

POUGHKEEPSIE CONTEST HISTORY, 1962 - 1969

1962

Spring 1962 was Poughkeepsie's very first contest. Bill James was off in college finishing his MS degree, so Bill Heydman and George Nagy directed our two contest songs. Bill directed "Oh, How I Miss You Tonight" and George took "Glad Rag Doll." We placed fifth out of ten and missed the NED qualification for fall district (four went). We were edged out by Johnstown-Gloversville (imm. past NED champs), Saratoga, Sandy Hill, and (of course) Pittsfield. We beat Albany, Schenectady, Hudson, Kingston, and, I think, Northampton (not in that order). In the same contest our novice quartets placed 2nd and 3rd ("Taconichords" missed the title by ONE POINT, thanks to a drunken SP judge who went wild for the "Four 'N' Aires" nee "Tri City Four" who did a Swanee act with two singers on their knees; "Roman Notes" with their centurion costumes were a huge hit, also; T'chords were Plumb, Veltre, Poux, and Maurer; Roman Notes were Heydman, Schanz, Slack, and ???).

1963

Spring 1963, our second contest, was on our home court. We got smart and decided to host the thing and held it in Arlington HS (now JHS). I believe we sang Bill's arrangement of "All Dressed Up With a Broken Heart" but I don't remember the other one (I was busy chairing the convention and I was distracted). Newyorkers placed SECOND to J'town-G'ville and qualified for district. That was the last contest ever for the J-G chorus—they had disgraced themselves the summer before by not showing up in Kansas City to represent NED at Int'l, and their big-shot director, Fran O'Brien, had deserted them, and they were gone soon after this. Our hit quartets this year were the "Millionaires" who were outfitted in fancy tuxes, minus trousers! They sang "Taxes Take It All Away" to great hilarity (except for the SP judge who DQed the performance for bad taste...must have been Schanz's legs), and the first appearance of the "Four Walkers" who displayed the snappiest walk-on ever seen, continuing right off the stage without singing a note, leaving the panel staring at their score sheets and the timers clicking their watches on and off with a puzzled frown. The audience was hysterical. The "Walkers" received a massive time penalty and zero scores from each judge. They were told they would have to come back for two more contests just to get the net score back to zero.

Fall 1963

We travelled to one of the farthest points of continental NED: Portland, ME. for our first appearance in the district contest. In our usual brash manner we crashed the quartet semifinals Friday with the "Chord Sharks" and the "Chord Bandits" coming away with the District Novice Quartet award for the "Sharks." The "Bandits" starred with sartorial splendor in exotic bandit costumes of days of yore. The Newyorkers crashed the medals in our first district shot, placing fourth (edging the Framingham [Bob Long] chorus for the first of several times, and being edged by Saratoga, Montreal, and New London [champs] in 3-2-1 order). Much celebration and anticipation for the coming year.

1964

The division contest was held in Northampton and was noteworthy in that we won the division contest, but were beaten in Harmony Accuracy by Pittsfield (and not for the last time!). I don't remember any memorable quartet entries --- somebody will fill that part in.

The most eventful turning point in the Newyorkers early years came on Labor Day weekend. The Worlds Fair in Flushing had arranged a week of barbershop shows in the Worlds Fair Pavilion, with all the top choruses of MAD taking turns holding down an evening. The hooker: the MAD district contest was taking place in NYC that weekend (can you believe Labor Day?) and they needed a filler chorus. WE got the invitation, along with the "Four Statesmen." Our preparation was fast and furious....it seemed like we could never get all the songs in shape for that show. We took the bus down, sang at the gate, and then went around enjoying the Fair. The show had Bob Johnson, himself, on the scene. With his usual flair, Bill James pulled the rabbit out of the hat. The chorus sang 'way over our heads, the "Statesmen" were great, and the chorus grew about four-fold in confidence and skill that night. The afterglow was at the NYC Hilton with the MAD district crowd, where Livingston had just won their first MAD championship. They

challenged us to win our district and meet up in Boston (no bet.....yet).

So, we headed to New Haven with high hopes and a whole raft of "hoopla" planned by Mike Patti and his crew. We had planned to dress in individual quartet costumes, standing in foursomes, and being a chorus of quartets. The code was "the 11x4's" and the stick-on cards we plastered everywhere had the code and the statement "In Poughkeepsie, it is the s p e b s Q s a" with a great big "Q". Many a shapely lass walked out of an elevator with a twin display of stickers on her backside. The old Taft Hotel was being held together with these stickers. Man, we strutted around that place like we had already won the contest.....and we were actually beginning to believe.

At the Saturday stage walkthru, it turned out (fate) that New London, the team to beat, was going to follow us, so they were hanging around when we went on stage to see what this bodacious bunch was going to offer. We spent the entire ten minutes getting our foursomes placed on the risers—lots of action but no singing. Finally, with the "1 minute warning" Bill called for a pitch and we sang the intro to "Roll Out of Bed With A Smile" that has killer swipes and a big finish. "That's enough!" he proclaimed and everyone jumped off the stage and started carrying our stuff up to the dressing room. Rudy and I stayed there, with our white shirts and red-striped ties, in the front row, to inspect New London's warmup. After what they had seen they took the stage a little tentatively. George Backus, the director, was very nervous—he paced back and forth, looking at Rudy and me, barking at the chorus. Finally, he lost it: he marched over to the wings and PULLED THE CURTAIN CLOSED. That was like turning over his sword! He had surrendered in front of his troops. Rudy and I jumped off our seats and raced upstairs to tell everyone what had happened. Poor George—how could he have known that we had plastered "11x4s" stickers all over the inside of that curtain!

With all that hype it was no wonder that we sang over our heads in the contest. "Roll.....Smile" was hot, and halfway through "Lorena" I suddenly was aware that we were singing better than we ever had before. For the first time, then, I started to get nervous—no trouble, just that I could feel my heart beating—and I was pretty certain we were going to make good on our goal. It sure sounded great when they counted down: 5th—Framingham (again), 4th—Saratoga, 3rd—Montreal, 2nd—New London (we knew, then...damn, that sounded good), FIRST PLACE: POUGHKEEPSIE NEWYORKERS!

We were, naturally, pretty high, so we got a little peeved when Bob Dunning told us, at the critique, that we "needed to staaht all ovah!" As an aside: years later I critiqued his chorus, which he directed, and told him the same thing. Of course, it went right over his head, but it was satisfying, anyway.

That night the "Rogues Four" racked up the third place medal in the quartet contest, in their first contest venture (James, Burns, Light, and Jones). They made us proud for four more great years after that, and made their mark on the NED. Best damned quartet to never win the NED!

1965

The division contest was already conceded to us (this was before the automatic bye rule for champs was enacted). We won handily, but Pittsfield beat us again in Harmony Accuracy. Our big goal was Boston: the International Chorus Contest.

We had worn different collared vests in the district contest to identify the quartets by color. In Boston we borrowed various dressy quartet costumes from all over, plus some of our own, so we we actually looked like quartets. We chose to sing "Roll.....Smile" along with "Little Pal" in honor of the "Four Rascals." We did better than OK in our first shot at the "big fracas" and finished ninth. Livingston came in fourth, and the foundation for a big wager was established.

Soon after the Boston convention we had an interchapter with the Dapper Dans (Livingston) and the gauntlet was thrown. They would spot us five places (as we had been ranked in Boston) and the loser had several obligations to carry out. Of course, this depended on both of us winning MAD and NED in the fall.

We went to Providence in a pretty cocky mood. We sang "All Dressed Up With a Broken Heart" and

"Carolina Mammy" and we felt pretty good when we came off the stage. Several people told us that Montreal had out-sung us but that our performance was considerably more energetic and entertaining (duh?). So we were a little more tense this time at the countdown, and I remember thinking, suddenly, how much I really wanted to win this one and go back to the big show. The standings were almost the same: F'ham (naturally), Saratoga, New London, and.....then....."second place chorus: Montreal Mountain City Chorus." So, the bet was on (the Dans has already won MAD).

1966

I don't remember much about the division contest—we won, but those were getting pretty routine. Again, the big target was Chicago for International.

We invested in our brilliant (literally) new quartet costume set. Fifteen sets of suits in neon shades, with shoes, socks, trousers, dickey-shirts, jackets, ties, and bowler hats—all in solid single-colors. We wore them on the stage for the first time there in Chicago. The curtain opened on our spectacular array of unmistakable quartets in a freeze, and the intake of breath was audible (and damned exciting). People still remember that moment.....they had never seen anything like it. We sang "Carolina Mammy" (with the Inca quartet of Nagy, Gielow, Slack, and me miming the motions of the "Imposters" who had made that song famous), and "You're Nobody's Sweetheart Now." We dropped back to a tie for eleventh (lost the bet, big time, as the Dans came second!) but we came in SECOND overall in SP. Only Louisville, the champs, topped us in that category. The "Rogues Four" did us proud, placing 45th in the whole world in the quartet quarterfinals.

We went home, prepared to pay off our bet, and to decide what to do next. The chosen strategy was to get back to basics, learn to sing better, and to do lots of shows to pay off our costume debt. We did exactly that, electing to sit out the Bridgeport district contest (and the 1967 district in Worcester, as well) while we honed our skills. It was funny to watch Montreal, in Bridgeport, as they came loaded for bear and intending to give us a lesson.....and they probably would have. But they left town with the trophy and a hollow victory, gnashing their teeth. Some of them still snarl about that.

Meanwhile, we sure did a lot of shows. We had become very stage-worthy. We did an afternoon show in Meriden, CT, with our 1965 trophy on display, only to find it missing when we loaded the bus. At our chapter show the "Four Statesmen," who were our guest quartet, came on stage for the finale lugging the trophy. A year later we invited ourselves to crash the charter show for Danbury, which also starred the "Statesmen" and we swiped their brand new gold medals (arranging for them to be mailed back to them from various exotic sites around the world, after a suitably long time for them to sweat). So----1968 was to be the year of return to contest.

1968

Bill James had invited me to partner with him to share the directing/teaching/ coaching chores for the chorus. To gain experience I directed the New Yorkers for the division contest in Ravena, where we sang "Gotta See Annie Tonight" and "Red Roses for a Blue Lady." We won handily and pointed for the Hartford fall contest.

This was to be the first time the district audience had seen our neon suits. Bill and I dressed in white (we had twelve quartets in the colors; it was always a hassle to make the count come out in multiples of four, but the option of the two directors in white made it a little more modular. We chose to sing "The Masquerade Is Over" and "Jolly Holiday with Mary." In typical New Yorker form, and totally certain of winning, we had rehearsed a marching band who gathered at the rear of the hall while the countdown proceeded: 5th--F'ham (who else), 4th--Saratoga, 3rd-- Montreal, 2nd--New London. Out came the horns, and we marched down the center aisle playing the "Colonel Bogey March" at full tilt, while Bill James was standing on the stage miming playing a horn with a trumpet mute in his hand. More than the horns were brass at that moment.

1969

We won our division contest with ease and pointed for St. Louis. I had transferred with IBM to Burlington in January but due to the Fishkill connection I was required to fly down once a week to coordinate our

project. Naturally I chose that to be Wednesday every week, so I was able to attend virtually all rehearsals, including our extra Saturday sessions, since I had not yet moved the family to Burlington. So, Bill and I went on to co-direct in St. Louis. By this time we had developed some pretty sophisticated acts for the various quartets to perform and our "bi-sectional" rehearsals, with a director present at each, were definitely improving our unit sound. In St. Louis we sang fifteenth (last in line, as there were only fifteen districts then and no wild cards). The curtain opened on our freeze, and the audience actually welcomed us back----that felt good. "Dirty Hands.." was directed by Bill, and every chord was ringing and the emotions were warm and loving. The climax was exactly as we had intended. "Jolly Holiday.." was bright and bouncy, cleanly sung, with lots of action by the individual quartets (fifteen of them, this time, with Bill and me embedded among them, since the count was 60). We had high hopes for a medal, but the countdown, this time, did not include us. Then, at the cafeteria where many of us had gone for supper, someone ran in with the score sheets that showed us SIXTH, only twelve points out of the medals. That still ranks us tied with J'town-G'ville ('61) as the highest rank attained by a NED chorus. As Maxwell Smart would have said: "We were thissssss close."

Hey, we were only eight years old and we had competed in three Internationals, placing 9th, 11th, and 6th. Some fantastic memories were crammed into those years, and the New Yorkers didn't stop there. I moved my family to Burlington, but came down to Albany to watch your squeaker win over the on-rushing Saratoga gang, and I marvelled with the rest of the world at your ultimate display of "some set of *****," as Bill would have described it. The rocket in the lobby, the movie of the launch, and, the topper, the missing-rocket-and-the-fabricated-hole-in-the-lobby-ceiling was the perfect topper to the brass band in Hartford. Congratulations, Tom Enger and team for a world-class psych-out job!

OK, so Atlantic City was a twelfth place finish. It was still great