



A .M.

Autrey

Material prepared by
Sheryl Murphy-Manley & Walter
Foster

Biographical Sketch of A.M. (Al) Autrey 1922 – 1988

April 12, 1922 was a fateful day in Sommerville, Texas, for on that day was born one who would be a prime mover in public school choral music in the state of Texas.

Early on in school he was attracted to the trumpet which he played all through high school. Becoming a “music teacher” was the farthest thing from his mind as he grew up doing all the things young boys did in south central Texas in the 1930s, like skinny dipping in the town’s water supply reservoir and “cruise” the town for girls.

However, one episode did stand out in his mind. During his high school years, a politician came to Caldwell, where the Autrey family was living. He needed someone to drive him about the county to meet the people and solicit their votes. When Al’s father heard this, he said, “My boy Al will drive you”. Surely the man who became U.S. Congressman, U.S. Senator and ultimately the President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, didn’t remember the high school boy who drove him all over Burleson county, but Al never forgot.

Al was among that vast group of young men who were just the right age to become soldiers in World War II. He chose the Army Air Corps to do his service to his country and ultimately piloted B25 bombers and P51 fighter planes. Al was the prototype of the “fighter pilot”. He was short enough to fit comfortably into the cramped cockpit of a fighter plane, had a type A personality, was handsome, and had the self assurance that there was nothing he could not do, including directing a men’s chorus at Ellington Air Base in Houston.

Following five years of military service in the U.S. Army Corps, he returned to Sam Houston State Teachers College to continue his academic studies. Like so many war veterans from World War II, Al did not talk much about the actual combat, killing and the horrors of war, but he would thoroughly enjoy telling the funny things that happened along the way, i.e. the time during his flight training when he fell out of the open cockpit of the trainer he was flying and the week end he and his buddy were skinny dipping in the Pacific ocean and someone stole their

uniforms. They had to spend the entire night in the water before getting help the next day. For the rest of his life he suffered from a “bad” knee, that was a result of having to bail out of the P51.

At SHSTC he fell under the influence of Euell Porter. Al, a trumpet player who had developed a fine tenor voice along the way, was one of the several band members Euell Porter recruited to sing in the choir. Al ultimately chose to follow the discipline of choral music.

Following his graduation at SHSTC, he accepted a position as choral director at Tarleton Junior College in Stephenville. During the summers he began study for his Master of Music Degree at UNT at Denton. He continued additional studies at the University of Texas and the University of Denver.

Following two years at Tarleton, he moved to Amarillo High School which had 1900 students in grades 10-12. The choir program boasted 600 students. Surely this must have been the largest choral program in any high school in the State. The Bel Canto Chorale, the best 60 singers, presented a 15-minute program on the local NBC radio station, KGNC, every Sunday afternoon. They recorded the program on Fridays. They prepared one major selection during the week and sight-read the rest of the the program. One year, he prepared and performed Brahms’ German Requiem at an astonishing high level for high school singers. While there, his choir won the coveted Gulf Sulfur contest. The prize was a performance with the Houston Symphony Orchestra on a radio broadcast that covered the entire state, and beyond.

Al continued his singing, during his Amarillo years, by singing in the Blackburn Shaw Funeral Home male quartet. When this group was not performing in their professional capacity, they sang Barbershop with exceptional skill. On these occasions they were known as “The Four Hearsemen,” and, even more informally, as “The Four Stiffs!”

His next appointment was at Travis High School, followed by Harlingen High School, McAllen High School before making a transition to college level work. While at McAllen, he was elected conductor of the Valley Civic Chorus.

Having taught at John Tarleton Junior College, and through some research he had done while working on his Masters Degree at North Texas, he became vitally interested in the concept and development of community colleges. It seemed natural, therefore, for him to migrate from high school teaching to a position at San

Antonio College, a two year “community” school. For five years he directed Victor Alessandro’s opera chorus for the San Antonio Opera Festival and directed the Meistersinger Chorale. He sang comprimario tenor roles in some of the operas. While with the San Antonio Opera Association he was involved with one of the very early performances of Carlisle Floyd’s “Susanna”.

He was appointed choir director at his Alma Mater, Sam Houston State University, in 1965. During his forty years of teaching he inspired many of his students to life careers in music. His work, at every level, in the several places he taught, was admired and respected by his peers.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by Walter Foster
Professor of Music, Retired
Sam Houston State University

Following his graduation from Caldwell High School and Sam Houston State College, A. M. Autrey became director of the Sam Houston State College Men’s Chorus. Then, during a 5-year career as a pilot of P-51’s and B-25’s he directed the Men’s Choir at Ellington Field, Houston. After receiving his discharge, Autrey taught voice and directed choral groups at John Tarleton State College at Stephenville. He later did post-graduate work in vocal music at North Texas State College, receiving his Master’s degree from there in 1951. While still working on his Master’s, Autrey came to Amarillo in the capacity of choral director, succeeding Mrs. Julia Dean Evans in 1949. In his first year at Amarillo, he produced an outstanding organization, the Bel Canto Chorale, winning an appearance with the Houston Symphony in the spring of 1950.

I first met Al Autrey in the fall of 1950, my junior year at Amarillo High School, when I auditioned for a spot in the Bel Canto Chorale. At that time enrollment in Amarillo High School (grades 10-12) totaled around 1900 students, over 600 of whom participated in the choral program. The Bel Canto Chorale, consisting of the top 60 students, presented a 15-minute program on the local NBC radio station, KGNC, every Sunday afternoon. We actually recorded the program on Friday afternoons, having prepared one major selection during the week and sight-reading the rest of the numbers at the moment. It kept everyone alert! During the spring of 1952, my senior year, the Bel Canto Chorale presented Brahms’ German Requiem in its entirety. That was when we all met the marvelous baritone soloist, Charles Nelson, for the first time.

The high school officials didn't entirely appreciate the level of repertoire we were performing. They thought we were much too "high brow." After Commencement, the Superintendent of Schools complimented Al on the music we sang for the ceremony and expressed his wish that we should sing more numbers like that. The selection was the fourth movement of the Brahms Requiem, which the man had never bothered to hear earlier in the year. Such were the perils of mid-twentieth-century choral educators in Texas!

Not only did Al conduct, he also sang very well. In addition to his work as a soloist, he performed regularly with a male quartet at the Blackburn Shaw Funeral Home in Amarillo. When this group was not performing in their professional capacity, they sang Barbershop with exceptional skill. On these occasions they were known as "The Four Hearsemen," and, even more informally, as "The Four Stiffs!" One year they were finalists in the SPEBSQSA (Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America) Competition. The next year they were the First Place Winners.

Al picked a student male quartet out of the Bel Canto Chorale. I was fortunate to sing bass with the group, along with Bill Cormack, tenor; Bob Davis, lead; and Adam Ortiz, baritone. Adam, Bill and I all went on to pursue music as a profession. After decades of outstanding success in high school choral music, Bill went on to become Executive director of TMEA. Adam attended college briefly, then joined the Air Force, where he quickly became the Director of the Keesler Air Force Base Chorus and had incredible opportunities for traveling and performance experience in all parts of the world. After his stint in the military, Adam did music degrees in Mississippi and continued his career in music education. I completed degrees at UNT and UT Austin on the way to a college teaching career in voice and opera.

Al Autrey had a very positive, decisive influence on each of our lives. It was especially rewarding for me to teach with him years later at Sam Houston State University.

A.M. (Al) Autrey
by Suzanne Medlen

When I became a graduate assistant in 1969 at Sam Houston State University, the requirements for my assistantship were to accompany vocal students and to be the

choral assistant for the A Cappella Choir. Alvis Autrey was the choral director and voice teacher under whom I was assigned to work.

For the next two years, Mr. Autrey proceeded to place wonderful and difficult repertoire in front of me to sight-read for his voice students. Never having been good at sight-reading piano scores, it was “sink or swim” time. This method forced me to develop abilities that have been invaluable throughout my career. It allowed me to be exposed to a tremendous volume of outstanding vocal repertoire.

The most important aspect of my graduate accompanying experience was the opportunity to watch a master voice teacher work with many different students. This allowed me to develop an ear for vocal sound and Mr. Autrey would graciously answer my questions during our coffee and Dr. Pepper breaks. He frequently would explain different techniques during lessons. He allowed me to begin my teaching style when he would send me to start a student’s lesson. Alvis Autrey was one of the finest vocal coaches that I have had the privilege of studying with or observing. He seemed to always be mindful that he was training future teachers.

I also had the opportunity of studying voice from Mr. Autrey for a short period of time. This provided me with great insight into my own vocal instrument. He was tremendously helpful in preparing my graduate recital because I was not on campus during this time. My Mother (my accompanist) and I would come from Stephenville, Tx for rehearsals. Special arrangements had to be made for practicing and Mr. Autrey always accommodated his schedule to facilitate our rehearsals.

Alvis Autrey was a wonderful teacher and an excellent musician. His musical insight and teaching skills have impacted many singers and teachers. He had a tremendous influence on my teaching career.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by Walter H. Hodgson, Dean, School of Music
North Texas State College

For at least a dozen years, Amarillo High School has had one of the ranking high school choirs of the country. Musicians like, Mary McCormic, Julia Dean Evans, Jim Bob Nance, Cloys Webb, Janet Catterton, Harlen Nesbit, Adrian McClish, Helen Marshall, Ruben Noel and many others from Amarillo, are prominent names of the North Texas State College School of Music.

When Mrs. Evans came to NTSC three years ago, we had a chance to reciprocate and send one of our finest students, Alvis Autrey, to direct the Bel Canto Chorale. It has been a great source of great satisfaction that Autrey has been able to carry on the work of yesteryear and add to the laurels of the Chorale's Distinguished tradition.

Last spring, when I heard the chorale sing, I could truly say it was one of the finest three or four high school choirs I have ever heard. My experience includes 20 years of judging in Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, New York, Oklahoma and Texas. I prophesy this album will add greatly to the Chorales reputation, and I would like to have album number one for the NTSC music library.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered by Sheryl Murphy-Manley

Al's presence in my college life extended far beyond the realm of merely being my voice teacher. He was a father figure away from home. He was an encourager and one who helped me as a young college girl put the world into a larger perspective and walk boldly toward my goals and dreams.

He was perceptive and quick to assess his students' frames of mind. He was always ready to listen, offer advice, or reprimand when necessary. He had an uncanny way of knowing what each student would achieve once they graduated, or if they even would. I saw over the years, that his predictions were almost always correct.

Knowing the accuracy of his perceptions, I came to trust his advice and his observations even more as the years passed. More than anyone else in my college years, Al helped to instill in me the desire to seek the career paths that he saw I truly desired. He did this for all of his students.

He was the most honest individual that I had ever met. He told me truthfully what a career in music would bring: both the pleasant and not so pleasant. He always had his students' best interests at heart and was able to help us sort through our young adult minds that were full of extraneous ideas.

There are times in my adult life that I think of him daily, missing his sincere and realistic approach to music and life. His kind and spunky spirit inspire and encourage me today as I can still hear his words of advice, gently reassuring me.

His sense of humor was endearing and his smile unforgettable. His kind gestures were an assurance to all who knew him that he had created a better world for so many people who were blessed to have called him teacher, friend, and colleague. With sincerest and fondest appreciation to you Al — we will always love you and remember you.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered by Charles Nelson

As I remember, it was the summer of 1950 (it could have been 1951) that Al attended summer school at NTSU. We had some classes together and his affable personality made me seek his company beyond class time. He was a trumpet player who had sung in Euell Porter's choir at Sam Houston State and decided to make his "fame and fortune" in choral music. Being young ambitious choral directors, Al and I had a lot to talk about, and did, over coffee at the student center and in the swimming pool and at every other opportunity we could find.

About that time, he moved from his first job at John Tarleton Junior College in Stephenville to Amarillo High School where he accepted the responsibility of a large (perhaps the largest) high school choral program in the State. The program flourished under his direction. They won the Gulf Sulfur competition for a radio performance with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. One spring he invited me to come to Amarillo and sing the baritone solos with a performance of the Brahms Requiem. His singers did a remarkably mature performance of that great masterpiece; well beyond high school choir norms.

Al's ability to cause high school singers to sing extraordinarily well became well known throughout the State and he was looked to as a leader in the field. The prowess of his choirs in Amarillo, Austin, Harlingen, McAllen High Schools won him a teaching position at San Antonio College. In McAllen he became the second director of the Valley Civic Chorus. While working at San Antonio College, he was appointed Chorus Master for the San Antonio Opera Company and director of the Meistersinger Chorale. Al also had a fine tenor voice and sang many comprimario roles with that company. He completed his teaching tenure at Sam Houston State University where he directed choirs and taught singing. As our friendship grew, we sought every opportunity to be together. Our wives and children became friends.

Al was a colleague whose outstanding ability I recognized and admired. Since I

admired his skill, I never wanted him to hear my work, as a choir director or as a singer, unless it was the best I could possibly produce. I wanted to enjoy the friendship and have the approval of the best talent in our profession. Al was one of the best.

I shall not forget his influence upon my private and professional life.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by R.B. Norman, Principal
Amarillo high School

I have told several people that the Bel Canto Chorale is the best choir ever to come out of Amarillo High School. I believe it is also as fine as any choir I have heard anywhere.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by A.D. Nance
San Jacinto Kiwanis Club

Alvis Autrey has the best choir to come out of Amarillo High School in many years. He has done wonderful things with those youngsters. I have heard them many times, and I can truthfully say the Chorale has the best blend, balance, harmony and tuning I've ever heard. I'm not a music critic, but I know when music is good, and that choir is good.

A.M.(Al) Autrey Remembered
by Carl Bates, Pastor
First Baptist Church

The Bel Canto Chorale is one of the finest musical organizations I have ever heard.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by Euell Porter, Choral Director
Hardin-Simmons University

I think the Bel Canto Chorale of Amarillo High School is one of the finest high school choirs in the Southwest.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by Mary McCormic, Director of Opera
North Texas State College

It is with great pride that I learned the Chorale is putting out an album of records. Being a native of Amarillo, I've always taken great interest in the musical life there. I think there is no better choir anywhere. The Bel Canto Chorale is a group of which Amarilloans should be very proud.

A.M. (Al) Autrey Remembered
by Bob Watson, Assistant Manager
Radio Station KGNC

The Bel Canto Chorale is terrific . . . and the skill with which Autrey directs this splendid group of voices is wonderful. It is gratifying to know that Amarillo students are being given the opportunity to study music under the directorship of so capable a musician as Autrey.