

More than three decades of song

General Motors sponsored the Dayton singing sensation Inland Children's Chorus



Lisa Powell
Staff Writer

The sound of a 100-voice children's chorus, first formed to entertain at a company Christmas party, rang out in Dayton in 1936.

The Inland Children's Chorus, the only corporation-sponsored children's choir in the United States, was the brainchild of Wallace Whitacre, founding general manager of the Inland Manufacturing Division of General Motors Corporation.

The goal of the ensemble, started in the heart of the Great Depression, was "to give 5- to 16-year-old children of employees a musical education and training which they might otherwise not be able to obtain, and to make a contribution to the cultural life of Inland employees and the community."

"I worked and collaborated with kids from all parts of Dayton and every background," said Jerry Alred, a chorus member from 1951-59 who now lives in Tennessee. From "sons and daughters of prominent musicians to those whose parents worked on Inland assembly lines."

Richard Westbrook, the talented son of Dayton undertaker Ben Westbrook, was the first chorus director. Westbrook studied music and singing in Detroit before coming home to lead the 40-voice "Westbrook Singing Boys," a local choir who performed for churches and fraternal groups.

The chorus performed in front of full houses at Memorial Hall and the Dayton Art Institute. General Motors spared no expense to create a dramatic theatrical experience, hiring a Broadway designer to give the performances professional polish with stage design and lighting.

A review of the 1937 Dayton debut concert described



Inland Children's Chorus director Richard Westbrook works with chorus members John Miller, Phyllis Denlinger, Bill Clineham, Shirley Augdenheide and Richard Engel. FALANDCHORUS.COM/PHOTOS

HOW TO GO

Inland Children's Chorus Spring Luncheon
The annual reunion will be held Saturday April 29 at noon at the MCL Banquet Room, 4485 Far Hills Ave. in Kettering.

Please contact Fred or Geneva Moore by April 26 if you plan to attend: fandgmoore@aol.com or (937) 297-0991
For more information about the chorus: InlandChorus.com

the chorus' dramatic entrance into Memorial Hall. The boys, dressed in black coats and trousers with white shirts and girls "prowled in blue," marched from separate doorways into the hall, up a set of stairs and arranged themselves in tiers.

Chorus continued on SB2



Marlene Debeath and Gerry Richard, members of the Inland Children's Chorus, release in 1941.



The Inland Children's Chorus, formed in 1936, was the only corporation-sponsored children's choir in the United States. It was the brainchild of Wallace Whitacre, founding general manager of the Inland Manufacturing Division of General Motors Corporation. At center is chorus director Richard Westbrook and at the organ is Urban Deger.

'Sweet, fresh tone'

Chorus

continued from SB1

Colored lights played over the children as green plush draperies were drawn back to reveal a background of changing lights.

"The concert presented was one invested with much charm since children's voices carry a sweet, fresh tone which is never to be duplicated by the adult voice," wrote the reviewer. Auditions for a spot in the Chorus were competitive. Rehearsals were held twice a week, and as a concert date grew closer, they stepped up to four times a week.

"As a chorus member, I learned self-discipline, preparation, excellence and collaboration as we prepared and performed great music," said Alred.

And great music it was. The chorus sang from a repertoire of Broadway tunes, classical pieces, popular music and sacred hymns. They were featured in national radio and television performances, made live and studio session recordings and performed with the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra.

The chorus concerts were a point of pride for the Dayton community for more than three decades. The young voices inspired others during World War II, rang in the holidays at Christmas and awakened spirits at the annual spring concert.

The final concert was held May 12, 1971, at Memorial Hall. A combination of changing business practices and musical tastes contributed to the conclusion. "The chorus ended the show with "It's a Grand Night for Singing" and ended with "God Bless America."

Chorus memories and camaraderie continue today. For the past eight years, a reunion has been held in Dayton for chorus members who gather together to reconnect and share memories. This year's luncheon will be held April 29 at noon at the MCL Banquet Room in Kettering.

"It's exciting to meet former members I knew and many who participated in other years," said Alred. "Looking at the items bring back great memories for everyone."

Contact this reporter at 937-225-2239 or email Lisa.Powell@coinc.com.

ABOUT THIS FEATURE

HISTORY EXTRA is a weekly pictorial history feature showcasing the Miami Valley's rich heritage. If you have a unique set of historic photos found in your parents' or grandparents' attic that depicts the past in the Miami Valley, contact Lisa Powell at 937-225-2239 or at Lisa.Powell@coinc.com.



Inland Children's Chorus members Lisa Crumb and Jim Lehman were photographed in 1943.



The girls section of the Inland Children's Chorus, photographed in 1942. FALANDCHORUS.COM/PHOTOS



LEFT: Richard Westbrook, director of the Inland Children's Chorus, works with members Angela Mae Lehman and Paul Durman.



BELOW: Linda Crumb adjusts the bow of another Inland Children's Chorus member in a 1942 publicity photograph.

Text of article follows

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