

Choir celebrates golden moment

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It all began in the parking lot at the Brantford Golf and Country Club.

So goes the story of the birth of the Brant Men of Song.

While leaving the club-house, local lawyer Bob McIntosh, a young clarinet and saxophone player, approached Frank Holton, who was heavily involved in music both inside and outside local schools. McIntosh proposed that Holton conduct a new choir.

McIntosh was the leader of a barbershop quartet, but was interested in singing a broader range of music.

That the Brant Men of Song was formed, in 1961, was no small feat, writes group member Robert MacMillan, in a community that has been called the

"City of Choirs."

But the chorus endured and this year the Brant Men of Song marks its 50th anniversary. As part of the celebrations, the group will perform at a special concert on May 14 at the Sanderson Centre.

More than 200 male voices will ring out in mass harmony as eight choruses from Ontario, British Columbia and the United States take the stage.

And, beginning April 25, the Brant County Museum and Archives will house a special exhibit about the chorus, featuring old photographs, programs, uniforms (maybe even a pair of the polyester bellbottoms the men wore in the early '70s), and, of course, samples of their music.

Brian Osborn was a young elementary school teacher who couldn't read music when he joined the Brant Men of Song in 1965. Forty-six years later, the first tenor is the longest-serving member of the chorus.

"I was never in a glee club in high school," said Osborn, who gathered recently with some of the other senior members of the group. "I was more of a jock.

"I enjoy the sound of men's voices and the camaraderie of the group."

Osborn said Frank Holton ran a tight ship in the early years, keeping the chorus members to a set number.

"You were told to show up," recalled Osborn. "If you missed three practices, you were out."

Allan Edgar was introduced to the group 45 years ago by his brother, Harold, who sang bass. He had a background in choral music, as a singer at his church and a member of junior farmers choirs.

Mel Plant had done a lot of choral singing in the Navy and, when he returned to the city in 1970, was looking for group where he could showcase his booming bass voice. That lowest vocal range, he joked, makes him "the man of the choir."

Plant was quickly recruited to be the conductor of the Brant Men of Song in 1971 and was emcee when the group toured England, Wales and Scotland in 1976.

The Brant Men of Song began as a simple 16-member male chorus that informally entertained local audiences.

From there, it initiated a concert season and then joined the Association of American Male Choruses and began performing as guests to other choirs in Ontario and the United States.

In 1973, it hosted a male chorus festival composed of 28 choirs from Ontario and the United States at the civic centre.

On a bus ride back from a district performance, the spouses of the Brant Men of Song decided that they, too, wanted to sing and, in 1971, the Brant Bell 'A' Dears formed. That group celebrates its 40th anniversary this

year.

Paul LeBlanc, who joined the Brant Men of Song in 1976, is chairing the group's 2011 anniversary committee.

The Sanderson Centre show in May will include songs from each of the decades in which the group has performed.

Although the type of songs on the bill depend largely on who is conducting the group, the chorus has performed, over the years, everything from hymns to show tunes to folk music to The Beatles, always trying to find a balance between secular and sacred.

"It's not always easy to find music for a four-part male chorus," said Osborn.

Robert MacMillan is one of the newest members of the chorus. When he joined a couple of years ago, he said all he really brought with him was a desire to sing.

"I don't have any real musical background, yet I was able to come into the chorus. It's a matter of having a decent voice and wanting to sing."

Now 32 members strong, the Brant Men of Song practises two hours a week under the direction of Amy Groleau.

In addition to its concert schedule, the group performs at various charity and community events. It also hosted a workshop for male singers last October under the tutelage of Philip Sarabura, music director of the Brantford Symphony Orchestra. The group also offers scholarships to those in university music programs.

The chorus is always looking for new recruits, but the senior members say they recognize that choral singing has become less popular over the years.

"We need younger voices in the group," said Leblanc.

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At a glance

What: Brant Men of Song celebrate their 50th anniversary by hosting Ontario Sings, featuring eight male choruses from Ontario, British Columbia and the United States.

When: Saturday, May 14, at 7 p.m.

Where: The Sanderson Centre

Cost: \$20 tickets are available from Brant Men of Song members or through the Sanderson Centre box office.

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