

Local Barbershop Harmony

By Jack Evans

Today's barbershop harmony movement had its roots in a small group of wealthy and influential residents of Dallas who recalled "The good old days" and wanted to do something to preserve the iconic barbershop quartet. Those founders were also distinctly racist in outlook, and the organization they launched, called The Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America included a clause that only white men could join. Nonetheless the society proved successful, spreading quickly across the U.S. and into Canada within 20 years with chapters in major cities, including Toronto.

There is much historic truth to barbershops and music going back to medieval France when customers in used barbershops as a place to make music, more commonly on instruments at that point. No doubt this tradition was modified by French culture in Louisiana and morphed into singing and voila, barbershop quartets became part of minstrel shows and ultimately the Vaudeville stage.

With its close trade and business connections to Toronto, Belleville became one of the first centres in Eastern Ontario to have a society branch formed, called simply the Belleville Barbershop Chorus. Its formation was the result of the late Brad Bradford who moved to Belleville from Toronto where he had been exposed to a barbershop chorus there. My father, the late Alfred Evans, a noted local singer and music maker, was tagged as the first chorus director in the mid 1950s and myself and other family members were also quickly involved. Running almost at the same time as the SPEBSQSA and as an associated organization was the Sweet Adelines organization for women.

Barbershopping, which specializes in a cappella (unaccompanied singing) was enhanced with the hit musical The Music Man which featured the famous quartet, The Buffalo Bills, in several songs and helped inspire renewed interest in this unique form of folk music. Also, the women's quartet, The Chordettes, popularized the medium with their hit, "Mr. Sandman." Locally, this writer, as a

staff member at CJBQ, promoted the cause with a special program called Harmony Heritage which ran Sunday evenings.

The local chapter thrived for several years and ran annual shows in the former BCI auditorium, drawing guest quartets often from Toronto and the northern U.S. and appreciative audiences. Chorus director Evans, himself put a quartet together called The Quintones, which sang throughout the area. In the 1960s, interest waned and the chapter closed down. But a few years later, under a new leader, the late Ray Williams, another chapter started up based in the Trenton community, called The Trentones. This chorus eventually appointed Robert Young as its chorus director. He, too, arranged to take part in a quartet called In Four Mation, which has also entertained many groups and locations over many years. The Trentones also thrived and the Quinte chapter of the now international Barbershop Harmony Society, with branches in Europe , Australia and elsewhere, to this date, 2018, changing the name in recent years to A Cappella Quinte to reflect both its regional nature, drawing members from Brighton through Prince Edward County and centre Hastings, and it's a cappella style, which was again in vogue thanks to several contemporary pop groups. Meanwhile, the contentious and stoutly opposed racist element had long been removed at an international convention.

For many years, barbershop groups have supported charities, especially, speech therapy and music promotion foundations, (Sing Harmony) and continue to do so, plus scholarships. A Cappella Quinte's latest annual show was on May 12, in Maranatha Church. The chorus also has a new leader, Lyn Brown, who succeeds Bob Young, who continues as director emeritus.

Belleville has also hosted several all-Ontario conventions of the society in recent years, drawing members and family plus professional judges for quartet and chorus competitions from across North America. The spring convention this year even drew one judge from New Zealand. Current size of the Quinte chapter is around 30 members, fluctuating from time to time.