

A Life of Singing by Rodney Hanson

There was a wood fire going in the basement furnace and another one that had been stoked up in the kitchen range.

The floor-to-ceiling register between the downstairs kitchen and the upstairs bedroom, where my brother and I were nestling in, radiated the warmth from the fires below, as well as the music that radiated from my mother.

I could see her sitting on the kitchen stool, strumming the guitar that seemed like her instrument of escape, and singing the familiar songs that would put us to sleep.

I say "familiar," but they were only familiar to us. A favorite was "Two Little Orphans, a Boy and a Girl." (It brought tears to my eyes.) Then she sang "Spanish Cavalier," (where did she learn that?) and then she would probably shift to "Yes, We Have No Bananas." We kids played her big black record of that on our hand cranked "Victrola."

Dad was at the store on a Saturday night like this. Those years, we stayed open until midnight. My oldest brother was likely helping him there, and my older sister was probably at the dance down at Fankhanel's Hall, across the street from our hardware store.

My mother was always strict about how late her kids stayed out, but not if there was music involved, like at a dance.

So here we were, my brother and I, being sung to sleep by a mother with an angel voice, waiting for the family to come home, keeping the home fires burning..

She had no musical training. I think she picked the strings on the guitar more so than chording. But there was more to it than just the song. There was an unspoken closeness, a comforting contact, a touch of the heart, a joining of souls just 10 feet apart from upstairs to downstairs. We drifted to sleep soothed by the wan-nth and music.

As we grew up, my mother taught us the songs she knew so well. She not only encouraged us but set us up to sing. One of my earliest recollections, when I was about six years old, was traveling all the way from Pelican Rapids to sing at the Frazee Methodist Church at the invitation of Mrs. Iver Lee.

We moved to Vergas in 1933 and spent the years of our youth singing for confirmations, weddings, funerals, creamery days, and town ball basket socials. I can't believe we were talented singers. We were simply the twins that looked alike, dressed alike and were available.

I heard words like "cute."

Singing at PTAs at the many rural schools was part of our agenda. I think of one out by Lake Franklin

where Gerald was in charge of the program, and was also a local entertainer. My brother and I had two songs planned, but wound up with him joining us in an impromptu song, then playing his accordion, and then him whistling along with us as we sang yet another.

The lunches afterwards were always good, which made the evening worthwhile.

One other night when we showed up at the Vergas School, the PTA president announced that they hadn't had any luck finding something good for the program so they'd asked the Hanson twins to sing.

It was not hard to stay humble.

My dad let us use his pickup for these excursions. I have to wonder if he thought it was good for business.

Talk about my dad. He also liked music, but never seemed to find time to practice it. I'm told his dad was a guitar instructor in the "old country," and other members of his family learned to play instruments and study music.

But my dad was famous to me when he played a mouth-organ with a #2 kerosene lamp chimney over the end, which he cupped with his hand to give the sound of a bellowing effect.

I was so proud. Forget the violin.

Singing stayed with me as I reached my high school years. But I was never a disciplined musician. I played clarinet in the Frazee band, but when Mr. Wells started increasing the size of the band, I moved from second chair to fifth.

But I sang in the chorus, and Max, Jerry, Roger and I formed a quartet in our senior year. I tried again to be more than just a singer when I graduated, going up to Detroit Lakes and buying a piano from Hy Berg for \$25.

I took lessons from Freddy Lieske, who had piano classes in Vergas, but when he scheduled the recital for his students, he asked me if I'd sing instead of play.

The influence my mother had in acquainting me with the joy of singing has stayed with me all through my life. Even when I entered the military, I found places to sing: Chapel, U.S.O. bars. Four of us formed a quartet when in electronics school and represented Keesler AFB on New Orleans TV in 1949, when TV was in its infancy.

For the last 30 years, I have sung with the Barbershop Chorus, and again I find singing and harmonizing not only fun but therapeutic.



**Keesler A.F.B. Quartet,
Biloxi, Miss.
New Orleans TV 1949**

In this setting, I don't have to pretend to be good. Oh, occasionally we enter a contest and compete, but I find the judges who concern themselves on how we hold our hands and position our feet somewhat amusing.

Let us sing the song, lift up our voices. Just judge the blend.

Is blend the key word? Do we fill the niche the Good Lord provides in our everyday living, just as we do when we harmonize in music?

I never worked hard at being a musician. I had another job. If I was to wait until I was perfect before I attempted to do anything, I would have left so much undone. When I reach the end of this trip, don't ask how we did at contests, nor how many gold stars on my final report card.

Ask only: Did you make the most of the journey?

That brings me to these twilight years. And the way some of my generation still enjoys singing the good old songs. We can be sitting at a table reminiscing, and Whit will remember the words to "As Time Goes By."

So we sing it, then we'll talk about the good old days of our childhood (and in the same breath, argue about who grew up the poorest), and Betty will suggest, "Always."

And we sing it. We then might get into talking about the close friends we miss, school memories, the blessings of family. And then some guy might want to try "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows."

How great to grow old together and find communion in memories and singing. Blend is the key word.

Finally, we resign ourselves to surrendering another day of those precious few remaining and go our separate ways. And when the time comes to drift into sleep, a warmth passes over me like 70 years ago.

I remember the guitar. I remember that voice. And I remember to give thanks to the powers-that-be.

I had a mother who sang to me