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# D | LIFE



## BONUS SECTION

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### HISTORY

## Inland Children's Chorus: More than 3 decades of song

General Motors sponsored singing sensation.

By 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 8- 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



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

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

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 pre-

pared 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, 1970 at Memorial Hall. A combination of changing businesses practices and musical tastes contributed to the conclusion. The chorus opened the show with "It's A Grand Night for Singing" and ended with "God Bless America."

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