

EVERGREEN GOLD



**A FIFTY-YEAR HISTORY OF THE EVERGREEN DISTRICT
SPEBSQSA, INC.**

By

**Ray Greaves
and
Ed Hartley**

Dedicated to the memory of:

Ray Greaves

Historian Extraordinaire

Musician

Quartetter

Administrator

Innovator

Gentleman

Friend

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A few notes are in order:

1. In the interest of saving space I have, unless otherwise noted, always listed quartet personnel in this order: tenor, lead, bari, bass. That reflects how old I am. Would you believe that we “always” used to stand in that order.
2. I designated division (and area) numbers with Arabic numerals. The use of Roman numerals for such numbering was not always consistent in reports and the bulletin.
3. One of the groups of people overlooked is that hard-working bunch of guys who turn out chapter bulletins. I made this choice early on. I apologize for any presumed oversight.
4. The Forest Grove quartet contests have provided room for many Evergreen District quartets to perform and compete. But that is a separate story and I have left that story for another writer to cover.
5. I have tried to check all name spellings and chapter designations. Sources frequently conflict. Independent checking is not always possible.

There is a strong temptation to suggest that any errors, omissions, perceived oversights or heavy-handedness be overlooked in a spirit of forgiveness. That would not, however, accomplish what a history is intended to provide. Facts are the be-all and end-all of history. If I have made mistakes I want to know about it. We don't need misinformation in our history.

Ed Hartley
Quilcene, Washington
July 31, 1998

PRE-HISTORY 1940-1943

When the *Seattle Star* newspaper hit the streets on January 5, 1940, less than two years had passed since O.C. Cash and Rupert Hall had sent out that first letter in Oklahoma calling for men who were interested in preserving the tradition of barbershop harmony.

The paper contained ominous news of the escalation of World War II occurring in Europe. But it also contained the everyday items: an ad for dresses at the Bon's basement sale for \$1.99, an ad for eggs at 2 dozen for 43 cents, an announcement that Sally Rand was appearing at a local theater, and expression of surprise that everybody's boy next door, Mickey Rooney, was old enough to be considering marriage.

In the lower left-hand corner of the front page, there was a picture of four fellows who were obviously barbers. They were in Joe McDermott's barbershop in the Seattle Hotel. They were said to be warming up a four part chord in preparation for the first meeting of a group of local harmonizers being started by fellows such as Roy Ryerson, who worked for the *Seattle Star*, and Maury Rider of Radio Station KIRO.

It seems they had heard about the SPEBSQSA movement, and they allowed as how Seattle could stand to have its spirits lifted by the presence of organized harmonizing. That first meeting occurred on January 18, 1940, with Maury Rider selected as temporary Chairman, and Roy Ryerson as temporary Secretary.

Recruiting efforts were primarily aimed at encouraging local civic groups, businesses, and fraternal organizations to get together quartets to join the new group. Individuals without a quartet were also invited to drop in at the meetings in the hope that they could find three other unattached souls with whom to sing.

By January 29 there were already 126 registered members, and by the March 27th meeting, just a little over two months after the first call went out, membership certificates were available for some 300 men who had signed up with the SEATTLE STAR-KIRO Chapter of SPEBSQSA.

Half hour radio shows, featuring quartets from within the group, were being broadcast live on KIRO. There was talk of having a contest to pick a representative quartet to enter the "2nd National Convention and Contest" to be held as a feature of the New York World's Fair in July.

Groups such as the **Police Quartet**, **Four Winds**, **House Boys Four**, **Seattle Rotary Club Quartet**, and **Monarch Four** were singing for civic and fraternal organizations throughout the area.. According to Roy Ryerson ("Ye Harmony Editor" at the *Seattle Star*), they "...have found that every club they have appeared before is desirous of entering at least one quartet in the fast growing harmony society."

Emphasis was heavy on quartets, but the massed group did rehearse with a director, and sang as a chorus to back up the quartets who were chosen by an audition committee to perform on the Saturday evening radio broadcasts.

On February 9, it was reported that at the rehearsal the night before, "Chairman Maury Rider, the Dean of Seattle radio barbershop harmonizers, led the entire group, divided into the parts they sing, through several numbers, coaching as he went, and drawing out minor chords like a magician hauls rabbits out of a hat."

Such appears to have been the start of organized Barbershopping in what is now the Evergreen District. The "National" Society was growing by unexpected leaps and bounds. No one involved with that initial Tulsa gathering had expected it to be more than an enjoyable gathering of a few local harmony lovers. The fact that by early 1940 some 300 chapters had sprung up through spontaneous enthusiasm, in all corners of the country, still had them reeling in a state of happy confusion.

Deac Martin, in his history of the first ten years of the Society, *Keep America Singing*, reports that it is impossible to give accurate charter dates during the first two or three years, as there were no National Secretary's records prior to 1941. He writes, "as to charters, none were printed until March '41 when the first lot was ordered in St. Louis." They were mailed to each city where there had been a show of interest, and a bill for \$3.00 was enclosed. Payment of the bill would make the charter official.

Efforts were being made to give this obviously popular movement some unified direction, but there was no staff, only volunteer "National" officers, paying their own postage and expenses, so progress was difficult at best.

The Seattle group appears to have had somewhat the same problems. Like most other chapters (and the National at the time,) there were no individual fees and no dues. The treasury, which recorded assets of less than \$10.00, was supported by passing the hat at meetings. Committee meeting minutes reveal a group in the throes of expansion, trying to make formal plans for a group which they all understood to be designed to provide enjoyment through music. Some of the notes bear striking similarity to minutes from the board meeting that any of a thoroughly modern 1990's chapter would take. One short sentence admonishes the administration to devote the meetings "to song and to song only."

The 38 articles in the *Seattle Star* end with the May 24, 1940 issue. Roy Ryerson was laid off on June 5, 1940 when the *Star* went through a retrenchment. Although he was briefly in contact with the "National" Society, he was never again associated with barbershopping. The organization lost a capable public relations pen that would be welcome in any fledgling or fully-grown organization. It also lost a great lead. Roy sang all the rest of his life for his and his friends' enjoyment.

The Seattle Star-KIRO Chapter evidently hung on for a while more. Correspondence from president George Christensen notes that chapter numbers had dropped from 250 to just 25 in late 1941. In the meantime, however, Seattle had been represented at the National Convention and Contest held in St. Louis in 1941. Competing in the contest was a Seattle quartet called the **Tune Twisters**. It was made up of Fred Christensen, George Christensen, Vern LaLonde and William McLaren. George Christensen must have made some sort of an impression in St. Louis for he was elected (by the board members) to the "national chapter," the group that then directed the affairs of the national organization.

Because we have his 1941 membership card, we know that the late "Doc" Wahlstrom, whose last membership was with the Anacortes chapter, was a member of this early Seattle chapter. The memoirs of the late Myles Gregory, long time barbershopper and member of several Evergreen Chapters, mentions having been a member of an early Seattle Chapter, and says in part that in 1941 he "...left Seattle and joined the army."

In the course of just two years the first Seattle chapter was born, grew to great heights, furnished the first quartet representation from the Northwest at a national contest (we'd call that an International now) and had had the first representative from this area on the national (read International) governing body.

It can only be assumed that the rapidly escalating drain on manpower due to the country's total involvement in World War II, and perhaps lack of long range goals and guidance, combined to defeat this most worthy effort. Even today it is all too evident that the loss of a few key people can spell disaster for a chapter with a far more solid background than the Seattle Star-KIRO chapter had had time to acquire



From the *Seattle Star*, January 5, 1940.
Pictured are: George McDermott, Dan Clark, Charles Mash and
barbershop owner Joe McDermott.