

Hancock, John Henry (1917–2001)

DAN SHULTZ

Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

John H. Hancock, a preeminent youth ministries leader during the second half of the 20th century, had a major role in the development of Pathfinders and was an accomplished accordionist.

John was born in Chico, California, on August 8, 1917, the son of George Henry and Anna Samson Hancock.¹ In addition to seven years of piano study, his musical training included piano-accordion studies with Orlando Meni-Ketti begun at age 14. He would also study with world-renowned concert artist Anthony Galli-Rini.²

In 1939, John graduated from Pacific Union College with a degree in theology and married Helen V. Lonberger. They soon would have a daughter, Dottie (Versteeg), and two sons, John Richard and George Dwayne. John was called to the Northern California Conference, where Helen worked with him in evangelistic and pastoral ministry.³

Prominence in the Pathfinder Story

Hancock was appointed youth director of the Southeastern California Conference in 1946. In his new position, he worked with others to develop Pathfinder clubs, an idea that had started 20 years earlier in Anaheim. He designed, with Francis Hunt, the Pathfinder triangular emblem and, with his wife and others, developed and taught an honors program that recognized acquisition of knowledge and skills in various areas. In 1947 and



John H. Hancock, 1963.

From Glassnoise.com

1948, the Southern California and Central California conferences encouraged the formation of clubs, the first being formed in Glendale. By the end of those two years, 23 more clubs had been formed in the Central California Conference alone.⁴

In 1948, the Pathfinder flag was designed and introduced by Helen Hobbs. In the following year, the first Junior Congress of Pathfinders, planned by Hancock, was held at La Sierra College (now University), and the “Pathfinder Song” was written by Henry T. Bergh, notated and harmonized by his wife, Miriam, and adopted with the encouragement of Wayne Hooper from the *Voice of Prophecy*.⁵

Within a decade, the Pathfinder Club program was officially endorsed by the leaders of the Adventist Church and eventually became a worldwide organization involving hundreds of thousands of young people. After serving as youth director and Pathfinder leader in the Lake Union and North Pacific Union conferences, Hancock was called to the General Conference in 1963, where he became world Pathfinder director and associate director of the Youth Department. Seven years later, he became General Conference Youth Director, a position he held until his retirement in 1980.⁶

In his retirement years, Hancock authored *The Pathfinder Story*, first published by the North American Division Office of Pathfinder Ministries in 1994.

Piano-Accordion Performer

All through those years of service, Hancock’s professional-level playing of the accordion had become part of his identity. As a young person, he had performed with numerous ensembles and was in demand as a solo performer in both the classical and lighter music genres. Although his primary interest and study was in classical and light classical music, he became more widely known for his creative arrangements of familiar hymns and a style of playing that featured an active bass line in contrast to the more common chord-style adopted by many players.⁷

Throughout his ministry to the young, he used his talent as an accordionist wherever he talked and served. He believed that playing his custom-made instrument was especially effective in reaching congregations and gatherings of youth around the world because, as he would often observe, “It does not need to be translated.”⁸ Hancock’s album, *John Hancock and His Piano-Accordion*, was released by Chapel Records in 1964.

Hancock also composed seven choruses to be sung at Youth Congresses throughout the world: *Safe In His Hands*, *All Of My Heart*, *To The Outposts!*, *Christ Is Coming*, *We’ll March Along Together*, *Make Us Ready*, *Follow Me* (jointly with Lowell Litten), and, probably best known, *I’ll Share My Faith*.⁹

Legacy

Helen Hancock, John's wife of 52 years, died suddenly on July 13, 1990. John soon married Charlotte "Lollie" Keller in 1991. They were residing in southern California at the time of his death on February 22, 2001, at age 83.¹⁰

John Hancock is best known for his worldwide work with Seventh-day Adventist young people and his important role in developing the Pathfinder organization as the church's alternative to the Boy and Girl Scout organizations. He was also known as the "man with the accordion," an instrument he played wherever he traveled.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. 1920 United States Federal Census, Butte County, California, Enumeration District 11, Roll: T625_94; Page: 9B, "John Hancock," *Ancestry.com*.
2. "John Hancock and His Piano-Accordion," liner biography, Chapel Records, ST-069, 1964, Discogs, accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.discogs.com/John-Hancock-John-Hancock-And-His-Piano-Accordion/release/10593382>.
3. "John Hancock and His Piano-Accordion;" "Helen Hancock obituary," *ARH*, April 4, 1991, 30.
4. *The Pathfinder Story: A Brief History of Pathfinder Club Ministry* (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2019), 9, 48, 58; "Pathfinder Beginnings," Pathfinders Online, accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.pathfindersonline.org/history/27-overview-of-pathfinder-history/243-pathfinder-beginnings>.
5. *Pathfinder Story*, 9; Becky Wynn, "Hendersonville Welcomes Pathfinder Composer," *Southern Tidings*, April, 2006, 9.

6. *Pathfinder Story*, 13-14, 58-59.
 7. "John Hancock and His Piano-Accordion."
 8. John Hancock, *The Pathfinder Story*, 2004 ed., 7.
 9. "John Henry Hancock," *Glassnoise.com*, accessed March 3, 2020, <http://www.glassnoise.com/jhh/index.html>.
 10. Ibid.; John Henry Hancock, Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007, *Ancestry.com*.
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