

The Dukes' Golden Reunion Chorus

By Ron Whiteside, Scarborough Chapter

It all began at, of all things, a friend's funeral. About 35 Scarborough Dukes of Harmony, past and present, gathered at The Canadian Legion in Uxbridge one snowy afternoon to say good-bye to our buddy, **Fred Wretham**.

Over the next few days, I couldn't stop reminiscing, and thinking fondly of how we'd been able to so quickly rekindle that old Dukes' magic that day, that unique combination of song, laughter and fellowship; how, I believe, that magic had honoured Fred; and I wondered if we'd ever fully appreciated what we had over the years, through the medium of Barbershopping, and spending a lot of time with that most wonderful guy, Joe Barbershopper.

And it struck me that Scarborough's 50th Anniversary was close at hand. What if we could put together a chorus of Dukes from across the 50 years, to perform in the Golden Anniversary year. I wondered how much interest there would be?

I talked informally to a number of Dukes, in particular, **Ray Danley**, **Ed Russell** and **Barry Stringer**. Ray volunteered to arrange a medley of our "greatest hits." Ed suggested that the perfect venue for the performance would be the fall convention. Barry was our quality control man. **Rodger McTaggart** joined us and did a lot of the background organizing that made things work.



Photo — Alan Eidt, Shades Imaging

The *Dukes* on stage after the spring chorus competition.

WHAT A SHOW! ❁

We asked the district's sanction of our performance and they quickly returned unqualified and enthusiastic support. We humbly thank them for that.

Then we sent out the word to the Dukes of all eras, as many as we could reach. They replied with a wave of enthusiasm that outstripped my wildest dreams.

About 30 men got together to sing Ray's medley. The enthusiasm grew exponentially as we sang those great old songs with considerable quality and ring.

On a cold and windy Saturday at Harmony Ranch we held our first practice. Almost 150 men showed up! Thanks, Harmony Ranch, for the use of the facilities.

Over the year from the first practice in mid-October, 2003 at *Harmony Ranch*, to the final performance, we got together six times and each time was honestly wonderful. There were never fewer than 140 men at any practice. But most importantly, we



renewed old friendships in a buoyant atmosphere of harmony and love!

And then the day of the performance arrived. When we gathered in the warm-up room at the Sanderson Centre, about 175 strong, the atmosphere was absolutely electric. The energy almost palpable. The excitement and fellowship powerful and truly unforgettable.

Our old buddies from Ottawa came in, and presented us with a beautiful, wonderfully worded plaque, recognizing our contributions to Ontario Barbershopping, and giving us yet another highlight memory; and we thank them so much for that, especially Lifetime President Al, and

Music VP Shaun, who presented the plaque.

Included among the men jammed into that little room were past directors **Barry Towner**, **Ron Crapper** (from Winnipeg.), **Gareth Evans** (from Vancouver), and also from the left coast, well-known quartet leads **Wally Coe** and "Rhinestone" **Rick Morrison**, and from Baldwin, Ontario, another famous lead singer, charter member (only one still active) **Jim Mccowan**.

Joining us for our final song on stage, a man who was never a Duke but was always a dear friend; who isn't a famous lead, but is O.K. on some harmony parts; who created Joe Barbershopper, Sir Duke, the Golden Reunion Chorus logo and the beautiful commemorative certificate of participation that most of us now proudly display, **Greg Backwell**. But perhaps the biggest thrill for many of us was the presence of a man who sang with us from 1958 to 1972, and who came to sing with us from Auckland, New Zealand, **Abe Crossley!**

Well, enough of these personal recollections. Back to the story of October 16, 2004, that most memorable day. The curtain opened, and you gave us one of the greatest thrills of our lives.

What a welcome! It was huge, it was warm, it was real and it just went on, and on, and on. Let me repeat, Ontario Barbershoppers are truly wonderful, truly the best! To a man, we "felt the love." To a man we'll NEVER forget it! To a man, we thank you SO much — yet again.

The emotions that you engendered in us were so powerful, that as a result we couldn't sing anywhere near our capabilities. But that didn't spoil the day. You welcomed and applauded everything we did and in doing so, you helped us fashion a truly wonderful experience — in the opinion of many of our men. Better by far than any gold medal!

I must share with you that we really had 250 men on stage. Many of us had laminated cards in our pockets, with the names of each of our Dukes buddies who have passed on. The cards, with the words "Gone. but not forgotten" were put together by **Ross Muzyllo**, shared among us and made us feel that those 86 men were on stage with us, sharing, and loving the experience.

And so, our reunion was a huge success, full of warmth and laughter and love and song, a barbershop high that we hope you shared with us. And, we made an important discovery that day — You CAN go home! ❁