

The Fred Waring Factor

IF THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA HAD A VOCAL MUSIC PEDIGREE, FRED WARING'S FINGERPRINTS WOULD BE ALL OVER IT.

Waring, a famed 1940s and 1950s bandleader and television and radio personality, was known as the father of modern choral music. He played a key role in OU Dean of Fine Arts Rich Taylor's career and left behind tangible pieces of OU music history that still ring out across the University every day.

Waring's NBC Radio program, "Chesterfield Pleasure Time," was heard by as many as 20 million listeners each week and featured a glee club of former college singers. Schools throughout the nation competed to have Waring write fight songs for their teams by collecting Chesterfield cigarette packs. In 1939, OU students won. The end result was "O.K. Oklahoma: We'll March Down the Field," a tune Sooner football fans would recognize in a heartbeat and one that can be heard pealing regularly from the Oklahoma Memorial Union clock tower.

A few years later, in 1942, Waring launched the "Pleasure Time National Glee Club Competition," which drew 140 entries. OU was named one of eight regional champions, and its 31 members traveled to New York City with Director Lara Hoggard.

"It was my first time to sleep on a train. I remember that so well," says 1942 Men's Glee Club member Bob Harris, of Cincinnati, Ohio, whose 1947 OU degree was in petroleum and geological engineering. Shortly after arriving, Harris says that the eight clubs were shepherded into a hotel ballroom and taught several Italian songs by Waring's young glee club director, Robert Shaw. Shaw, who conducted the assembled competitors while standing on a grand piano in his undershirt, went on to become classical music's best-known choral conductor and the recipient of 13 Grammy Awards and the Kennedy Center Honors.



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Harris says the singers were then transported to New York City Hall, where they serenaded legendary Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. The next night, OU's glee club played Carnegie Hall in a nationwide broadcast emceed by Waring himself. The glee clubs were scrutinized by a judging

panel that included LaGuardia, the managing director of Radio City Music Hall and theatrical producer George Abbott, who later wrote and directed many Broadway plays and Hollywood films and earned both the Pulitzer Prize and seven Tony Awards.

"That was a really special time. It was so exciting," Harris says of the glee club's big night.

Judges picked the University of Rochester as the winner at a special banquet where OU was recognized with a trophy for "Best Choral Tune." The OU students returned to Norman and the group hosted a series of farewell concerts as its members and friends headed off to World War II. Harris himself was soon gone to the U.S. Army 103rd Infantry Division.

After the war, he returned to OU to finish his engineering degree and discovered that Hoggard, his former glee club director, had been snapped up by Waring as choral director. Harris later contacted Hoggard, who gave him an audition—and a job. For the next 15 years, Harris would perform as a choral singer for Waring's programs and on TV musical variety shows that ranged from Perry Como to Garry Moore. He also raised a family of three boys that includes former OU student and four-time Academy Award-nominated actor and director Ed Harris. Bob Harris later returned to his alma mater as a staff member in the development office.

"I never spent a summer in an oil field," Bob Harris quipped, though he proudly points out that he still is a member of the Tau Beta Pi engineering fraternity. Like Dean Taylor, Harris knows that his life story might have been very different if he had not crossed paths with Fred Waring while still an OU student.

"There is a host of people who are indebted to Waring in one way or another," he says.

—Anne Barajas Harp