

Voice of Prophecy

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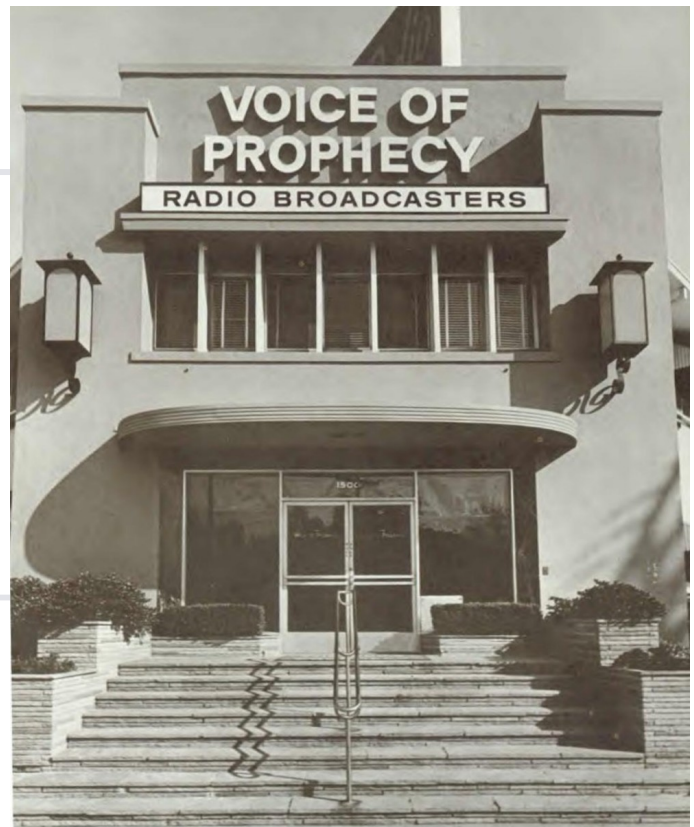
Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an 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.

The Voice of Prophecy (VOP), founded in California by evangelist H.M.S. Richards, Sr. in 1929, became Adventism's premiere radio ministry, with nationwide broadcasting and a Bible Correspondence School both launched in 1942. By 1947 the VOP was reaching around the world, broadcasting in six languages on more than 600 stations, and its international evangelistic ministry continues in 2020 on multiple media platforms.

Bible Tabernacle of the Air

H.M.S. Richards (1894-1985), a successful West coast Adventist evangelist in the 1920's, began broadcasting on California radio stations in 1929, in addition to his ongoing work in tents and tabernacles. Rejecting the showy tactics of most radio evangelists of that time, he presented in his Bible Tabernacle of the Air a reasoned, biblically based message. The immediate success of the program created a demand for secretarial assistance, a need met by Betty Canon, a stenographer who offered to assist one day a week on a volunteer basis. The need for her services quickly led to full time employment paid for daily, the amount dependent in contributions received that day.¹

While conducting evangelistic meetings in Southern California in the following decade, Richards became acquainted with The Lone Star Four, a male quartet consisting of the three Crane brothers, Wesley, Waldo, and Louis, and Ray Turner. They had formed their quartet in 1928, while students at Southwestern Junior College (now Southwestern Adventist University) in Texas.



Voice of Prophecy headquarters, Glendale, CA.

Photo courtesy of Central Union Reaper, September 29, 1970.

Richards, impressed with their music and its effect on attendance and the audiences in his meetings, hired them in 1936 to join his evangelistic meetings and radio program. The following year, he changed the program's name to the Voice of Prophecy and the quartet became The King's Heralds, a name suggested in response to an invitation to the radio audience to send in possibilities.²

Voice of Prophecy: Coast to Coast and Overseas

The VOP was still a West coast program as the 1940's started. At the Annual Council of 1941, the General Conference Radio Commission at the denomination's headquarters in Washington, D.C., voted to have a national broadcast and chose the VOP to be that program. Agreements were reached with the Mutual Broadcasting Company and on Sunday evening, January 4, 1942, four weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the program was heard coast to coast on 89 stations.³

Following the clarion call of the theme song, "Lift up the trumpet, and loud let it ring: Jesus is coming again!" by the King's Heralds, announcer Fordyce Detamore opened the program with, "Hello America!" Richards then presented his message interspersed with the quartet singing hymns. The program concluded with final encouragement by Richards to "Have faith, dear friend, in God," and the quartet singing a benediction, ending with an "amen." With another world war adding to uncertainty and concern over the future, Richards' intimate, friendly voice, with its message of hope, and the quartet's impeccable singing of familiar gospel hymns provided much needed reassurance.⁴

By the end of 1942, the number of stations carrying the broadcast jumped to 225. In the month of October that year alone, 22,711 letters arrived at the studio. The Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence School, developed by Detamore, was announced one month after the first broadcast and within a month 2,000 persons had enrolled. Lessons for young persons followed, along with lessons in Braille. By 1946, there were 85,000 students, the support staff had increased to 120, and 32,000 students had graduated from the courses⁵

In March 1943, Spanish and Portuguese versions of the program started broadcasting in Central and South America on more than sixty stations. By 1952 the VOP was being broadcast on more than 700 stations worldwide and operating 69 correspondence schools. In 1947 the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) had begun carrying the VOP, and in 1956 the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) became the third network in the United States to add the program. By the 1960's it was being carried on over 1300 stations in 30 languages⁶

The King's Heralds and Del Delker

The quartet became an inseparable part of the program's identity and within a decade of its first national broadcast in 1942, the rich contralto voice of singer Del Delker was also regularly featured. While speakers proficient in their respective languages replaced Richards for non-English broadcasts, the quartet and Delker,

with encouragement and coaching from the speakers for these programs, learned to sing in many of the new languages. As the work of the VOP spread around the world and the diversity of broadcast languages increased, the quartet was able to sing in many of these languages through use of the International Phonetic Alphabet and assistance from language instructors.⁷

Yet another challenge for the quartet during those years was the continuing change in quartet personnel. In 1943 the last of the Crane brothers left the group, to be replaced by Wayne Hooper. He and Bob Seamount, who had joined the group earlier, had sung in a quartet at La Sierra College, now University, as students. Both men would become key persons in the group and in other aspects of the operation of the overall VOP program.

From the first, quartet members did more than sing. In the early years, Ray Turner, bass in the original group, for example, was unofficial manager of group. He cared for the car in their frequent travels and assisted in the studio by directing the broadcast. It was his responsibility to start and end the program on time, carefully pace it, and let Richards know how much time was left.⁸

Seamount, who sang second tenor, had studied electronics before coming to the VOP and introduced recording into the studio and then, in successive years, led in expanding and upgrading this aspect of the operation. When he left the quartet in 1961, twenty years after he had joined, he continued for a time as a recording technician in the studio.⁹

Hooper, a baritone, had interrupted his studies in music at La Sierra to teach at an academy in Portland, Oregon, in 1941. Two years later he became part of the quartet, continuing with them until 1947, when he left to complete a music degree at Union College.

Beginning in 1943, the General Conference Radio Commission in Washington, D.C., in response to the concerns of trained musicians about the VOP's heavy use of gospel songs, hired George Greer, choral director at Washington Missionary College, to coach the quartet and oversee its choices in music. Despite the best of intentions, there were clashes between Greer and the quartet and Richards. Greer believed the music should be as sophisticated as that used with his highly regarded choirs. Richards and the quartet believed that such a change would lessen the broadcast's appeal to the audience they were trying to reach.

In 1947, the Commission released three members of the quartet and, at one point, made a move to replace Richards because of his defense of these members. Finally, in mid-1947, the situation became untenable and Greer left to accept a position as choir director at Avondale College in Australia. Lon Metcalfe, a respected choir director who had also sung in quartets, replaced him. Again, there were clashes, which led to his departure in 1949.¹⁰

Hooper, one of the three who had been released in 1947, had just completed his music degree at Union. He was invited to return to the VOP and agreed to do so with the understanding that he would form a new quartet and have control over what it sang. He brought back Seamount, who had also been released in 1947, to sing second

tenor, retained Bob Edwards as first tenor, moved Jerry Dill from baritone to bass, and placed himself as baritone. This ensemble, with its unique blend of voices, would sing together for the next twelve years and provide the sought-after stability for the quartet.¹¹

Their singing and choices in music, coupled with recent breakthroughs in sound recording and reproduction, would define the King's Herald sound for millions. Use of long-playing vinyl records beginning in 1948, tape recording in 1949, and, finally, stereo in 1958 enabled the quartet to release quality records that VOP listeners eagerly purchased.

Hooper would sing until 1962, when he became musical director of the broadcast, a position he held until he retired in 1980. During his years with the VOP, he became famous for his composing and arranging talents.

Broadcast and Traveling Ministry

The weekly program initially occupied a Sunday evening time slot but in 1943 Mutual relegated it to Sunday morning, with two separate live broadcasts – first at 6:30 a.m. (Pacific time) for the Eastern and Central time zones, and at 8:30 a.m. for the Mountain and Pacific zones. When a new VOP building was constructed in 1950, the studios were equipped with professional tape recorders, a recent innovation in recording technology. Even though live broadcasting continued into the 1950's, some of the program was now prerecorded.¹²

From the beginning of his work as an evangelist, Richards had traveled extensively but he expanded this part of his ministry as the radio program started and then flourished. He was joined in these trips by the quartet when it was added in 1936, and when the program became a nationwide success, the travels widened to include the whole country, mostly during summer camp meetings. Richards loved music and understood its power, often acknowledging that words set to music do what sermons cannot. The quartet, which he affectionately referred to as "his boys," traveled with him wherever he went.

It was a grueling schedule with long drives, last minute arrivals when delays occurred along the way, constant performing, and extended visiting following meetings. In 1957 two groups were formed to relieve some of the pressure and respond to the increasing number of requests for a visit by the VOP. The "A" group consisted of H.M.S. Richards and the quartet. The "B" group at first included J. Orville Iverson and later H.M.S Richards, Jr., assisted by Del Delker and VOP organist and pianist Bradford and Olive Braley, respectively. It was not unusual for each of these groups to travel over 12,000 miles a year.

Studio organists through the years in addition to Braley included Irving Steinel, Elmer Digneo, Al Avilla, Beth Thurston, Calvin Taylor, and Phil Draper. Braley and his wife would work a record nineteen years for the VOP. Taylor was the most highly trained of this group, having completed a master's degree in organ under full scholarship at the University of Michigan. He followed Braley and played until 1975, when he left to pursue a concert career.

His successor, James Teel, a pianist and skilled arranger with a master's degree in music from the University of Arizona, was a natural musician who could both read music and improvise by ear. For the next seven years, he worked closely with the quartet and Delker as accompanist and as a soloist. During these changes in the keyboard area, Braley continued to play organ as needed. He again played following Teel's departure and then finally retired fully when Phil Draper joined the VOP and became its official organist.¹³

Seamount was the first in the Hooper quartet to leave, to be replaced by John Thurber in 1961. The following year, when both Hooper and Dill left, Jack Veazey, baritone, and Jim McClintock, bass, both of whom had sung with Thurber at Southern Missionary College, now Southern Adventist University, joined the quartet. Additional changes in the quartet would continue until 1982, when its association with the VOP ended. By that time, Del Delker, who had worked with the King's Heralds for over 30 years, had sung with twelve different combinations in quartet personnel.¹⁴

H.M.S. Richards, Jr. and a New Era

1969 was a transitional year for the VOP. The Voice of Prophecy Evangelistic Association was formed under the leadership of Gordon Henderson to better coordinate the many new VOP outreach programs needed to meet changing times. Also in that same year manager Alvin Munson began using computer technology to better facilitate the tracking and follow-up of persons responding to the broadcast.¹⁵

H.M.S. Richards, Sr. retired in 1969 at age 75, though he remained active in both the broadcast and traveling ministry. His son, H.M.S. Richards, Jr. (1929-2000), was chosen as successor. An accomplished musician, the younger Richards valued his musicians and often would let them fill at least half of the time allotted to the VOP group at camp meetings. He would also on occasion join in spontaneous impromptu music-making while traveling.

Unfortunately, he followed his father at a time when radio audiences had been declining, due in part to the impact of television. By the late 1950s and through the 1960s, many families were tuning in to this newer medium. At the same time, the introduction of transistors made portable radios possible and improved the quality of car radios. Persons traveling in cars were becoming the new audience. The proliferation of radio stations and growing number of static-free stereo FM radio broadcasts created more options and the likelihood of listeners' changing stations if a program did not appeal to them.

By the end of the 1960's, many radio stations were targeting groups with diverse musical tastes and interests. Half-hour broadcasts with speakers and music were being relegated to religious broadcast stations, or placed at low-audience, overpriced time slots on traditional stations. Eventually, by the turn of the century, programs like the VOP were more likely to be found only on Christian broadcast networks or stations!¹⁶

The need arose for 30-second and one-minute spots, or two-, five-, or 15-minute programs which could state the message and not lose the audience. The younger Richards embraced this reality and moves were made in that direction, with some success. The musical requirements for this kind of programming, however, were minimal. Also, during these same years, musical tastes were rapidly shifting to a preference for the amplified sounds of Contemporary Christian music.¹⁷

In 1978 the VOP moved to the Seventh-day Adventist Radio, Television, and Film Center, later renamed the Adventist Media Center, in Newbury Park, California, joining with Faith for Today, It is Written, and Breath of Life programs which had moved there earlier in the decade. Budgeting problems and other changes led the Media Center Board, by now the governing group for all national Adventist media efforts, to release the quartet and Teel in 1982. This action signaled the end of an era. The Media Center was relocated to Simi Valley in 1995.¹⁸

“The Voice” in the Twenty-first Century

Lonnie Melashenko became speaker in 1992 and director of the program in 1993, when H.M.S. Richards, Jr., retired. Following Melashenko’s retirement in 2008, Fred Kinsey served in that capacity for four years. Shawn Boonstra became speaker-director in 2012 and is assisted by his wife Jean, who serves as associate speaker. Both Boonstras have written several books.

In 2016 the VOP headquarters moved to Loveland, Colorado. Its mission continues to be accomplished through radio broadcasts adapted to a changing media environment. Since 2016 the weekly broadcast has become an hour-long program in the talk radio format entitled Disclosure, hosted by Shawn Boonstra. Discovery Mountain, a Bible-based adventure series for children, with Jean Boonstra, launched in 2017. Addition to the broadcast airwaves, listeners can download episodes of both programs them through various podcasting services or access them on the VOP website. Free Bible courses both for children and for adults are available by mail, satellite, mobile devices, and online.¹⁹

Legacy

At its peak, the Voice of Prophecy, with its skillful mix of music and message, was the church’s largest and most effective outreach program. Through those and subsequent years, the radio industry has recognized both the quality of the broadcast and its music with praise and awards. As gratifying as this recognition has been, however, the program’s most important accomplishment, then and now, has been its effectiveness in presenting the gospel to millions around the globe.

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