

PRELUDE TO HARMONY

1957

TO ANSWER the frequently-asked question, "Why are there two barbershop organizations for women?" we have to go back to the events of twenty-five years ago. Most present-day members of both organizations have no knowledge of those events since members who lived through the ordeal prefer not to discuss their experiences. Since both organizations exist to sing and promote barbershop harmony, from the public view, and that of most members, both organizations are the same, except, perhaps, in size. Members sing in choruses and quartettes, rehearse weekly, sponsor shows, sing out for the public, compete and improve their musical skills by participating in educational programs at all levels. What, then, is the real difference?

In 1957, there was only one organization for women — Sweet Adelines, Inc., founded in 1948. Events of that year provided the impetus for Harmony, Inc. to emerge on the barbershop scene. For several years prior to the 1957 International Convention in Miami, there had been some unrest among many Sweet Adelines over certain International policies and procedures. Regions had been delineated and some were highly-developed, with their own governmental structure and competitions. Some regions existed mostly on paper, being geographical designations for extension purposes. Attendance at regional meetings skyrocketed when chorus competition, not yet a part of International convention, was introduced.

Some of the larger regions held several meetings a year, sponsored their own craft classes and collected regional dues, all frowned upon by the International organization as taking away incentive to attend International Conventions. As the

regions grew and became more aggressive, some began to protest International policies and even the governmental structure, which minimized participation or input from the regions.

The highest elected official of the regions was called the "regent." Protesting members were reminded that this term meant "one who governs in the absence of higher authority" — in this case, the International Board. Thus the regents, although elected by their own members, were expected to represent the International Board and carry out its policies. This was not acceptable to some members, who felt the representation should be reversed.

Another major point of controversy was the nomination procedure for the International Board. Each outgoing Board served as the nominating committee for its successors, ensuring that the government would be self-perpetuating. Members realized that as long as new Board Members were hand-picked by their predecessors, there was little hope for any change in administrative policies. Some regions were insisting that their elected regents take a more active role.

Another bone of contention was chorus competition. Some regions had been holding competitions for several years and were eager to progress to the International level. The official position was that there could be no International competition until the regions were equally developed. This position was augmented by the Board's theory that entire choruses would never attend convention to compete on the International stage. While future developments would not support this theory, it was the mindset that helped create the controversy in the mid-fifties.

The unrest over these and other policies had reached a zenith at the 1957 convention in Miami, Florida. The regents met together for the first time to draw up a list of demands to present to the Board. The demands were based on the wishes of the members they represented. Upon learning of the meeting, the Board sent one of its own members to chair the meeting, over the protests of the regents, who were prepared to elect their own chairman. Nevertheless, the demands were put on paper and a delegation did present them to the Board.

Despite this somewhat volatile behind-the-scenes atmosphere, the 1957 convention was one of the best ever for the membership. The Miami chapter had done a superb job of promoting and hostessing. One of the highlights was the parade of singing choruses down Collins Avenue, with directors perched on antique vehicles ahead of each walking chorus. The judges training program was also being introduced, with many members trial judging for the first time during the quartette competition. Sweet Adelines, in its tenth year, was feeling the need to develop its own judges, rather than continuing to rely on S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A., Inc.

With all this going on, no one expected the annual membership meeting to be the most historic event at that convention. This meeting, featuring the droning reports of outgoing Board Members and their recommendations to the new Board, did not usually draw much of a crowd. Then, as now, the average member was more interested in singing than in meetings. In 1957, however, because of the activity in the regions, there wasn't an empty seat in the house. Some members, in fact, had been sent to convention by

their chapters for the sole purpose of attending this meeting, to find out if any policy changes were being planned. One of these was an attractive young lady from Orillia, Ontario, Joan Stockwell (now Chapman), who was later to surface as one of the founders of Harmony, Inc. She and Ruth Geils, the regent of Region 3, had already been friends for several years, and were working actively in their respective regions for the same policy changes.

Members who sat in the annual meeting were totally unprepared for the bomb that was dropped. Among the recommendations of the outgoing Board was that the Corporate By-Laws be amended to make membership available only to women of the Caucasian race! The meeting went up in smoke at the announcement. Due to the location of the convention, there were many members present from the deep south, so there were many cries of approval. There were also shouts of protest and of pain from members representing other parts of the country and Canada. The divisive effect of this announcement could not be exaggerated; women who had been firmly united on other vital issues were suddenly driven apart by the edge of the racial sword. To this day it remains a mystery why this controversial subject was introduced at the meeting. Although Sweet Adelines had no black members, there had previously been no official policy. No one seemed to know of any black women who had applied for membership, although many chapters would have welcomed them. No poll of the membership had ever been taken to find out how the members felt on the subject.

In the months to follow, before the Mid-Year Meeting of the Board,

members who objected to the proposed ruling went into action. Typewriters clattered, phone lines hummed and much midnight oil was burned. It was pointed out to the Board that such a policy was hardly in keeping with the motto "Harmonize the World." Some demanded that choice of membership be left to chapter option. Some threatened to leave the organization, or demanded that a membership poll be taken. Some individual members quietly dropped out, opting to give up their beloved hobby rather than engage in a civil rights controversy. Some regional meetings were chaotic; at least one regent resigned; some chapters split; many hearts were broken.

With the formal announcement that the discriminatory policy had been adopted came the stern warning that there was to be no further discussion, verbal or written, about the subject. All protests and requests for a referendum were met with the information that Sweet Adelines had always had an "unwritten policy" and that the time had come to avoid future problems by putting it in the By-Laws. Members were advised to accept the ruling and go back to singing, or leave the organization.

Some braved expulsion by continuing to plead with the Board and to keep the subject alive at regional meetings. International Board members began to show up at regional meetings to monitor the proceedings and identify the "trouble makers." In chapters where the majority were willing to give up their charter and "go independent," some members who agreed with the new policy left their choruses to stay in Sweet Adelines. However few, they were granted special privileges

to maintain their charters and given time and help to rebuild. Thus the loss of chapters, on paper at least, was kept to a minimum. So bitter was the controversy, so deep the rifts it created, that close friendships were dissolved, quartettes, as well as choruses, split and even family relationships were affected. Some who departed during this chaotic period vowed never to join another women's organization.

It is a tribute to the enormous appeal of barbershop harmony that the initial flurry soon subsided. Most members decided to accept the inevitable, regardless of their personal feelings. They reasoned that they had joined the organization to sing, not to fight, and they returned to singing with a sigh of relief. Many resolved never again to get involved in the "business" or to question any policies or edicts.

After this exhausting emotional experience, only a few of those who left summoned the courage to start over again. Those who made this hard decision loved barbershopping too much to give it up. They were determined to prove that good music can co-exist with good government. They knew their task would not be easy but were bolstered by their strong beliefs. Perhaps it's fortunate that these dedicated women could not and did not know the awesome obstacles that would confront them along the way. Courageous as they were, had they foreseen the future they may have sought an easier course than starting a new International organization in a field already so well covered. A quarter-century later, we can only be awed at what they accomplished in the face of such great odds.