

# Edwards, Robert Elden (1924–2004)

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## 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.

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Robert Elden Edwards, an ordained minister and author of five books, served for the longest period as a member of the Voice of Prophecy King's Heralds quartet. He was born in Kokomo, Indiana, on November 18, 1924, the younger of two sons of Lowell Adelbert and Josephine Thelma Cunnington Edwards.<sup>1</sup> His father was a pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist church and mother was a teacher who would become a noted storyteller in the church and author of over two dozen books and numerous articles enjoyed by children and adults.<sup>2</sup>

Robert sang his first solo, *Marching to Zion*, at age four, standing on a chair in the Adventist church in Muncie, Indiana. After attending elementary schools in Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, he attended Maplewood Academy in Minnesota, where he was deeply influenced by the music teacher, Adrian R. M. Lauritzen. Lauritzen was a motivating teacher, spotted music talents among the students, and encouraged them to be involved in musical organizations. At one time 80 out of the total school enrollment of 150 were involved in the academy choir. But to young Robert the most important day was the one when his music teacher encouraged him and his friends to form a male quartet. On that day, wrote Edwards some 50 years later, "I discovered my life's obsession."<sup>3</sup>

Following academy graduation in 1942, Edwards enrolled at Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska. At the end of his first year he transferred to Emmanuel Missionary College, now Andrews University, where he completed a



Bob Edwards, 1993

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degree with religion major and music minor.<sup>4</sup> His interest in quartet singing had continued after graduating from academy, and by the end of his first year at EMC he was a member of the highly regarded EMC College Quartet that was popular both on and off campus.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of his sophomore year Edwards married Irene Angela Sansonetti on May 27, 1945.<sup>6</sup> That November when Edwards heard the King's Heralds perform at the college, he entertained the idea of possibly someday becoming a member of that group.<sup>7</sup>

In May 1947 during his first year as a pastor and singing evangelist in Florida, Edwards met H.M.S. Richards and the King's Heralds at the Florida camp meeting at Forest Lake Academy. He would later write:

I made myself an absolute nuisance to them, though I did learn they were looking for a first tenor to take Ben's [Ben Glanzer] place. After standing in line with them at the cafeteria, I pestered them while they ate.

I'm sure that it must have been to get rid of me that they asked me to try out in a mini-audition before the afternoon meeting. I eagerly accepted. We went to a little ministers' room at the camp meeting auditorium and sang a cappella a quartet arrangement of John Newton's hymn "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken." Wayne [Hooper] blew the pitch pipe to give us the key. After each stanza, he blew the pitch pipe a half-step higher, testing me to check my vocal range....This was my big moment and I was proud as a peacock!<sup>8</sup>

The following September, the Voice of Prophecy (VOP) hired Edwards to be a back-up member of the quartet, work part time in the VOP Bible Correspondence School, and be a secretarial assistant to Richards. He was unaware of the turmoil over music that had been occurring behind the scenes at the VOP since 1943<sup>9</sup> and, in all innocence, became a member of another quartet called the Gleemen of Glendale led by H.M.S. Richards, Jr., which soon became popular and was getting more invitations to perform locally than the King's Heralds.<sup>10</sup>

Edwards got his first chance to perform in the King's Heralds quartet in December 1947 when a regular member developed a sore throat. He became fulltime member of the quartet in 1948. But then in early 1949 he let Richards know that he was thinking of leaving the quartet because of internal turmoil.<sup>11</sup> Wayne Hooper was hired later that year, however, and formed a new quartet that included Edwards as first tenor. That quartet would continue without change for twelve years, creating a stable group that, with its blend of voices and the production of quality records using new recording techniques, defined the King's Heralds sound for thousands of listeners.<sup>12</sup>

Edwards continued to remain with the quartet even though the three other quartet positions were frequently changing. Edwards retired from the quartet in 1971, and by that time he had sung in the quartet for more than two decades, always singing as first tenor.<sup>13</sup>

During those years Edwards and his wife Irene raised five children. In July 1967 Irene was diagnosed with lymphosarcoma. When she died in September, Richards, who was in London, immediately flew back to Los Angeles so that he could deliver the funeral sermon, honoring an earlier request from Edwards.<sup>14</sup> Five years

later Edwards married Sharon E. Bullard on July 9, 1972, with Richards officiating.

In addition to his role with the quartet, Edwards assisted in writing for the radio broadcasts and wrote three books about the VOP: *Hello America!*, *H.M.S. Richards: A Biography*, and *A Voice in the Air*. Another book, *South of the Border*, narrated highlights from the King's Heralds' first trip to Central and South America in 1959.

Fascination with archeology led Edwards to visit many biblical sites and to write a book on the subject, *Scrolls and Bones and Talking Stones*.

After he retired from the quartet, Edwards worked closely with H.M.S. Richards in developing a fifteen-minute daily broadcast. He continued to serve as a researcher and producer for those broadcasts until his retirement in 1989.<sup>15</sup> After retirement, he continued to assist the VOP by serving as a counselor in the Bible correspondence school. He died at Malibu, California on June 3, 2004. He was 79.<sup>16</sup>

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## SOURCES

1944 *Cardinal*. Emmanuel Missionary College Yearbook.

Edwards, Bob. "Singing as I Go" *Adventist Heritage* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1991).

Edwards, Robert E. *Hello America*. Voice of Prophecy, 1961.

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"Josephine Cunningham Edwards obituary." *Adventist Review*, December 23, 1993.

Michigan Marriage Records, 1867-1952. Ancestry.com.

U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014. Ancestry.com.

U.S. Social Security Records for Robert Elden Edwards; 1930 and 1940 U. S. Federal Census Records. Ancestry.com.

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## NOTES

1. U.S. Social Security Records for Robert Elden Edwards; 1930 and 1940 U. S. Federal Census Records, Ancestry.com.

2. "Josephine Cunningham Edwards obituary," *Adventist Review*, December 23, 1993, 22.

3. Bob Edwards, "Singing as I Go," *Adventist Heritage* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 44.

4. Robert E. Edwards, *Hello America*, (Voice of Prophecy, 1961), 39; Robert E. Edwards, *H.M.S. Richards* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 210.

5. 1944 *Cardinal*, Emmanuel Missionary College Yearbook, 26.
6. Michigan Marriage Records, 1867-1952, Ancestry.com.
7. Edwards, *H.M.S. Richards*, 210.
8. *Ibid.*, 215, 216.
9. *Ibid.*, 193-196, 201-203, 214-216, 218, 226-228. A detailed account of this turmoil is found in the listed pages. It revolved around disagreements between H.M.S. Richards, the General Conference, and trained musicians over the quartet's use of gospel music. This led to ongoing and unsettling changes in quartet personnel.
10. *Ibid.*, 226.
11. *Ibid.*, 226; Edwards, *Hello America*, 43. Edwards dropped out of the quartet in early 1949 for three months to assist with a radio broadcast in Oakland, California, but returned later that year when Hooper formed a new quartet.
12. Edwards, *Hello America*, 43-44.
13. Listing of King's Heralds quartet members from 1936 to 1977, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Printed Program, on November 18, 1978 at the Vallejo Drive Church and on November 19, 1978, at the Loma Linda University Church.
14. Edwards, *H.M.S. Richards*, 295.
15. *Ibid.*, 313.
16. U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014, Ancestry.com.

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