



HISTORY

From its official inception on June 14, 1930, the mandate of the Fort William Male Choir, as stated in its Constitution, was and remains today At promote interest in male chorus singing and in general to foster interest in the Lakehead Musical Culture. For eight decades, this group has done just that, and as their numbers and fame grew, their musical influence spread beyond the local boundaries to national and international spheres.

It was a humble beginning. Eight members of the choir of St. Paul's Anglican Church decided, almost on an impromptu basis, to form a male voice octet, and this group formed the nucleus of what later came to be the Fort William Male



Choir. Fred Parish served as conductor for ten years and singing appearances were mainly at meetings of the Men's Club of St. Paul's Church. Dues were five cents per practice and the men chipped in another thirty-five cents each week for refreshments. The group made its first out-of-

town trip to perform in Kakabeka Falls. An audience of approximately twelve heard a one-hour concert. What a contrast to the performance schedule and travel venues the current choir enjoys. Near capacity audiences attended the Thunder Bay Community Auditorium on the local level to performances before ten thousand people at the International Eisteddfod in Langollen, Wales where the world's best male voice choruses compete for international recognition. Although no prizes were won, the choir finished well in competition and out of twenty-four entrants, finished twelfth, gaining valuable international experience.

Fred Parish stepped down as Conductor. His place was taken by J. H. Booth, who had been accompanist. Like his predecessor, Jim Booth was a native of England. His first job in Canada was as a postman, but he eventually went to work for the grain industry, rising to the position of Senior Grain Inspector. Jim was well known in the Lakehead as a highly accomplished pianist. He played piano for silent movies at the Lyceum, Orpheum, and Colonial theatres and was a member



of several local dance bands. He was president of the Musicians' Union from 1915 to 1917, served as organist for Port Arthur Anglican Church, and played oboe in the Fort William Band.

In 1942, Wilkie Haynes succeeded J. H. Booth as Conductor. Wilkie was known as an excellent accompanist and taught piano in the Lakehead. He also was a voice teacher and coach. He served as representative from the Lakehead District to the International Correspondence School from 1932 to 1950. The Choir's accompanist in these days was Dorothy Shaver (née Hamlet), who recalls that 1943 was an interesting year! There was hard work as we prepared for the concert even though the concert was on a smaller scale than it is now.

As the fledgling choir developed in stature, their horizons broadened and it was in March of 1946 when the Choir's musical destiny was set. Norman J. Kleven assumed the duties of Conductor, a position which he held for 30 years. During this period, the choir had a number of superb accompanists: Donald Hassard Jr., James Metcalfe, and Alma Madill, served the choir until 1958 at which time Diane Crocker (née Winarchuk) took over the position and has maintained it since then with periodic assistance from Anne Koning and Marcella Smithers. Mrs. Crocker's sensitive intuition to the moods of the music and the conductor has provided a style of accompaniment which has assisted in lifting the choir from the ordinary ranks to that of world class ambassadors of music and good will.

Kleven was born in Sprague, Manitoba, where he received his early education, Norm studied in Winnipeg, Toronto, and at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. For seventeen years he was director of music for the former Fort William Board of Education; for seven years he was Master of Music and Psychology at Lakehead Teachers' College; and for eleven years he was lecturer in music methodology at the Ontario Department of Education summer school in Toronto. He adjudicated music festivals throughout Manitoba and Ontario and taught music education at Lakehead University.

During Kleven's time, the Fort William Male Choir developed its distinctive style and unique dedication to superb diction and tonality. Kleven was a perfectionist who demanded and received every ounce of musicianship from each member of the choir instilling his love of music and working his mastery of interpretation into each piece making the most difficult classical offering a sublime and beautiful gem for the singer and listener alike. Under his guidance, the Choir took first place honours in Festival competitions. Adjudicator Alex Redshaw (1952)



stated in his remarks that the Choir would rank well in competition with the greatest male choirs of the world. How prophetic.

It was in 1952 also, that the Choir introduced a new format in the presentation of its annual concerts, held then at Selkirk Auditorium. Calling the concert "Musical Moods", the men made use of costumes, scenery, and stage lighting to suit the type of music performed in four separate groups. This has continued to the present and with the inception of performances at the Thunder Bay Community Auditorium in 1985, the staging effects have advanced incredibly and technologically, with subtle lighting effects, smooth set transitions, and the glory of the most superb acoustics in the country.

The previous year (1951) gave birth to membership in the Associated Male Choruses of America (A.M.C.A.) whose mandate was to further the development and promotion of fine male chorus singing and to foster co-operation and good fellowship among individual member organizations through joint concerts and other co-operative events. The Choir's connection with A.M.C.A. was one of its most important facets over the years. The Choir's first Big Sing took place in Minneapolis in April of 1952 where they performed two solo numbers, a decided honor amongst the assembled choruses and as a result of this performance, the Choir was invited to be one of the solo groups to perform at the Milwaukee Big Sing the following year at which the national president of the A.M.C.A. acclaimed the Fort William Male Choir as, the outstanding group at Milwaukee. It was a professional performance with the highest standards of music. Your choir is a credit to your community and your country.

One result of the Choir's success in Milwaukee was the decision to have Fort William host its first Big Sing in the city in 1954. This was the highlight of the year with 250 choristers from eight choirs participating in the sell-out event at the Exhibition Coliseum. A portion of the concert was broadcast live throughout Canada and the United States. Listeners from every province in Canada and from California, Oregon, and Utah contacted the Choir to express their pleasure at the broadcast. During the Big Sing, Norman Kleven was presented with a life membership in the A.M.C.A. in appreciation for his fine work with the choir and later he received a life membership in the Fort William Male Choir in recognition of outstanding work done in building the choir into the successful musical group it has become in recent years.

With such glowing successes both nationally and internationally, the choir was now ready to pursue a new adventure. 1955 marked the appearance of the Choir's first record album and this was followed eventually by eight other albums (see discography) which were received most favourably by local, regional and national music lovers. The recordings, concerts, and out-of-town performances



all helped to generate resources needed to finance a dream trip to take the thirty-two members to the International Eisteddfod in Wales in 1963. A grand sum of \$16,000 was needed for this venture.

It was realized that a small choir such as this had to be beefed up with more members in order to have better depth for future international competitions. At this point, Kleven proceeded to build his choir to more than fifty voices. Potential members were recruited by word of mouth, through advertisements, and from Mr. Kleven's Lakehead Teachers College choir, then auditioned and placed in the appropriate section most suited to the singer's voice. He endeavoured to balance the four sections of the choir, first and second tenor and first and second bass, with approximately twelve singers each and proceeded to hone and sharpen the choir's already renowned diction and tonality.

As expressed earlier, the Eistedfodd gave the Choir valuable international experience and no sooner had the Choir returned to Canada then the wheels were set in motion for its first international tour proposed in 1967. With that goal in mind, the fund raising efforts were doubled. Assistance was sought from all three levels of government and MPP James Jessiman proved to be one of our staunchest supporters. Mr. Jessiman promoted the Fort William Male Choir every opportunity he had. Along with that, new recordings were produced, bingos were hosted and the first annual Sing-a-Long Smorgasbord was born. Some thirty years later, the sing-a-long continues but the smorgasbord has been replaced by spaghetti and meatballs. However, the fellowship with their patrons thrives as a direct result of such a beautiful community gathering.

Canada's Centennial Year, 1967, will be long remembered by Choir members as the year in which they won the title of Canada's Centenary Choir. This competition was held in St. John, New Brunswick with the Choir competing with nine other choirs. The Choir was jubilant when the judges voted it the best among all the groups and named it the Centenary Choir of Canada. A prize of \$1000 accompanied this honour. The choir also received a beautiful marble statue of three singers from the Ontario Federation of Music Festivals as winner of that province's competition. Morris Jacobsen, one of the adjudicators for the event, stated that the Choir, beyond being technically correct had the ability to interpret music and to convey to the audience the composer's theme. The Choir scarcely had time to reflect upon its achievement before it was on the move again. The members flew directly from St. John to Europe and the start of their first international tour which included visits to Switzerland, Holland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, East and West Germany. Perhaps the spirit of the entire trip was summed up best by a city official in the W. German town of Hechingen who said, These men who go about the country bearing song do more to promote peace than those who come bearing arms.



International travel became second nature for the Choir with journeys to the Scandinavian countries in 1970 and three years later, the Mediterranean countries. It was during the latter tour that the Choir was privileged to sing for Pope Paul VI and an estimated audience of 15,000 people at the Pope's summer residence, Castel Gangolfo. The Pope praised the Choir and commended the men for their effort to promote world peace through their singing. Yet another journey was under way to celebrate the Golden Anniversary of the Choir as soon as the group returned. Morocco and Spain in 1977 cast its spell on the group and strains of Malaguena and Ferdinand the Bull warmed the fiery Spanish temperament. This year was Norman Kleven's final year as conductor of the Fort William Male Choir and following a long and illustrious career as educator, musical ambassador, and conductor, he turned his choir and baton over to his assistant conductor, Kendall House, who stepped into those shoes and took the choir forward into the future.

Born in MacTier, Ontario, Kendall began his music education there and moved on to Sudbury to continue his studies. After completing North Bay Teachers' College, Kendall moved to Thunder Bay in 1953 and began a long and noteworthy career in education with the Lakehead Board of Education as both teacher and principal, retiring in 1988. Educational pursuits followed with voice studies with Gladys Whitehead in 1958-1960 and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Lakehead University in 1965. Kendall joined the Fort William Male Choir as a bass in 1954 and took over as assistant conductor in 1966. Mr. House assumed the baton as full conductor in 1978.

Kendall House brought with him years of musicianship and devotion to the Choir. His joy of music shone through at rehearsals and choir members could see hints of Norman Kleven's directorial techniques subtly surfacing. Though Kendall also insisted on precision, diction, and dedication, he brought a more relaxed atmosphere to rehearsals and introduced a more contemporary repertoire with music from Broadway: Les Miserable's, Phantom of the Opera, Man of La Mancha, along with classical and spiritual selections. "Musical Moods" evolved into "Prelude to Christmas" and became the vehicle to kick off the festive season for the patrons in Thunder Bay.

In the tradition of Norman Kleven, Kendall House continued to inspire the Choir to achieve and develop beyond the national sphere and under his guidance, the Choir made a second visit to Wales and participated in the International Eisteddfod in 1984. The experience was as grand as the first, twenty years earlier. During the gala wind-up performance, the Choir brought the huge audience seated beneath an enormous tent, to their feet with a rousing chorus of Tempest in a Teapot which has since become a favourite of the Choir and its patrons. During Expo '86 hosted in Vancouver, the men of the choir lifted their voices in rousing song, singing several concerts in both the Ontario Pavilion and the



Canada Pavilion. Their international exposure continued with the most incredible experience of singing 'O Canada in Minneapolis to open a Twins/Blue Jay game. Singing the Canadian national anthem before fifty thousand people was truly a memorable experience. The choir was bursting with pride as it stood in the giant floodlit circle surrounded by their American friends, singing our beautiful anthem. The cheers which followed were over-whelming.

Perhaps the ultimate singing experience occurred for the forty-five member Choir in 1993 during the last international trip undertaken by the group. A singing tour of France gave the Choir the enviable opportunity of singing in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, followed shortly by a brief concert in the exquisite stained glass chapel of St. Chapelle. The voices of the choir resonated gloriously among the vaulting ceilings of the cathedral and many who were listening shed tears of joy. The sound was magnificent and were the choir to not sing another note in France, this experience would have been worth every sacrifice needed to be there.

Other singing engagements took place at the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, as well as concerts in Arles, Avignon, and Aix-en-Provence. Every member of the Choir agrees that this tour was one of the best and provided the Choir with the grandest opportunity to be Thunder Bay's musical ambassadors to the world.

Concerts in the Community Auditorium have provided the Choir with one of the very best performance venues in the country and in celebration of the Choir's 65th anniversary, a special Prelude to Christmas 96' featuring current choir members augmented by invited former members was presented to their most loyal supporters. Staging effects coupled along with extraordinary singing made this concert one of the best in memory. None of these events could have been achieved without the resolute commitment of the Choir's conductor, Kendall House; the superlative accompanist, Diane Crocker; and each and every individual member past and present.

The new millennium heralded a memorable event in the Fort William Male Choir's history. Prelude to Christmas 2003 marked the choir's 75th year and the event was singular for its wonderful artistry as well as for the continued capacity audiences. Good wishes were brought to the choir by all levels of government and many wonderful presentations and words of praise were made in its honor.



And now, entering its 88th year, the Fort William Male Choir continues to fulfill its mandate of bringing fine choral singing to Thunder Bay, the surrounding communities, our province, our country and beyond. Whether it be formal or informal settings, the joy of song is shared with all those who enjoy and appreciate the richness of male voices joined in harmony. From performing arts centres, school auditoriums, nursing homes, churches or cruise ships, the men of music continue to lift their voices in a tradition of harmony established eight decades ago.

