

Greer, George William (1895–1967)

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.

George William Greer taught voice and conducted choirs at several Adventist schools in an influential career especially noted for innovation and excellence in a cappella choral music.

Early Life and Training

George Greer¹ was born on September 11, 1895, in Eureka, California, to George William and Isabella

Smith Greer, the younger of their two children.² As a child George Greer had a natural aptitude for mathematics and music, and enjoyed piano practice and baseball. He attended Lodi Academy, where he joined with three other students to form a male quartet, the first of several he would sing in over the next half-century. After a year at Lodi, he transferred to the academy at Pacific Union College (PUC).³

Greer studied voice with college voice teacher Alexander A. Krasoff, former singer with the Metropolitan Opera, and then with Ada M. Hartley. Though he would later study voice with noted musicians Henry Pasmore at the University of California at Berkeley and Reinald Werrenrath in Washington, District of Columbia, Greer often referred to his lessons with Ada Hartley as the most important in his career. He also studied woodworking, mechanical drawing, theology, and music theory beginning in academy and continuing into his college years.⁴



Hazel and George Greer with Koala bear, 1952.

Photo courtesy of *Youth's Instructor*, March 25, 1952

At age twenty, Greer met Hazel McElhany, the daughter of a dentist who was preparing to teach elementary school. They married two years later. Although he was listed as a carpenter in the 1920 census, their home became a center of musical activity as Greer organized quartets and glee clubs that initially rehearsed in their living room. He also began teaching voice students in his home.⁵

While Greer was by then enrolled as a theology major at Pacific Union College, he continued to study voice with Hartley, who was no longer teaching at the college but living nearby. At the beginning of his junior year at PUC, when the president informed him that he had to make a choice between taking lessons with Hartley or continuing at PUC, he dropped his classes at the college.

Greer nonetheless continued to be involved with music at the college, singing in a quartet and directing a sixteen-member male chorus called the Sweet Sixteen. In the spring of 1921, he presented a highly successful program of spirituals with the male chorus at the college. A representative of the Pacific Press was present and invited Greer to bring his group to present the program in their auditorium in Mountain View, California.⁶

Lodi Academy Years (1921-1926)

The success of the Pacific Press concert led to an offer to teach at Lodi Academy and its related elementary school. Greer developed an outstanding choral program during his five years at the school. He also immersed himself in the writings of Ellen White, and as a result decided that he would no longer perform secular music with his choirs, a commitment he kept for the rest of his career.⁷

At the beginning of his last year at Lodi, Greer was given a lighter load so that he could enroll at College of the Pacific to complete a degree in music. However, after three weeks he dropped his studies, fearful that continued study would alter his outlook and commitment to serve his God and the church. The only music study he would have for the rest of his career were voice lessons and some short courses taken during two summers in later years.⁸

Pacific Union College Years (1926-1937)

In 1926, Greer, now thirty years old, was invited to return to PUC to teach voice and direct the choral program. He immediately formed a large oratorio chorus that provided the school's first performance of the *Messiah* in 1927.

More importantly, in his eleven years at PUC Greer formed an a cappella choir, a first in Adventist colleges, that became the premier ensemble at the college. Its reputation for excellence led to widespread touring and performances on radio broadcasts. Even though he had not completed a music diploma or degree, the quality of his work led PUC to grant him a professorship.⁹

Washington Missionary College Years (1937-1943)

In 1937, Greer accepted a position at Washington Missionary College (WMC, now Washington Adventist University). He immediately established a fifty-member a cappella choir and, as he had done at PUC, formed an oratorio chorus that presented WMC's first performance of the *Messiah*.

Greer's a cappella choir became regionally famous in the next six years, performing at leading churches in the nation's capital and, on one occasion, singing at the annual lighting of the Christmas tree outside the White House. The group was acclaimed for its performances broadcast nationwide on NBC radio and at the World's Fair in New York City in the summer of 1941.¹⁰

While on the East Coast, Greer took additional voice lessons in a summer session at Westminster Choir School in New Jersey. He also attended a choral workshop led by F. Melius Christiansen, founder and conductor of the choir at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and a pioneer in a cappella choral singing in the United States.

Years of Controversy at the Voice of Prophecy (1943-1947)

In 1943, the General Conference Radio Commission asked Greer to accept a position at the Voice of Prophecy radio program, which had become a national broadcast a year earlier, and was enjoying immense success. In this position, he provided training for members of its music group, the King's Heralds quartet, and make changes in the music they were using. The Church's trained musicians had urged the commission to make this move, feeling that the broadcast was not representative of the church because of the quartet's style of singing and overuse of gospel music.¹¹

Immediately after Greer arrived in California, he asked to meet with H. M. S. Richards, director of the program, wanting to reassure him that he would not make any changes without consulting with him. Richards questioned the need to make any changes, feeling that the broadcast's music needed to appeal to the average radio listener. Greer responded that the program's music might turn away musicians. Richards observed that most people were not musicians and that ordinary people liked what they were doing and were providing support for the program.¹²

An intense conflict ensued in the next four years between Greer and the quartet and Richards, which never became personal but reflected vastly different ideas about what was appropriate sacred music. Greer found compromise unacceptable on what he regarded as serious issues. He was also uneasy when Richards and the quartet shared in whimsical teasing of one another and would laugh together. Although Greer and Richards liked each other on a personal level and enjoyed traveling together, the relationship between Greer and the quartet steadily worsened despite efforts on both sides to make the arrangement work. Finally, in December 1946, three members of the quartet were released for not supporting and cooperating with Greer.¹³

When Richards protested, the commission briefly entertained the idea of releasing him also. It was rumored that Greer's wife's uncle, General Conference President J. L. McElhany, knowing of his nephew's hurt and frustration, had influenced the commission. It was an upsetting time for all parties and when, in 1947, Greer had an opportunity to become choral director at Avondale College in Australia, he accepted the position.¹⁴

Avondale College Years (1947-1952)

In the next five years, Greer transformed choral music and the image of music at Avondale. He organized a large seventy-member a cappella choir and then traveled extensively throughout the continent. The story of his remarkable success and experience in Australia was chronicled by Hazel Greer in a four-part series of articles that appeared in the *Youth's Instructor* during March and April 1952.¹⁵ By the time Greer left, the choir had gained national recognition for excellence and his accomplishments at Avondale were already legendary, a perception that has widely persisted into the twenty-first century.¹⁶

Final Teaching Years (1952-1960)

In 1952, Greer accepted a faculty position at Atlantic Union College (AUC) in Massachusetts. When college president, Lawrence M. Stump, told him that he must do secular music with his choir as well as sacred, Greer stood firm on his longstanding principle and left AUC after serving there for two years.¹⁷

He resided in the Washington, District of Columbia, area for the next two years, where he taught voice lessons and conducted a choir at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary (also known as Potomac University), and taught courses there for a summer. He also worked as an insurance salesman and cabinet maker.

In 1956, the Greers returned to PUC,¹⁸ where George Greer worked until his retirement in 1960. Revered and highly respected by PUC students and faculty, he was given the title of professor emeritus at the time of his retirement.

Contribution

George William Greer was living in Lakeport, California, when he died on November 1, 1967, at the age of 72.¹⁹ Known as the first to found an a cappella choir at an Adventist school, he was also a pioneer in doing extensive tours with his groups, conducting Adventist choirs on radio broadcasts, and releasing recordings of their music.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. This article draws substantially upon the author's article, "George William Greer" in Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource, accessed November 3, 2019, http://www.iamaonline.com/Bio/George_Greer.htm.
2. "George William Greer obituary," *ARH*, January 4, 1968, 26; 1900 United States Census, Eureka Ward 2, Humboldt, California, Enumeration District 0023, FHL microfilm 1240086, page 13, "Greer, George A. W." Ancestry.com, accessed November 3, 2019, <https://www.ancestry.com>.
3. Hazel McElhany Greer and Norma R. Youngberg, *Hymns at Heaven's Gate: The Story of George Greer, Choirmaster* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1974); Walter C. Utt, *A Mountain, a Pickax, a College: A History of Pacific Union College* (Angwin, CA: Alumni Association of Pacific Union College, 1968), 66 (photo caption).
4. McElhany and Youngberg.
5. *Ibid.*, 34; 1920 United States Census, Saint Helena, Napa, California, Enumeration District 63, roll T625_122, "Greer, George W.," Ancestry.com, accessed November 3, 2019, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

6. McElhany and Youngberg, 44-45.
7. Ibid., 46-47
8. Ibid., 59, 63-64.
9. ⁹ Utt, 88-89.
10. Esther Kuckenmeister, "All Choral Work Under Full Steam Ahead," *Sligonian*, October 22, 1937, 3, 6; "A Capella Broadcasts at Radio City," *Sligonian*, July 26, 1940, 3; LeRoy Summers, "Prof. G. W. Greer Recognized for Directing Choir," *Sligonian*, April 16, 1943.
11. Robert E. Edwards, *H. M. S. Richards* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 193-195.
12. Ibid., 194-195.
13. Ibid., 194-196, 201-202.
14. Ibid., 204-205; Wayne Hooper, interview by author, February 10 and 14, 2005.
15. Hazel McElhany Greer, "On Tour with the Avondale Symphonic Choir," *Youth's Instructor*, March 11, 1952, 7-8, 17-18; March 18, 1952, 7-8, 17; March 25, 1952, 9-10; and April 8, 1952, 7-8, 21.
16. Milton Hook, *Experiment on the Dora* (Cooranbong, New South Wales: Avondale Academic Press, 1998), 205-207.
17. "Prof. G. W. Greer New Vocal Instructor," *Lancastrian*, November 14, 1952; Ellsworth F. Judy, interview by author, March 13, 2003; McElhany and Youngberg, 135-140.
18. McElhany and Youngberg, 139-140.
19. "George William Greer obituary."

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