

A Recollection for GGBC Families  
Offered to GGBC Families and Friends at the Passing of our Director Emeritus  
Dr. William J. Ballard (1922 – 2006)

Dear GGBC Families,

We are very saddened to have learned of the death last week of our GGBC director emeritus, Dr. William Ballard. His passing was conveyed to us in an email from Kirke Mechem, Doc's good friend in San Francisco, who said that Mrs. Ballard had asked him to contact us with the news. The email also said that while the funeral in Ashland, Oregon, was to be private, there would be a public memorial in San Francisco at a later date, yet to be determined. Kirke added: "Doc and Edith were very proud of everything you have accomplished at the Golden Gate Boys Choir."

The most recent personal visit of Dr. and Mrs. Ballard was to our GGBC Christmas Concert at the Cristo Rey Monastery in San Francisco in December of 2004. Following an annual tradition, we contacted Doc and Edith by phone from camp last August 2005 and sang for them a sample of our repertoire, which was to be used for Rome and our CD recording.

I first met Dr. Ballard at a dinner on the University of San Francisco Campus. We had a fundraising dinner for the boy choir I had organized at Saint Ignatius Church, and several of the boys in the church choir also belonged to the San Francisco Boys Chorus. These boys and their parents invited Doc and Mrs. Ballard to attend the dinner.

It was more than a little intimidating for me to have the director of the SFBC in the audience as my little group of boys struggled through three songs after dinner. However, Doc put me at ease with his gracious comments. I noticed that at his table and several surrounding tables, it was Doc who took the initiative to stand and pour our "champagne" the bubbling apple cider. He was not only gracious, but was obviously someone who practiced the fine art of hospitality with a smile.

I was invited to serve as a camp counselor at the Boys Chorus Summer Music Camp in 1975. It was the first time I had ever been to a camp, and what a camp that was! I could hardly believe how much music we learned, preparing general repertoire, learning parts for the opera in foreign languages, teaching, coaching and passing music theory with the boys, and – for the first time – the older boys began learning handbells. By the end of the three weeks, I was exhausted, but excited and inspired by it all. Doc Ballard was the driving force behind all of this, supported in his efforts by his spouse, Mrs. Ballard, and those who shared the responsibilities.

That summer music camp cemented a life long association with boy choir and bellringing in which I am still involved today (2006). I owe my love of music to my parents and grandparents, who always encouraged me as a boy. But I owe my involvement with boy choirs and bellringing to Dr. Ballard, with whom it was my pleasure to serve as camp director, Intermediate and Training Group Director, Glockenspieler and Zimbelstern Bells conductor, and finally, associate director.

At the SFBC, Doc established a myriad of activities that eventually resulted in a choir of more than 200 hundred boys. The quality and prestige of the organization grew under Doc's leadership so that not only families in San Francisco brought their sons to learn and grow through music, but

also there were boys from as far north as Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa, as far east as Concord, Alamo and Walnut Creek, and as far south as Half Moon Bay. His dedication and enthusiasm was such that the boy singers, the men's chorus of alumni and dads, the bellringing groups, performance and touring opportunities grew in number as well as quality. The chorus family was larger and more extended than ever before.

The unselfish dedication that marked Doctor Ballard's leadership at the SFBC was not always appreciated. As the organization grew and experienced great successes at home as well as abroad, so did the politics and efforts by some to insert themselves into the direction of the music program. When Doc's relationship with the Boys Chorus abruptly ended, some families immediately asked Doc to continue teaching their sons, and soon the Singing Boys of San Francisco Bay was born. About 60 families joined Doc at the Singing Boys, and thank goodness, Doc was able to invite me to rejoin him several months later.

About five years later Doc decided to retire and the reigns of the SBSFB passed to Dr. Philip Hahn. An attempt to reconcile with the Boys Chorus was a failure, and once again some families were looking for an alternative for their sons.

This brings us forward to December 6, 1988, my birthday. I was sitting down to dinner at home, when the doorbell rang and more than 40 persons were on my porch, ostensibly to sing happy birthday to me. Doctor Ballard was among those on the porch, and took a lead in the singing – and conducting - of “Happy Birthday.”

As you know, this was the evening on which the Golden Gate Boys Choir was born. I have always admitted to being at first a reluctant participant: the thought of beginning all over again was daunting. But, among those 40 persons were the families who were my strongest supporters and friends and I preferred to stand with them, rather than to continue in the parent organization. I looked forward to being able to focus on the boys and the music, rather than to continue dodging the fickle winds of civic and chorus politics.

Now, if it seems that this narrative has shifted from Doc Ballard, it has not. The reasons so many of us could not swallow what had happened at the Boys Chorus in '84 or at the Singing Boys in '88 had much to do with Doc. We knew, love and respected Doc, and we also experienced the joys, width and breadth of the program as he had come to build it on behalf of the boys.

So, Doc was among the founding persons of the GGBC, and he was the first person to lead rehearsals of the new organization. While I went out of town for the holidays to visit my parents, Doc conducted the first rehearsals in my absence. Our first concert, with Doc and Mrs. Ballard in attendance, was on Epiphany Sunday, January 1989, at the First Presbyterian Church in Oakland.

Doc and Mrs. Ballard retired to a more rural setting in Afton, Virginia soon thereafter, but we were reunited when the fledgling GGBC toured the east coast. One of our stops was in Afton, where Doc organized homestays for all our boys and staff, arranged a concert, and hosted us at his new home for a “watermelon bust.”

In the years since that time, I was never happier than when Doc and Mrs. Ballard were able to join us for the Old English Christmas Feast, a holiday madrigal dinner, which was designed and

established by Dr. Ballard, and which he encouraged me to continue at the GGBC. We were especially pleased to honor Doc and Mrs. Ballard at the FEAST on the occasion of their 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary. In years when he was not able to attend, Doc always provided a note for me to read to the boys, ringers and alumni, offering his encouragement and congratulations to all involved.

I appreciated very much the compliment Doc once paid me at a SBSFB Board meeting, when someone asked what my “ambitions” were with organization. Doc immediately interjected, “Steve is not ambitious for himself, he is ambitious for the boys under his direction.” At another time, he explained correctly that I would never give up my church work to work only for the boy’s choir (at Saint Vincent de Paul Parish) because “Steve draws the spiritual strength of his own work from his involvement at the church.” He knew me so very well, that I could not help but feel close to him.

Doc lived a long and very active life, and was in generally good health up to the moment of his death last week at home in Ashland, Oregon. It is not possible in anything less than several chapters of a much longer biography to detail all the ways Doc contributed to the world of music and the education of young people and all the boys who sang or rang under his direction. Even before he came to San Francisco and began his work with boys and Bellringers, Doc had a long and distinguished career as choral director at Northwest University, music director for a synagogue and several churches.

Those of us who were witness to this extra-ordinary life all recognize that it was the admirable and lasting relationship between Doc and his first love, Edith Ballard, that sustained him through thick and thin. Not only were the Ballards blessed with their four children, Chris, Ruth, Nick and Katie, but they were a blessing to each other. We express our sympathy to Edith and all of Doc’s family, and hope that they find comfort in this time of loss.

For our organization, we will honor Doctor Ballard’s memory in the coming season in the following ways:

A special anthem will be chosen to memorialize Doc at our Christmas Concert Program at Cristo Rey Monastery Chapel, San Francisco, on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006;

The FEAST on December 17, 2006 will be dedicated to the memory of the Founder of the FEAST, Dr. William Ballard;

Issues of our next Gateway Newsletters will feature recollections of mine, those of alumni and alumni parents:

Those who may wish to contribute to the continuation of the GGBC program in honor of our director emeritus, William Ballard, may send their contribution to the William Ballard Memorial Scholarship Fund.

We will continue to honor his life and memory by making the choir a program of excellence, and where the boys and their education is our highest priority.

May the angelic choir lead you into Paradise;  
May the holy martyrs welcome you along the way  
And with Lazarus, who is poor no longer,  
May you have eternal rest