

GM children's chorus in spotlight

Local youths were proud to be included in Inland's critically acclaimed group.

By Adele Koehnen
Contributing Writer

From 1936-70, Inland Division of General Motors in Dayton sponsored a Children's Chorus for the children of its employees.

Soon, other children from ages of 8 to 18 were invited to audition for the 100-member chorus. Ideally, the ratio was 50 girls and 50 boys. The girls wore long blue dresses, and the boys looked professional in dark jackets and white shirts. Each singer held the music in a large black folder.

The chorus became well known through its popular and critically acclaimed concerts, national radio broadcasts and performances on early television. The chorus frequently performed with the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, and at one time as part of the world premiere stage production of Benjamin Britten's "Saint Nicolas" with guest conductor Hugh Ross of New York and tenor David Lloyd of the New York City Opera.

The first director, Richard Westbrook, died at the age of 44. Joseph Geiger, a local church organist and choirmaster, replaced him. The chorus was accompanied by pianist Mary McCash and organist Urban Deger.

Children joined the chorus as second-graders and aged out at 16 or 18. Every member of some families participated in the chorus.

Thomas Connair of Kettering, a retired veterinarian, remembers that he and his five brothers and their



Former members of the Inland Children's Chorus (first row, from left): Phyllis Denlinger Phillips, Virginia Mauch Wade, Joe Wade, Shirley Whiting; (second row, from left) Paul Thomas, Gene Schamel, Jim Thomas, Helen Albers Crotty, Jerry Alred, Tom Connair, Fred Moore, Bob Drerup attended a reunion. Contributed photos

sister all sang with the Inland Children's Chorus.

"We must have inherited good singing voices, but it was always a great day for Mom and Dad when still another offspring passed the audition," Connair said.

June Albers Lavin of Centerville and her sister Helen Albers Crotty of Miami Twp. were members from the beginning in 1936 until they left high school. "It was a great experience and it's fun to look back on those days. I always remember the long blue dresses," said Crotty.

In 2007, Gerald Alred, a chorus member (1951-59) and now professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee connected with former chorus members through a music blog. On a business trip to Dayton this past June, Alred organized a lunch with former chorus members to decide what to do with the extensive memorabilia he and others had accumulated.

The former members who attended included



The Inland Children's Chorus. Gerald Alred (front row, first on left) organized a reunion of former members.

Fred Moore, a longtime member of the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra; and Paul Thomas, a 35-year member of the Kim Kelly Orchestra, among others.

Alred conducted research and received support for the project from Jane Brock Woodall and Craig Orr at the Smithsonian Institution as well as Christo Datini, archivist at the General Motors Heritage Center. Datini believed the project would document this portion of GM's history.

All this led to enthusiastic interest from special collections and archives

at Wright State University Libraries in Dayton. Alred and others presented digital versions of photographs, recordings and other materials to the archives at WSU on May 21.

"Now that the initial materials are in place, we urge others to contribute their personal Inland Children's Chorus memorabilia," Alred said.

Toni VandenBos, one of the archivists at WSU Special Collections, may be reached at (937) 775-3991.

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