

REFLECTIONS ON 55 YEARS WITH THE  
J. ELWOOD ROBERTS – MARS HILL UNIVERSITY  
CHORAL FESTIVAL

– Jim Jerome Williams –

J. Elwood Roberts founded the Mars Hill Choral Clinic in 1949 for the sole purpose of improving choral music in the high schools of western North Carolina. Paul Young from the University of North Carolina was the clinician with 85 students participating representing 12 schools. The second year had 136 students representing 18 schools. What vision. What a tradition and legacy Mr. Roberts established.

My first exposure to the clinic was when I was a student at what was then Mars Hill Junior College from 1956 to 1958. At that time the clinic was held in the Owen Theatre, formerly Mars Hill Baptist Church. In 1958 twenty-three schools participated. At the final concert I was fortunate to sit with my high school band director M. Thomas Cousins, the most significant influence in my music career. Mr. Cousins was an acclaimed composer and one of his newest compositions, PRAISE THE LORD, YE HEAVENS ADORE HIM, was performed on that concert.

In those early years it was the practice that schools would pay a nominal registration fee and the college would supply the music which was to be returned at the end of the clinic. This practice ended at some time before I participated and schools began purchasing their own music.

My 55-year involvement with the choral clinic began when I took my first teaching job as band and choral director at Hildebran High School. In February 1963 I took my first group of 8 students to the clinic. About 30 schools participated. Well ---I was hooked. During my 32 year teaching career I always took students. What I learned from watching those clinicians work was a major influence on my ability to direct high school voices. The clinic also had a major impact on the students. One year after the final concert I had a student, who was in tears, ask, "Why can't it always be like this?".

Mars Hill became a senior college in 1962. (it attained University status in 2013.) Moore Auditorium opened in 1960. With the space now available and the increasing number of schools interested, the clinic kept growing both in number of schools represented and in the number of students attending. In 1965 the number had grown to 35 schools.

In the early years (including when I first participated) high school directors chose their students to attend, usually a balanced group with a maximum of eight voices. There were no auditions nor zone rehearsals. For a time Mr. Roberts would go to centrally located schools and listen to the selected participants sing, as a school group, three of the clinic pieces. This practice ended when Mr. Roberts suffered from failing health in 1965. After that there was no screening process. Directors simply prepared their students and took them to the clinic.

For the first 40+ years most of the clinic students stayed on campus using rooms of college students away for the weekend, the gymnasium, and the playrooms in the dorms. Cots and bunks were brought in as needed. The first year I participated many of the directors stayed on campus. Most of the male directors that year stayed in the infirmary.

The clinic continued to grow. At the same time, there were wide variations in both student ability and preparation. By 1969 the clinic had reached an enrollment of about 400 students. Joel Stegall, who was chairman of the music department at the time, had a meeting with a small number of choral directors to discuss the possibility of going to an audition format and reducing the size of the group to about 300 singers. This idea was based on concerns expressed by Lara Hoggard, '69 clinician, and on suggestions made by Robert Rich, Mars Hill Choral Director. After much discussion this was approved. It was agreed that each school could bring 12 singers to the auditions and they could choose anything they wanted as an audition piece. It was also agreed that there would be zone rehearsals held at each audition site. These would take place one to two weeks before the clinic. This practice worked very well for a number of years. After some time schools were limited to 10 students at the auditions and more recently to an allotment depending on school size. We had six audition sites (now seven) and the director at each one of those schools was a zone coordinator. In addition to hosting auditions the director also hosted the zone rehearsal and gave input on other matters involving the clinic.

For more than 20 years the clinic started on Friday morning at about 9 or 10 o'clock with the closing concert on Saturday evening at eight and then at seven. William (Bill) Thomas was choral director and clinic coordinator from 1976 to 1985 during which time the geographical base and number of participants continued to grow. In 1980 **sixty-seven** schools were represented. In order to allow more time for travel home a decision was made in 1983 to hold the concluding concert late Saturday afternoon. The time fluctuated a bit from year to year but finally was settled at 4 o'clock and remained so until 2020 when (again for travel reasons) the start time was moved to 3PM.

For many years the Mars Hill Choir gave a concert on Friday night. This was followed by a rehearsal of the clinic choir. Eventually, the Friday night rehearsal was eliminated and we had a dance for the students following the college choir concert. More and more schools started housing their students in motels in Asheville. We also had a situation one year when the weather caused us to move the Mars Hill concert to the first part of the Saturday clinic concert. It dawned on me that we were using a schedule as though everybody was still staying on campus. I suggested to Joel Reed that we move the college choir concert to Saturday afternoon permanently, thus eliminating all Friday evening festival activities. That was in 2003 and we have been using that same schedule ever since.

A tradition was begun in 2007 when Dr. Reed programmed the college choir to sing Lara Hoggard's setting of PERSONENT HODIE. The festival students and their directors were invited to join in on the last verse. In the words of Dr. Julie Fortney, "Lets never not do that again." And, with some modifications, so it has been ever since. The sound of 500 singers filling the aisles, pit, and stage, accompanied by organ, brass, and percussion is absolutely stunning.

When I retired from teaching in 1994, I taught a choral methods class at the college. One day, Dr. Joel Reed, chairman of the music department and coordinator of the choral clinic, asked me if I would consider being the off-campus coordinator for the clinic. He thought it would be a hard sell. I was DELIGHTED. For the next 22 years this was my passion.

Other than the logistics of the clinic (more than I had ever imagined), one of the first things I became involved in was the tryouts. I was struck by the variations in materials that the students were using. In the late 1990's I suggested to the zone coordinators that we consider using a required piece or pieces for the tryouts. After a lengthy discussion Sam Doyle made the suggestion that we allow students to choose anything on the grade 4, 5, or 6 contest (now MPA) list as their audition piece. This change was implemented the following fall and as of this writing is still in use.

The 50<sup>th</sup> event was in 1998 with Rodney Eichenberger from Florida State University as our guest clinician. That year we changed the name from Mars Hill Choral Clinic to the **J. Elwood Roberts-Mars Hill College Choral Festival** to more accurately describe the event and to honor Mr. Roberts.

As far as I know, the festival has never been completely cancelled although weather is always a concern. There have been years when we had to start at midday on Friday. On very rare occasions we have given the concert a little earlier on Saturday to allow more time for students to return home safely. In 1996 we had to postpone the festival until April and then have it for only one day. In 2010 the festival was postponed until March, and we had a 2-day festival on a regular schedule.

In the early 2000's we began having Saturday lunch for all the directors in a private dining room in the cafeteria. (All students eat in the main dining hall.) This gives directors a chance to relax and interact with each other. The guest director shares comments with the group followed by remarks from other festival personnel. I think this is somewhat of a unique aspect of the event. Speaking of meals, it is also our custom that on Friday night the guest clinician along with all those involved in the operation of the Festival and some members of the music faculty go to a local restaurant for dinner. This is a relaxing time we all enjoy together.

When we first began using auditions to qualify for the festival, there were two judges in each room: two for sopranos, two for altos, and two for the men. Through the years that has changed so that now there is only one judge in each room. There is no sight reading. Students are judged strictly on voice quality and range demonstrated on the chosen selection. Auditions are limited to approximately 2 minutes for each student. Score sheets are not returned.

The festival has continued to grow. In 2000 there were 77 schools. By 2005, 87 schools; in 2010 – 103 schools; and by 2019 – 112 schools were represented. What would Mr. Roberts think?

Through the years we have had some of the most sought-after clinicians in the United States (see list of directors), and on one occasion we had Jonathan Willcocks (son of Sir David) from England. I had attended a workshop in Hickory with Jonathan and Sir David and was very impressed with the down to earth way it was conducted. I thought to myself: Jonathan Willcocks at Mars Hill? WHY NOT!! Having the opportunity to select clinicians, with Joel Reed's approval, and to spend time with them during the weekend has been one of the most enjoyable parts of my experience with the festival. It would be impossible to prioritize a list of my favorites, but I must say, having Craig Jessop as guest clinician while he was still director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and then having him return on

my last year as coordinator was a dream come true – – – Make that two dreams.

Another clinician who stands out in my mind is Gregg Smith who was with us in 1971. It was my first exposure to antiphonal choral music. The college had arranged for him to bring the Gregg Smith Singers with him and they did a concert on Friday night. Formed in the late 1950s and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they were among the best known professional choral groups in the country. Smith emphasized antiphonal and contemporary music on the Singers' program. He also did an antiphonal piece with the clinic choir. I was hooked again. Since that time, I have done an antiphonal piece on concerts whenever the opportunity presented itself.

In 2013, Rollo Dilworth was our guest clinician. Among his many talents, Rollo is an accomplished composer. I thought it would be a good idea to commission him to do a piece for the festival choir. Somehow Joel Reed came up with the money and Rollo wrote THE GIFT TO BE FREE based on the Shaker tune "Simple Gifts". The piece is published by Hal Leonard Corporation.

In order to run the festival efficiently plenty of help is needed. We have always had excellent assistance from students in the college choir as well as others on campus. Every year we have also been very fortunate to have a student coordinator to do a great deal of the work. This person is always a major asset to the festival.

Having an exceptional accompanist is an absolute necessity for a successful Festival. Mars Hill has been very fortunate in this regard. Carolyn Lamberson and Dewitt Tipton accompanied the Festival Choir quite capably in the mid-and late 80s. For the past 25 or more years Cathy Adkins has done outstanding work accompanying the Festival Choir on both piano and organ and has received high praise from many of our guest conductors. Mars Hill is very fortunate to have Cathy on the music faculty.

In 2011 I was able to talk Jeannie Graeme, choral director at North Buncombe High School, into assisting me in my work with the Festival. She was a great help to me and continues to assist Rodney Caldwell in Festival operations.

Meeting with the zone coordinators in August and again at the Festival has been another joy for me. At the August meeting, usually in Hickory, the coordinators look through the list of music suggested by the clinician for next February. They determine if there's any piece or pieces that should be eliminated for particular reasons. They meet again during the Festival in February to discuss Festival matters. These high school directors put in a great deal of time to make sure the auditions and zone rehearsals come off successfully. They also give valuable input into many aspects of the operation of the Festival. It could not be as successful as it is without the help they so willingly provide.

When I knew my time with the Festival was nearing an end, I was concerned that with my departure and Joel Reed's impending retirement someone would be hired who would see the festival as a nuisance. I couldn't have been more wrong. Dr. Rodney Caldwell was brought in as Director of Choral

Activities in the fall of 2014. He EMBRACED the Festival. He saw the advantages to the students involved and their individual choral programs, the recruitment advantages to the University, and the overall public relations benefits. I have no concerns about the future success of the festival.

As each event comes to an end I have usually asked the guest director if he/she has any suggestions on how we might improve things. The responses have been uniformly positive and reinforcing. One commented to this effect: I usually have two or three suggestions but you folks have been doing it for so long you pretty well have it down pat. "I've got nothing." Another commented to me that other than Honors Choruses and All State events this was probably the best festival he had ever directed. Still another stated that this was better than many All State Choruses.

My "official" role with the Festival ended in 2017 but since that time I have been able to stay somewhat involved by seeing to the needs of the guest clinicians. Susan and I enjoy picking them up at the airport, hosting them in the guesthouse, getting them to meals, and taking care of any other needs that may arise. I am so grateful to have been a part of such a significant event for so many years.

In closing, I must say another word about J. Elwood Roberts. When I was a student at Mars Hill, he was my music theory teacher. As far as I was concerned, he was THE MASTER. He loved teaching music theory and seeing students grasp a concept. He was also choir director at Mars Hill Baptist Church. But his legacy is the Choral Festival. At this writing we just finished the 71<sup>st</sup> hosting of the clinic with 112 schools and approximately 345 singers. That's remarkable. For a small private school tucked away in the mountains of North Carolina to host an event that becomes more successful each year and draws students from more than 100 high schools is amazing. We actually serve more schools and involve more singers than the North Carolina Honors Chorus while covering only about half the state. The closing concert is standing room only. I don't think there is anything like this Festival anywhere (and I'm sure that's a completely objective point of view ☺).

Mr. Roberts died in 1966 at the age of 52 but his memory lives on in the Choral Festival that bears his name. His influence will be felt for many years to come.

- Jim Williams, 2019

(Additional information can be found in the Festival scrapbooks which are on display each February at the Festival. At other times they will be in the possession of Jeannie Graeme or Rod Caldwell.)

**ANECDOTES**  
**MARS HILL CHORAL FESTIVAL**  
**Jim Williams**

**In the late 1960s**, we had a banquet in the “old” cafeteria for all the student participants and their directors. After the meal the college choir gave their concert in that same facility. On one occasion Bill Thomas, who later became Mars Hill choral director and clinic coordinator, along with Joel Reed, who held the same positions following Bill, were both members of the choir.

**In 1987**, while I was still a high school director, Gene Brooks, who was the Executive Director of the American Choral Directors Association was our guest clinician. At the end of the dress rehearsal he collapsed on stage and had to be taken to a hospital in Asheville. We directors were all abuzz as to what would be done. I was called to the front of the auditorium to meet with some of the people in charge. They wanted me to direct the closing concert. ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!?! After a short discussion I agreed to do it. (Some of my “good friends” said the only reason I was selected was because I was the only one wearing a coat and tie). I spent time with DeWitt Tipton the accompanist, in a practice room going over the music. Then I had maybe 20 -30 minutes with the singers on stage before the concert. It was one of the scariest things I have ever done but it turned out fine\_\_\_\_\_as well as I can remember.

**The 1997 festival** was the first year I lined up the clinician. In 1995 we had to start late and give the concert early because of weather. The following year we had to postpone until April and have a one day event. It was very important that 1997 be successful. I invited Paul Oakley to be our guest. He was DYNAMITE. (We were able to get him back several years later on short notice when a clinician booked well in advance canceled on us.) We had to rush to the airport after the concert as Paul had scheduled

five important church services Sunday in Minneapolis. When we got to the airport Paul said: “Jim, we have a problem.” Paul carried an oversize wallet in which he stored all his identification, money, and his PLANE tickets. It was nowhere to be found. We called back to Mars Hill and had them do a search. NOTHING! We called the restaurant where we had been on Friday night. NOTHING! We pleaded with the people at the airport desk to let him get on the plane. There was no way that was going to happen. By this time his plane had departed. We called the restaurant again describing his “wallet” and they DID have it. Paul finally made peace with the situation and agreed to stay one more night in Mars Hill. He, Joel Reed, Susan, and I all went out to eat and had one of most enjoyable evenings I can ever remember.

**From time to time** we would have snow and cold temperatures for the festival. We may also have a warm natured director. Such was the case with Jeffrey Redding from Florida.. He was freezing the entire time he was here. When we went out to eat on Friday night he insisted on sitting beside the fireplace as close to the heat as possible. On one occasion when Susan was driving him from the hotel to the rehearsal he thought he spotted his missing glove in the middle of the road in the snow. He insisted that he had to get out of the car to get the glove. Susan finally convinced him that he was running late and needed to get to rehearsal. She told him she would go back and check on the glove. When she did, it turned out to be a street workers glove...Ah, me. We had a great festival and he returned to be with us several years later. Oh! He dressed for the weather the second time.

**Judy Bowers** of Florida State University was with us one year. We were to meet her at the Asheville Airport about 5:30 pm. Judy was not on her scheduled flight. Neither she nor we had a cell phone. We asked and asked and begged the clerk at the airport desk for information on her whereabouts but he was not allowed to tell us anything. Rules, rules, Rules. Finally, he pointed to a scheduling board and a specific flight and said “I’m sorry I can’t tell you anything” At the same time he was telling us, “If I were you I would be at this arrival gate when this flight comes in.” Sure enough, at nearly midnight a flight came in and Judy came through the gate. Oh what a relief it was! During our wait Susan and I had a lot of time to kill. What a strange look a nearby hotel attendant had when we asked him if they rented rooms by the hour.

**2017 was my last official year with the Festival.** Craig Jessop was our clinician. During rehearsals on Friday Craig was having throat problems. As the afternoon went on he was tightening up more and more. After rehearsals were finished I told him he needed to skip dinner with “the gang” and rest

awhile. He was afraid we would all be disappointed but I finally convinced him not to go. I told him we would bring him dinner. When we returned to the guesthouse I knocked on his door and announced, "Dinner is served". Out comes Craig, IN HIS PAJAMAS, saying, "Hi, Jim. I feel rested." There I sat, a peon, watching one of my musical heroes eat dinner IN HIS PAJAMAS while we discussed the problems of the world. If only I had pictures to prove it.

**At the 2019 Festival**, Ben Wilson, who participated in the second choral clinic in 1950, was our guest. He spoke to the students at one of the rehearsals telling them how much the clinic had meant to him. He also talked with the directors at the Saturday luncheon and addressed the audience at the closing concert. Truly, a special moment.

**It was always my practice** to keep a list of possible future clinicians, ranked by preference. At the top of the list was Brad Holmes. (Segue) Susan and I were on a river cruise in 2016 and had dinner one night with a couple from Illinois. They were telling us about a European concert tour they had gone on with a University in their area. I asked for more information about their tour including the name of the University. "Oh, it's a very small school. You would never have heard of it." But I'm interested. What school? Same response. I pressed again. "Well, it's Millikin University." I pointed my finger at the gentleman and said, "Brad Holmes". I don't know which one of us was more surprised. I explained to him why I knew of Brad Holmes and Milliken University. Upon returning home I immediately contacted Brad, told him what had happened and why I was interested, then contacted Rod Caldwell who immediately issued the invitation. Brad Holmes was our clinician for 2018. SERENDIPITY!

**Through the years** I have been very fortunate to have four different compositions of mine performed by the Festival choir.

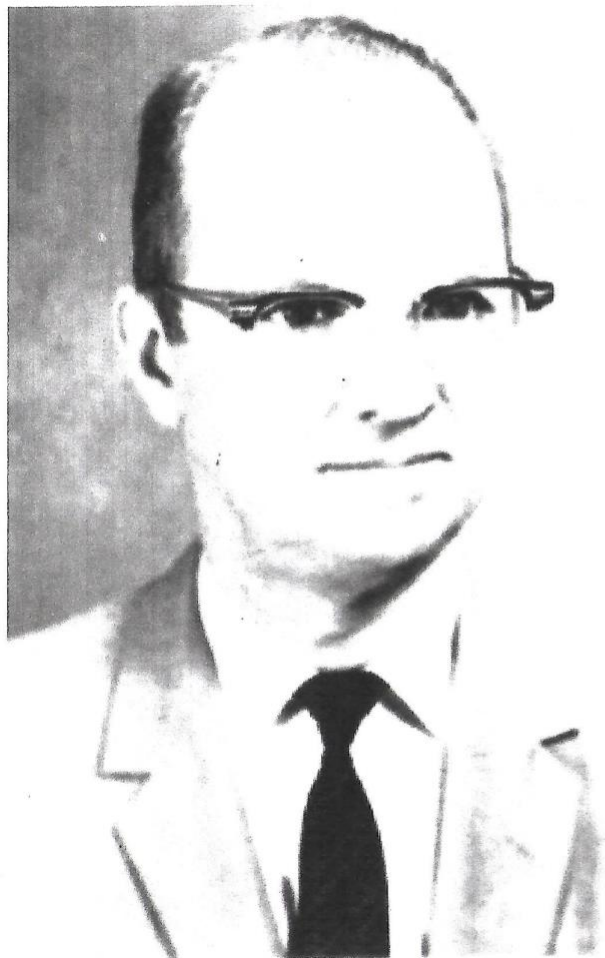
In 1983 the choir sang **THE CIRCLE**, from the Mars Hill Choral Series published by Hinshaw Music. Albert McNeil was the director.

In 1996 Rhonda Fleming conducted **SING HALLELUJAH** (dedicated to the memory of M. Thomas Cousins) published by Harold Flammer.

Paul Oakley conducted **CALL TO LENT** from Hope Publishing Company in 1997.

In 2012, to recognize me on my 50<sup>th</sup> consecutive choral festival, the festival choir sang my most successful publication (more than 225,000 copies sold) **A PARTING BLESSING** published by Shawnee Press. Renee Shatley, a former student of mine, choral director at Draughn High School, and a Mars Hill graduate, directed the piece. Each student was given an autographed copy of the music.





in memoriam

*J. Elwood Roberts*

*1914 - 1966*

