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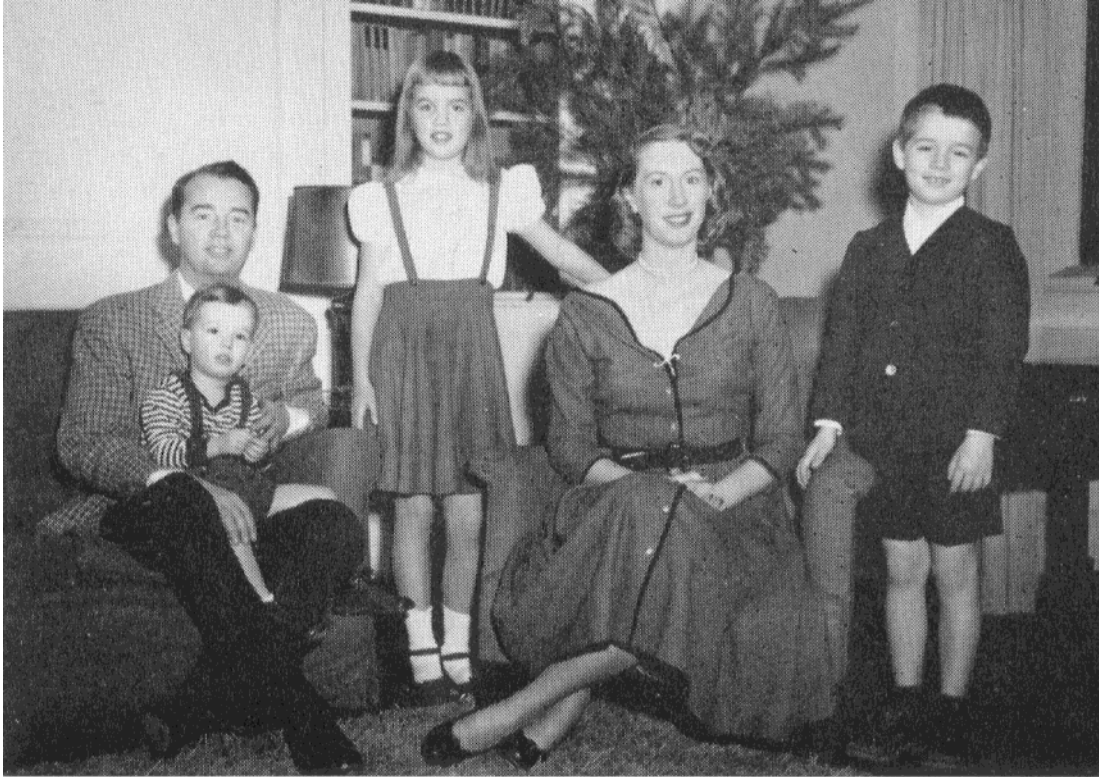
THE ORIGIN AND EARLY YEARS OF THE DUKE'S MEN OF YALE

By: the original members and those that sang with them

Scribe: Parker Towle

Eisenhower was president. As students we were deferred from participation in the Korean war. The McCarthy hearings occupied many of us in front of black and white TV screens. We had failed to be selected for the Yale Glee Club after a memorable year past for many of us with The Freshman Glee Club. Singing was seeping into the consciousness of more of us at Yale than, perhaps, any other college in America: 4 Glee Clubs or Choruses and 10 "small groups."

Paul Thompson '55 and Parker Towle '55 resided in adjacent rooms, 1028 and 1029 Saybrook, in 1952. Perhaps, after an Apollo Glee Club rehearsal early in the fall semester the idea of forming a singing group sprouted in their conversation with Fred Hard '55 and Burnie Riggs '54. Paul as an assistant "aide" in the college had ready access to our Master, Basil Duke Henning, Professor of History and former Whiffenpoof. We noticed that "The Duke" often convened old Whiffs during social events in his quarters, to which we might be invited. Song wafted from his rooms to the courtyard. The Duke offered us a room to rehearse on the top floor of one of Saybrook's towers which happened to have a piano in it.



The Duke and Duchess (Alison), with Cameron, Morgan, and Billy Henning

We gathered four additional voices to fill out the parts and began climbing the 5 stories from the courtyard (to much grumbling) to room 957 to rehearse for Princeton weekend, early November, 1952, our first performance, in the Saybrook dining room. The additions were: Walt Farrier '54, who became our chief arranger and music director; Ron Sindberg '54; Paul Stanley '54; and Ed Scheibler '54, who left us after that first semester. Fred remembers the songs at that first performance to have been: *Tiptoe Through the Tulips*, "Princeton Town," and "Breakin' Up That Ole Gang of Mine." Walt adds: "singing the awful printed 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips,' arrangement. I figured even I could write better charts than that!" Walt's roommate, Paul Stanley, recalls: "He and I were both in the Apollo Glee Club and we were also both pre-med students but Walt was much more interested in music [*indeed, a professional career in choral conducting*]. He played the saxophone and was an extremely talented musician. I always marveled at his musical talent. I remember that he took a course in musical composition and they started off by writing Gregorian chants. He would sit there at his desk late into the night blowing on his pitch pipe and chanting those chants. It is hard to believe but I think that course helped a great deal when it came to writing his wonderful arrangements."

We rehearsed 4 late afternoons a week. We must have had some measure of success and/or amusement with such early favorites arranged by Walt as "Castle on the River," "When I See All the Lovin' that They Waste of Babies," and "Tea for Two;" some Yale Songbook tunes; and "You Are Too Beautiful," arranged by one of The Duke's buddies, Lou Hemingway. Momentum grew by the week.

By the time we cut our first record at 78rpm on May 12, 1953 at WYBC (which must have been dangerously close to exams), we had sung at least twice at Saybrook, at 5 fraternities, and one women's college, Briarcliff (characterized on the jacket blurb as "the memorable fiasco"). By then we had added 4 more voices, and our first "baby," (a terminology that awaited another era), Gib Durfee '56, who began with us the next fall. Aside from Howie Park '55, all recruits came from other colleges: Warren Ransom '54 (Branford), Wick van Heuven '55 (Timothy Dwight), and Stan Cochran '55 (Davenport). Campus-wide participation was established. Quoting from the jacket, courtesy of Paul Thompson, "On this recording, all members evidence extensive conditioning and voice preparation. Basses trained on Budweiser, tenors on Sunkist, with Mr. Howard Park as the notable exception....Everybody is shot to hell, but it was all good clean fun." (The whole blurb is printed on the inside front cover of this document.) At the end of our first year (spring 1953):



Second row: Towle, Riggs, Sindberg, Park.
Front: Stanley, Hard, Ransom, Farrier, Thompson, Scheibler.

As the fall semester began Thompson continued as pitch with Gib as pitch-in-training, and Walt as “whip.” Walt must have been working hard for us that summer as he came to rehearsal with four notable arrangements that converted recorded instrumental riffs to voice: “Istanbul,” snatched from the Four Lads, “Robinson Crusoe,” “Rain” medley, and “Night and Day.” With additional arrangements by Durfee, Thompson, and Towle our programs became more and more “original.” The innovations must have fueled excitement and anticipation, though we scarcely noticed, as Columbia football weekend approached. Someone put in the Yale Daily news of October 10, 1953 under University Notices; “Duke’s Men – warmup in 957 at 8:30 for Chi Phi jamboree performance.” Howie Park in a recent letter says it well: “I will never forget our singing ‘Istanbul’ at the singing group jamboree. When we hit that final note that must have had 7 or 8 notes to it, and the room exploded (I’m getting goose bumps just remembering it). I thought to myself, ‘My God, they like it. We must be OK.’ I was floored by the response of our peers. The Duke’s Men were discovered. What a tribute to Walt. I believe I have never since heard such applause.” I have tears in my eyes right now.



The “Istanbul” moment, Chi Phi fraternity, October 10, 1953

The elation was short-lived. Some remarks must be inserted at this time. Anne Thompson, Paul's widow, turned over to me his Duke's Men file, after his death in 1999. Your scribe is violating the confidence of his lifelong friend to print these remarks which he wrote shortly after the above jamboree and are titled: TO THE MEMBERS OF THE DUKE'S MEN.....NOT TO READ BY ANY OF THEM. Yet it is part of a history that was one of the great gratifications of this man's life, and a monument to his love of choral music at the highest level and his dedication to his friends. One further preface: our other deceased member as of this writing is Ron Sindberg with whom we lost touch after graduation. He comes up a bit short (as do most of the rest of us) in this piece by Thompson. It must be said that Ron was a loyal member of our group. He was a stalwart of the Saybrook football team and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He had a distinguished career in clinical psychology. We will love this "fireplug" of a man forever.

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE DUKE'S MEN.....NOT TO READ BY ANY OF THEM

IN GENERAL...we have effectively done away with the effect of Chi Phi last Monday. The singing was rotten...not from lack of knowledge. Lack of practice in the past week, and a general we are god attitude did the job nicely. Three screw-offs in a row on the same day, killed most of our previous reputation as one of the top groups on campus.

WYBC...not bad. Rusty, but good crowd appeal, needed polish on the fine points. Decent impression, possible Chi Phi lead....

TD...poor, but not hopeless. Warren and Burnie were high, Wick was loose, and Ron was loaded. Very slow on pitches, especially UR2 [You are too Beautiful], first chords on Tea for Two, and general sharpness on words, entrances, and even notes was very poor. Volume control very poor.

FENCE...this was the killer. All went fairly well, until Burnie lost the words on Spanish, and the band covered our encore return. Everybody was all over the floor for pitch taking, slow on the uptake, and missed completely on a few. We were overly hammy, to make up for our big mistakes, and not really "live" where it counted. The audience was inconsiderate as hell, and our volume and clearness of pronunciation not nearly adequate to go over it.

Personnel...

Howie...left a bad taste at Fence by his drinks on the dance floor episode. Decent voice, but not with it. Flat WYBC, TD.

Ron...what can we say? He just can't get so morosely drunk, and sing too. He came around all right between TD and Fence, and then lost it all. Cost me two bucks and still didn't come across.

Fred...pure gold this time, bless him. He so often gets pissed, but he was dead on. Full of life, solo beautifully done, with us, fighting, all the way. Happy Fred.

Warren...a bit loose at TD, which didn't help, but not terribly noticeable. As usual, sang decently, not more, no less.

Wick...too drunk for complete comfort at TD. On the ball rest of the time. Concerned as were most of us.

Burnie...just not completely dependable on Spanish. Third fuckoff...words. High at TD. Accused by some of blasting. Does not know his notes on Wedding Bells and Someone.

Paul Stanley...a bit morose at Fence. Came thru OK.

Gib...concerned, on the ball.

Stan...Okay. Probably a bit too loud in spots, as was Parker if the past is any indication, but okay on the whole. Nothing specific.

Parker...late to WYBC. Probably a bit too loud in spots, but concerned and on the ball.

Walt...too serious as usual. Not much voice this weekend, for which we are all sorry. On my back for blasting off. Very worried about a repetition of the Smith and "subtlety" episodes. I suppose he has a right to be worried, but he and I have different approaches to handling of the group during really rough times. I blast 'em. He may very well be right.

WPT...too worried, blasted them a bit too much. Not on the ball at getting pitches around. Be fast and sure. Rotten voice at TD. Got to keep it wet, or don't drink. Got to get sleep or shot. Not remembering some fine points...inexcusable. FUCK!!!

Very poor word pronunciation. Lots of noise in the sounds. Talking many of the words. Not listening to chords. Very bad starts, much my fault. Got to organize appearances better. Too much standing around before and during. Not holding over fine parts. Very poor blend and coordination. WE HAVE NO EXCUSE FOR DOING JOBS LIKE THIS. EITHER BE READY, OR DON'T SING. THE GROUP COMES ABOVE ANY PERSONAL GRIPE.

And a small verse from a bit later in Paul's notes:

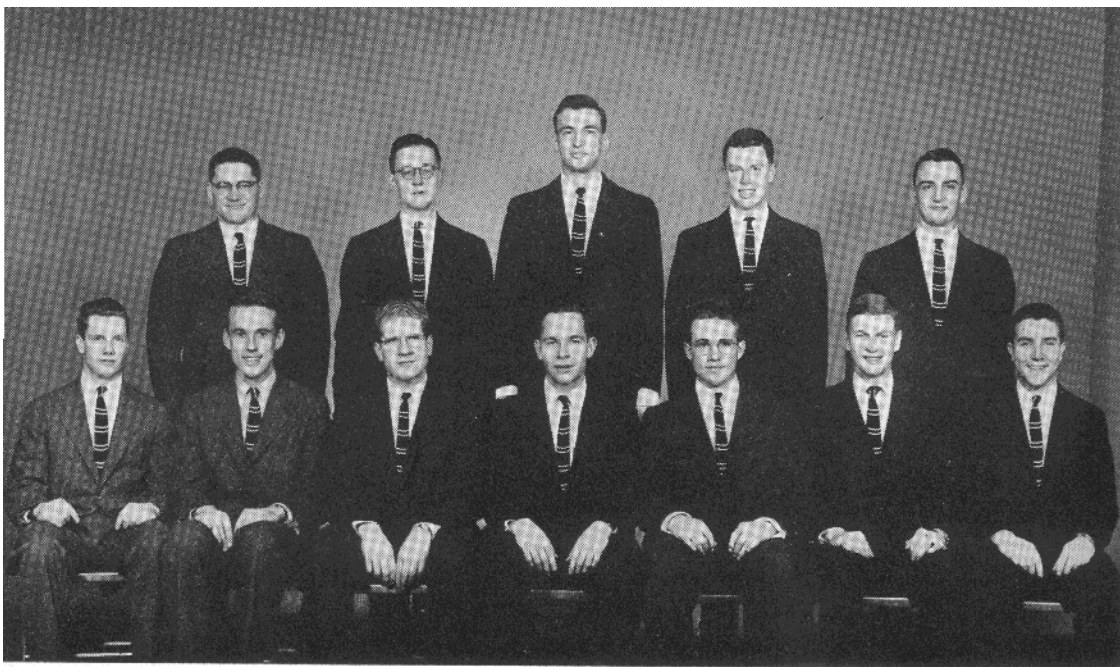
*We dislike, we rail, we disagree; but never hate.
We laugh, we chide, we ream; but never ridicule.
We band of brothers.*

Gigs followed at Skidmore, Bennington, the Hotel Roosevelt in New York and many more. Of particular note was a weekend at Bradford Junior College in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Stan wrote to his lady friend at that time who later became and remains his wife: "To begin with, The Duke's Men got thrown off the stage by the very irate conductor of the Bradford Choir. The story is this: our director forgot to include The Duke's Men on the program when he mailed it up a couple of weeks ago. Hence Mr. Hill (their director) didn't know anything about us. At an appropriate time during the concert, our director (Clayton Westerman) got up and made an announcement that The Duke's Men had consented to sing at that time. We got up there and had sung three numbers when we were ordered off very loudly by Mr. Hill who was shouting. We were getting twice the applause that the glee clubs were getting so it was all his opinion. As if this wasn't bad enough, he tried to get us kicked off the campus! Well everybody was completely up in arms against him, the audience and both glee clubs, and especially us. After the concert was over we sang at the dance and everybody there was really for us. When everything had cooled off we decided it was very funny." We were back in Saybrook on February 5, 1954

for the Seal Songfest with the Whiffs and other groups. Yale Daily News put us on page one the following morning.

Another infamous recording session occurred at WYBC on May 11 and 13, 1954, this time at 33rpm. Thompson again: "This record commemorates the greatest year in our short history. It is a tribute to the twelve Greatest Guys At Yale, to a mess of good fun, and the nation's outstanding composer, arranger, poet and taskmaster, Walt. These four numbers are our best efforts of the past year and are 100% Farrier. [*"Rain" medley, "Istanbul," "Robinson Crusoe," and "Night and Day."*] They were taped at WYBC in two nights of hell and frustration. By midnight on the 13th everyone was mercifully in their cups, which is as it should be."

Five founding members graduated: "crazy" Warren Ransom, "dance" Burnie Riggs, "tree" Paul Stanley, "seventh round" Ron Sindberg, and "monk" Farrier. Our Banner blurb ends, "Through these hallowed halls will continue to ring the cry of our tortured tenors: 'LOWER THE PITCH'. The spirit and the malady will linger on." The group at the end of the second year (spring, 1954):



Second row: Sindberg, van Heuven, Stanley, Park, Durfee
Front: Ransom, Cochran, Thompson, Farrier, Towle, Riggs, Hard.

Howie Park left to become our first Whiff, but we added two strong tenors: Todd Kendrick '57, and Bob Hewett '57 both of whom were destined for the Whiffenpoofs two years later. Other new members were Charlie Gill '56, Dave Ludwigson '56, Jack Hughes '57, Austin Pryor '57, Jeff Freeman '58, Dave Greenway '58, Sherm Durfee '58, and our next business manager, Jon Foote '58. Being a good friend and bon vivant of Paul's and Parker's, we had extracted Linus Travers '58 from his Freshman year shortly after he matriculated to bolster our second basses.

We were growing up fast...we were hummin'. Gib and Parker made frequent trips to Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY with the group to sing, and to court their future spouses, respectively, Camilla and Phyllis. Our second crowning achievement occurred April 29, 1955 in Woolsey Hall at the Eighth Annual Glee Club Jamboree and Quartet Contest. We appeared with the Baker's Dozen, O and B's, Whiffenpoofs, and the four college glee clubs, along with quartet finalists. Popular opinion declared that we topped the "applause meter." Immediately after the academic year ended a sufficient number of Duke's Men sang at Parker's and Phyllis' wedding in Massachusetts. By the end of our third year:



Back row: Ludwigson, Hughes, Kendrick, Travers, Pryor, Greenway, Gill
Front: Hewett, Cochran, Thompson, Durfee, Foote, Towle, Hard.

The Woolsey Hall Jamboree launched us, just as the last of the originals were to graduate: Cochran, Hard, Towle, Thompson, and, to the Whiffs, Gib Durfee. The future was assured when Gib recruited Fritz Kinzel. Gib relates, "as non-singing arranger, unheard of! Fritz was a great musician though he'd never arranged for four-part male groups. After rehearsals, I taught him the nuts and bolts and he taught me something of musicianship. What fun! In a short time, Fritz learned to sing, and in the spring of his junior year, after I graduated, he was elected to the Whiffs. As pitchpipe, no less." Our first Whiff pitch. Notable arrangements by Fritz were: "Jeepers Creepers," "Foggy Day," "They All Laughed," "Brother Can You Spare a Dime," and "Lulu's Back in Town." New recruits were Jeff Freeman '58, our next pitch, and Jim Cowperthwait '58.

Far and away the group's greatest "camp follower" in enthusiasm and durability from the early years was and remains Phyllis' roommate at Skidmore, Carol (Stewart) Schneidewind. She married an Annapolis graduate and Naval Officer but has sung our "virtues" to the stars and many of our songs as well. She recruited a friend to attend a performance of the '55 – '56 group

on their (in)famous tour of 5 Ohio institutions of higher learning in the spring of 1956. Before the description of the event as related by Carol's friend, an incident during the tour deserves mention as related by Austin Pryor: "I recall in particular our two cars, alternating positions and mooning each other. One time the car ahead disappeared and suddenly, when we were passing a large roadside sign, there they were, outside the car mooning us as we passed. Later we returned the 'favor' in the middle of downtown traffic when our two cars were side by side."

Carol's friend's comments: "They were just as good as you said they were if not better. They sang for almost two hours and I still didn't want them to stop. We got them to come back for three encores....I couldn't pick Todd out until he sang his solo in 'Skylark'" *[An arrangement of the song by Gib Durfee. He met Hoagy Carmichael's daughter who felt it was the best song her father ever wrote. It was great for the Duke's Men.]* Carol's friend, "Although I was scared to death, I went backstage afterward and gave him the Skidmore Fan Club greeting."

Excerpts from newspapers accounts after the performance: "The young men are billed as the Duke's Men from Yale University. They sing an informal type of group warbling. And the nearly 200 persons who packed the little theater for the concert loved it. The Eli representatives managed to leave safely, but only after two encores and round-after-round of applause... Casually dressed in three-button sport coats 14 Ivy Leaguers from Yale University introduced a new type of group singing to the campus last night....Hands thrust unconcerned in their pockets, the Duke's Men sang for nearly two hours....They tossed an occasional joke and generally had a good time. And when it was all over, the audience clamored for more....The Duke's Men's bespectacled, dead-panned bass kept up a running comedy routine all evening. He could sing too. And a couple of the boys managed to work in several yodeling numbers. And it's strictly a student operation."

Carol concludes her letter, "So there ya are, gang. Aren't you proud? I am. Lots of love, Carol X X X"

<u>Alpha</u>	<u>'52 – '53</u>	<u>'53 – '54</u>	<u>'54 – '55</u>	<u>'55 – '56</u>
Farrier	Cochran	Gill	Durfee, S.	Cowperthwait
Hard	Durfee, G.	Hewett	Freeman	Garrity
Park	van Heuven	Hughes	Foote	Krakoff
Ransom		Kendrick	Greenway	Stephenson
Riggs		Ludwigson	Kinzel	
Scheibler		Pryor	Travers	
Sindberg				
Stanley				
Thompson				
Towle				