

# *Tales From The Choir Loft*

October 2024

## **Remembering Beverly J. Gibbs and “Love Abides Forever”**

### **Generally In Charge of a Lot of Things – Chancel Choir**

Many dedicated church choir members can claim to have sung in church choirs for a long time. Even I can claim to have been singing in church choirs since September 1973, but thanks to the needs of the Air Force, that has been at several different churches over the years as I moved from one assignment to another. However, to be able to claim to have sung in the \*same\* church choir for over 50 years is quite an accomplishment. Beverly J. “Bev” Gibbs accomplished just that, having joined the Lancaster Methodist Chancel Choir in 1952 at the age of 18.

I first met Bev in 1989 when I joined the Chancel Choir, having been assigned to the tenor section. Normally, Bev would have been singing in the alto section, but her voice was low enough that she could easily handle the tenor parts. Like most choirs, the Chancel Choir tended to have a shortage of tenors, so Bev was a permanent member of the tenor section, along with Georgia Woodland. For most of the time we shared in the tenor section, we would end up sitting next to each other. Thus, I had the privilege of getting to know her very well. She would tell me about how she would talk to her family about me, which continually confused them, because her son was also named Russell.

When Ralph Williams took over as our choir director in 1999, the first briefing he got was from Bev. She told him that she was the de facto choir librarian, and she would take care of all music filing and anything else that needed to be done, and that’s just the way it was. She also maintained the database of choir members, addresses, phone numbers and such. On Sunday mornings, she would take the choir attendance, which would be put in the offering plate to assist the ushers with their counting.

In 2002, Bev reached the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of joining the Chancel Choir. To honor this achievement, at some time after that her family presented a plaque to the choir, which currently hangs in the Choir Room. Interestingly, when presented, the plaque listed her tenure as “1952 – <blank>” since, at the time, she wasn’t done yet.



In 2003, the Chancel Choir had recently transitioned to new choir robes. To honor Bev's service to the church, the Chancel Choir took Bev's retired robe and mounted it in a shadow box. This shadow box was presented on 19 October 2003, and is also on display in the Choir Room.



### Covert Data Collection

Our choir director, Ralph Williams, wasn't done with ideas about how to honor Bev for her faithful service.

Twenty something years hence, some of the details are fuzzy, but I'm confident that they are close enough to support the story. Around October or November 2003, Ralph called a Saturday rehearsal to have more time to prepare music for the upcoming Christmas season. Because the usual plan for these Saturday rehearsals was to go to dinner as a group afterwards, they were commonly referred to as "Sing for your Supper". Previously, choir rehearsals had been held in the choir loft in the sanctuary. At the time, the sanctuary was under construction as part of a remodeling and facility expansion project. Therefore, we were rehearsing in the Fireside Room.

During a break in the rehearsal, Ralph asked everyone to take a piece of paper and write down the following things on it:

- Your name
- Your favorite hymn
- Your favorite anthem
- Your favorite scripture

He claimed that he was collecting data to build a database of our likes to help him select hymns and anthems in the future. I was pretty excited about this, because my favorite hymn had never been sung in church during my time there. My favorite anthem, "My Eternal King", had been sung once by the choir many years prior when Ruth Jones was directing, but she must have borrowed the music from another church, because I couldn't find it in the choir

library anywhere. I thought this would be a way to introduce Ralph to it and maybe convince him to get it for the choir, but that story is covered in another article.

No mention was made of this supposed database after that. Years later in 2024, Ralph confirmed my suspicion that the real purpose was to collect that information specifically from Bev, without her suspecting that anything was afoot. The inputs from the rest of us were just to cover up his real intent.

### **Commissioning a New Choir Anthem**

Ralph's real plan was to commission a new choir anthem to honor Bev's faithful service. Knowing that Bev would say that was too much fuss if she knew about it, the whole process would be done without her knowledge. Today such a plan could be easily accomplished by email communication, just being sure to leave Bev off the address list. However, in 2003 email was not as widespread or ubiquitous as it is now. All coordination would have to be done in person. Complicating this plan was the fact that Bev was always present for every rehearsal and every Sunday of the year save one, which she would miss for an annual family event.

However, Ralph could make use of Bev's perceived position as being Generally In Charge of a Lot of Things. During one rehearsal, Ralph asked Bev to make an important sounding but probably unnecessary errand, probably to retrieve something from the church office. While she was gone, Ralph told us of his plan to commission a new anthem in honor of Bev's service. Of course, a commission requires money, so he asked the choir to make donations to him through the church to pay the commissioning costs. I remember that for some reason I was a little slow to make a donation. By the time I was ready, I asked Ralph how much more he needed. He told me an amount that I felt I could cover, so I finished off the commissioning donations.

Ralph always knew who he was going to commission for this project. He contacted Jan Sanborn, who had been one of his instructors while he was getting his music degree. The only guidance he gave her was that he wanted an anthem based on 1 Corinthians 13, which Bev had listed as her favorite scripture. Jan commissioned J. Paul Williams (not the Paul Williams known for working with the Muppets and the Carpenters) to write the text.

### **Covert Anthem Rehearsals**

By late 2004 or early 2005, Jan had finished composing the anthem "Love Abides Forever" and had sent the pre-publication sheet music to Ralph. At a subsequent rehearsal, Ralph again asked Bev to run an important sounding but probably unnecessary errand for the sole purpose of getting her out of the room. He told us that he had the sheet music, and that we needed to arrange a few rehearsals at another location without Bev's knowledge. We decided to hold the rehearsals at Mary Zimmerman's house in her large music room. The time would be immediately after church on Sunday, as that was a time that Bev would not suspect anything since we normally didn't do anything at that time. Security was tight, and everybody was informed that nobody was to mention anything about this to Bev. We held at least two, possibly three rehearsals over the next few weeks.

### **The World Debut of "Love Abides Forever"**

The appointed time for the world debut of "Love Abides Forever" was during a regular Sunday morning service around March 2005. By this time, the sanctuary remodeling was complete, but the Choir Room had not yet been finished, so we were still rehearsing in the Fireside Room. When Bev arrived for rehearsal that morning, Ralph acted very flustered, because he was supposed to have picked up a flower arrangement that would be presented to Mary Zimmerman that morning during the service in recognition of something. For whatever reason, he had not been able to pick it up, and asked Bev if she could go to the florist for him to pick it up. Of course, the florist he had ordered from was inconveniently way on the other side of town, ensuring that it would take Bev a significant amount of time to make the retrieval. Bev being Bev, of course, immediately said "yes" and headed to the florist. Of course, this was all a ruse to get Bev out of the room so that we could do the final rehearsal of her song.

After Bev left, Jan Sanborn, our composer, arrived. She was to be the accompanist for the world debut of her new anthem. We practiced the anthem several times. For what we thought would be the last run-through, we were standing and singing. About the time we got to the final chorus, Bev returned to the Fireside Room. She was so efficient that she had returned earlier than we thought she would. Several of us semi-panicked, wondering if our security had just been compromised. If we abruptly stopped in the middle of an anthem and just put it away, that would have been unusual and raised a question in Bev's mind. Instead, we just continued on as though nothing was awry. Bev returned to her normal spot next to me. She didn't recognize the song, so she knew it wasn't in her folder. She looked over at my folder, which I held so she could see it. Fortunately, there was nothing on the last two pages that gave away what was going on. I pointed out where we were, and Bev joined in with us, singing the final chorus. When we were done, everyone quietly put the anthem away and nothing more was said about it. By then it was time to pray and make our way over to the sanctuary. Bev never seemed to notice that it wasn't Mary at the piano. I

suspect that to maintain security, the title of the anthem was not printed in the bulletin, since Bev would see it and recognize that it wasn't an anthem that she knew, which would raise questions.

The service, under the leadership of Senior Pastor Jim Ledgerwood, started and proceeded as normal. At the anthem time, Ralph invited Bev to come out of the choir loft over to the other side of the chancel. Not knowing what was going on, Bev dutifully did as she was told. Much to her surprise, she was met there by her husband Paul and the rest of her family. Ralph then revealed the whole scheme. He told the congregation that today we were honoring Bev for her faithfulness of singing and serving in the choir for over 50 years. He then presented Bev with the very flower arrangement that she had just driven across town to retrieve. Ralph then told the congregation that for this auspicious occasion, the choir had commissioned a new anthem that we would now sing for its world debut. He introduced Jan Sanborn, the anthem's composer, who would be our accompanist for this debut.

Bev was invited to have a seat in a special chair on the chancel facing the choir. Of course, she was thrilled with the performance.

### **Our Choir Anthem Is Published**

Eventually we would receive the official published copies of "Love Abides Forever". They were published by the Lorenz Publishing Company, copyright 2005. Above the anthem title is a dedication which reads "for Beverly Gibbs, in celebration of more than 50 years of singing in the Lancaster United Methodist Chancel Choir, Lancaster, California".

The published version of the sheet music caused us to have to make some adjustments. The editors had gotten to the music, and had changed a few things from the pre-publication version we had learned. One bass/tenor entrance in the middle of the piece was changed significantly. My copy still has my note "different" there, which amuses me, because 20 years later I can't remember how it originally went. The editors had also changed the ending. I seem to remember the original ending as being a large, high chord for an exuberant ending, but the published ending is softer, lower, and more reflective. Apparently, these are the things that happen in the world of music publishing.

"Love Abides Forever" was an instant favorite of the choir, not only because it was "ours", but also because it was well-written and was easy for us to sing well. For many years, it was our go-to anthem for the Sunday near Valentine's Day. Bev did get to sing her song a few times in the following years.

### **Health Degradation**

While it is true that "Love Abides Forever", the same cannot be said for life itself. About a year after the debut of "Love Abides Forever", Bev's husband Paul's health started to deteriorate. As she always had, Bev stepped up to the task of being his caregiver. He became her total focus, and the only time she would leave his side was for Thursday choir rehearsals and Sunday morning choir anthems. These were her favorite activities of the week, and she wasn't about to miss them. Her one concession was that she would leave the Sunday morning service immediately after the anthem to return to Paul's side.

After Paul passed away on 19 June 2007, Bev was still at her spot in the tenor section. When asked why she didn't take some time off for bereavement, she explained that choir was her happy place and she didn't want to be anywhere else.

Sadly, not too long after this, Bev started developing her own health issues. When Bev would take her one Sunday of the year off, she would ask me to take the choir attendance for her. As her health degraded and it became apparent that her health would interfere with her ability to attend choir, she asked me to cover that duty for her. She promised that I would only have to do it long enough for her to get better and return to choir.

As I recall, she developed throat cancer, which caused her salivary glands to stop working. This made it difficult to eat, and she carried a spray bottle to use whenever her throat got dry. Eventually the cancer robbed her of her sense of smell and taste, which made eating difficult and unsatisfying. Her health would continue to deteriorate. After church on Sunday 8 Feb 09, the choir gathered at Bev's house to sing for her. Certainly "Love Abides Forever" was on the set list. We had planned to sing for her again the next Sunday, but when we gathered on Thursday 12 February 2009, we learned that Bev had passed away on Tuesday 10 February 2009.

The choir sang for Bev's memorial service shortly thereafter. Of course, the choir offering was "Love Abides Forever", and Ralph explained the significance of that song to the assembled crowd, telling the story of how the song had been commissioned in celebration of her service to the choir. Later in the service, people were invited to share "Fond and Funny Remembrances" of Bev. I got up and told the story of the pre-service rehearsal for the world debut of "Love Abides Forever", as detailed above, and how Bev just slid in next to me and joined in singing some new song, none the wiser that it was in her honor. It must have been good story, as it got the most reaction from the congregation of any of the stories told.

Ralph had always told the choir to spread out so it would look like we filled the choir loft. Without thinking, for Bev's memorial service we all sat in our usual spots. This left a gap between me and the rest of tenors where Bev usually sat. Later in the service, her son, Russell Gibbs, was speaking "A Little Insight" and commented on how the choir was sitting in the "missing chorister formation", much like the military "missing man formation", because there was a gap right where his mother always sat. I liked that idea so much that we never rearranged to fill that seat. Even during rehearsal in the Choir Room, we never filled her chair, except sometimes possibly when a visiting tenor would sit there. Bev's chair was very important to the chair formation, as one leg went right next to an outlet in the floor. If Bev's chair was in the right place, then all of the other chairs were arranged relative to it, and were thus in the right place. One semi-regular occupant of Bev's chair was my daughter Emmy (born 2015), who, on the occasion when she had to attend rehearsal because Mommy was busy, would sit in Bev's chair next to Daddy. I think Bev would have considered Emmy worthy of sitting in her chair.

### **Epilogue**

I continued to record the choir attendance until March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down normal choir operations. Up until that time, I maintained that it was just a temporary duty until Bev got back, because she promised me that she would be coming back.

Even though my wife Tuki would only get to know Bev for a few years, she would consider Bev to be a mentor and knowing her to be a blessing. Thus, she insisted that the choir sing "Love Abides Forever" as an anthem during our wedding on 25 August 2012, which was listed in the bulletin as "In Loving Memory of Bev Gibbs". It was rather odd for us to stand there and listen to the choir, much as Bev had done in 2005, since usually we were part of the choir doing the singing.

I don't know how many copies of "Love Abides Forever" have been sold, or what any other choirs have thought about it. Because it was commissioned by our choir, and because of its connection with a beloved choir member, it is still considered by the choir to be "our anthem", far more than any other. While Bev has been gone from us for fifteen years, she is still talked about and fondly remembered, especially on any occasion that "Love Abides Forever" is pulled out and distributed. This story has been written to ensure the continued memory of my tenor section-mate and friend to all who had the privilege of knowing her.

**- Russ Erb**