

By Patricia Trebe, Special to the Tribune.

Sten G. Halfvarson, 88
Aurora choral director, composer

As a choral director for more than 50 years, Sten G. Halfvarson did more than teach the mechanics of music. He instilled and fostered in his students the beauty of a piece and in the process gave them a foundation of musicianship and a freedom of creativity.

"As a teacher he was very kind yet at the same time he expected a great deal from his students," said his daughter, Linnea Halfvarson. "He would have the high school choir write and develop their own show, from scripting the story line to writing the songs. He gave them the most creative process."

Mr. Halfvarson, 88, of Aurora, who was the choral director at West High School in Aurora from 1938 to 1979 and whose music was recently published, died Monday, Sept. 1, while on vacation near Hayward, Wis., of suspected heart failure, family members said.

Mr. Halfvarson's Christmas concerts were more than simply singing traditional songs. He used his talents to write musical links between the songs, creating a concert-long musical medley. His talents were often coveted by other schools and choirs. Over the years, he was on the faculty of music camps at nine universities around the country, and was invited to be choral director at more than 50 festivals in the Midwest.

In 1968, he directed the Illinois All-State Choir, which sang at the World Conference in Dijon, France, said his daughter.

Born in Wilksburg, Pa., to Swedish immigrant parents, Mr. Halfvarson moved with his family to Chicago in 1929. At Senn High School, the composer-director Noble Cain took Mr. Halfvarson and his baritone voice under his tutelage. He sang with Cain's Chicago A Cappella Choir from 1929 to 1936 and performed in concerts, radio and on tours.

For two years he attended North Park College before finishing his education at Northwestern University with a degree in music education. In 1937 he began his teaching career in Menominee, Mich., but the following year he began his long association with West High.

His career was interrupted when he served as a B-17 gunnery instructor in the Army Air Forces from 1942 to 1945. After World War II, he returned to Aurora and in 1946 married Lucille Robertson, a choral director he met at a conference.

In 1960, he formed the Aurora Festival Chorus and for 15 years, the chorus performed in city parks, high schools and at the Paramount Arts Center.

Throughout his career, he wrote numerous pieces for use by his choirs. At the urging of his children, Mr. Halfvarson submitted several of his works to music publishers. In 2002, his talents were recognized by Alliance Publications Inc. out of Fish Creek, Wis., which has recently released the Sten Halfvarson Choral Series, including a collection of five songs for Christmas, his daughter said.

"He was a very humble man for all his talents. Finally he got connected with the publishing company and they loved his work," his daughter said. "And there are so many more handwritten pieces downstairs in the basement."

For 42 years, Mr. Halfvarson was the director of music at the New England Congregational Church before retiring in 1994. He was also past president of the Illinois Music Education Association.

"He really lived his spirituality. He didn't broadcast his belief, but he lived a Christian life," his daughter said.

Other survivors include his wife of 57 years, Lucille; two more daughters, Laura Jump and Mary Covelli; a son, Eric; six grandchildren and a great-grandson. Funeral services will be held at 10:30 a.m. Saturday in New England Congregational Church, 406 W. Galena Blvd., Aurora.