



God's Patriots sing under the leadership of Edgar Erskin

How Harris Prairie youth developed their talents, dressed themselves up in red, white, and blue, and went singing across the country as

God's Patriots

By MRS. RAYMOND LEWIS AND MRS. JIM PLOTNER

This is how it happened! How God blessed and used the efforts of thirty teen-agers, a few patient adults, and one determined, piano-playing preacher to witness for God and country from Joplin, Mo., to Washington, D. C.

Thinking back, there was a time when the Harris Prairie Church of Christ, Granger, Ind., didn't have a youth choir. Now, our people have become so involved with them, it's hard to remember when we didn't have God's Patriots and our junior choir, His Seekers.

The genesis of the patriotic theme was 1967. Faced with the trend toward cynicism and disrespect for our nation's flag, ideals, and heritage, we decided to include patriotism as an aspect of Christianity during the Vacation Bible School closing program. Parents and students were equally enthusiastic, for even our younger parents were reared in an atmosphere of respect for American fundamental principles. All of us wanted our children to experience the stirring emotions we knew and to develop into responsible citizens of this great nation.

During the next few seasons a girls' chorus developed into a real fellowship group under the sweet spirit of the late Mrs. Leah Reynolds. Then Edgar Erskin, our minister, worked in some young men for a Christmas program, and by the next Easter sunrise service we had a mixed chorus going. The youth had a good sound and were very enthusiastic about singing together.

On August 15, 1970, the first practice was held by a group that soon would be known as God's Patriots. Hard work was the order of the day, because their first concert was set for the end of September. Being blessed with some high-school choir members and Mr. Erskin's talent for getting a group to blend and produce more than they thought they could, they

were an immediate success. We expected a good program that night, but what we heard was a great concert. The excitement and pride they projected in the patriotic selections and the tenderness of "The Lord's My Shepherd" were blessings to people who were weary of protests, the desecration of national shrines, and the philosophy of no meaning and no purpose. From that first concert the real impact of this group has been: something meaningful.

One of the boys said in the introduction to "America, Our Heritage," "We should not overlook the faults of our country, neither should we be blind to her greatness." When God's Patriots started out perhaps they hadn't thought too much about this great land of ours, perhaps many of them were not really experiencing the presence of Christ in their lives, but as a result of their working together and sharing their needs and joys each one began to grow, and to project his convictions to the audiences.

By spring, two big events were in the making. They had been invited to sing on the program of Deeper Life Week at Ozark Bible College and there was a stirring of desire to make a trip to Washington, D. C., when school was out.

Since the fall of 1970, God's Patriots had been exposed to the Impact Brass and Singers and Concert Choir of Ozark Bible College, and the spirit of commitment and sharing of these college young people had really rubbed off on our kids. If there is any doubt about your having college groups come and stay in your homes, that doubt would be dispelled after seeing the impact of our youth. There was no stopping them now! They undertook with a vengeance to raise funds for the first trip by making themselves available for spring cleaning work, washing cars in that cold March weather, and praying a lot.

What a thrilling spiritual experience it was for this group of high-school youth to step onto the platform of the chapel of Ozark Bible College and sing before a capacity crowd of more than twelve hundred. They sang and smiled as tears glistened on their faces. When they came to the conclusion of their concert, the audience gave them a standing ovation. This was wonderful for them, but the highlight of that April was the marvelous spirit they came home to share with us. Their faith strengthened, they were no longer timid about witnessing, and they saw the matter of saving souls as the greatest goal for their group.

We all know that nothing succeeds like success, so, it was back to the rakes, mops, and concerts and prayers for the second trip. For a time it seemed doubtful that they could ever reach such a goal. Arrangements were made for them to stay in the dorms of Eastern Christian College, Bel Air, Md., a bus was chartered, and God provided the necessary funds. One important preparation these young men and women were making was a concentrated prayer effort for real harmony of personalities on this trip. There would be thirty-nine people, eight of them adults, living together for a week. God honored those prayers and gave them a perfect trip. The second week of June found them rolling eastward, a mountain of clothing and equipment stashed away. The Patriots were thrilled with the prospects of witnessing for their Lord in our nation's capital.

The Department of the Interior had invited God's Patriots to sing a noontime concert on Tuesday at Rawlins Square in the heart of Washington. They started singing in a drizzle of rain with few spectators, but finished with the park full of people. One sponsor heard a comment about how great it was to see young people praising God and their country instead of denying God and trying to tear the country down.

God's Patriots from Harris Prairie found Washington to be warm and friendly. Whenever they had an opportunity they sang, and people would gather to listen. But what was most gratifying was to see those young people go into the crowd, shaking hands and telling how thrilled they were to be Americans and how wonderful is Jesus Christ. It was super!

On Thursday God's Patriots gave a concert in the Rotunda of the Senate Office Building. The acoustics there are so good, the music could be heard up and down the halls and in the offices of the Senators and their staffs on all floors. The thrilling message of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" echoed through those halls. The arrangements to sing here had been made by Senator Vance Hartke of Indiana, who wrote: "I want to thank God's Patriots for a fine performance in the Senate Rotunda. I am proud to represent such enthusiastic and gifted young people who transform the word patriotism into a reality."

Another highlight of their visit in the Washington area was further fellowship with the Impact Brass and Singers of Ozark. God's Patriots considered it a real honor to be asked to share a program with them at the Manor Woods Church of Christ in Rockville, Md.

With reverence the youth viewed the Constitution and Declaration of Independence in the National Archives. Singing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and visiting the Arlington National Cemetery had a profound effect on them all. "I am thankful to God for allowing me to be an American," words from one of their numbers, took on a deeper meaning.

Surely the Lord has blessed these young people. They probably don't realize completely that the opportunities

they have had to witness through music will be among the most memorable years of their lives. Much prayer, much patience, and most of all much love go into a venture such as the one in which Mr. Erskin had led them.

There were several more concerts before the graduates went off to college, and the last one was hard for them. This would be the last time this particular group would sing together. They were so very close, brothers and sisters in Christ. The experiences they had been fortunate enough to share were over, but would never be forgotten.

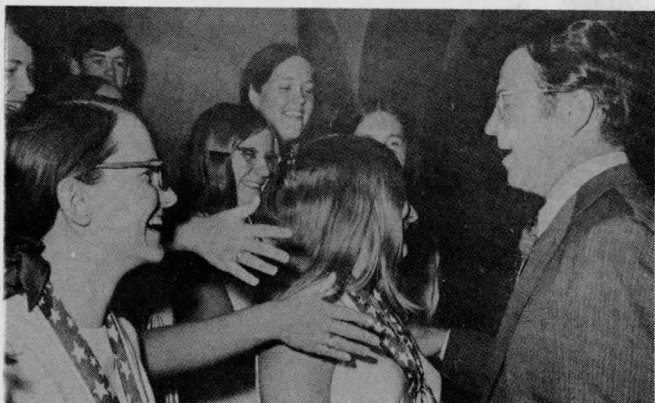
But, God's Patriots continue. New boys and girls came into the group which now numbers thirty-six. And they, too, are on the move. They were invited to sing during the Thursday evening youth session of the North American Christian Convention in Cincinnati.

There are new outfits—always red, white, and blue—some different songs, but the same purpose. They sing to honor their country and the Christian principles upon which it was founded; They sing for the glory of God and to share the message of redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. Throughout the concerts they witness to individuals about these things. While they hum "Just As I Am," each program concludes with an invitation offered by one of the boys. The invitation is followed by the group circulating among the people, shaking hands, while singing, "Pass It On."

God's Patriots are not perfect young people, but they do love Jesus, and they seek to serve Him. They have the same kind of hang-ups most young folk have today. The fellows are interested in cars and getting jobs; the girls are interested in the boys and clothes. They have the same temptations at school, at work, with friends that all teens have, but they are aware that they have Someone to see them through each trial. Yes, they are just plain kids, growing up in a sin-sick world, but they are going to come through with flying colors because the Saviour has become real to them. They have become aware of the blessings of living in a free land, especially the blessing of freedom to worship without fear.

This year three members of the choir are going to Bible colleges, and at present four from last year's group are already there.

As the years go by and we see these teens become adults, we are assured of the merit of such an undertaking. They have a profound respect for our nation, and have come to know Jesus in a deeply personal way. We are convinced they will continue to "Pass It On" wherever they may go. END



U. S. Senator Vance Hartke of Indiana greets the enthusiastic Patriots