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And He Shall Make Music

Ellen Molleston
*Iowa State University*

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The Robert McCowen family was getting ready to go to a circus in Des Moines when I arrived to visit with them on a Saturday morning several weeks ago.

After an hour and a half’s conversation with Bob (director of choral activities at Iowa State); his wife, Marcia; teen-age daughter, Pat and 7th-grade son, Mike, I didn’t feel that I’d have needed another circus that day.

They’re quite an expressive family headed by quite an expressive man who’s been the object of student admiration and affection since he took over the choral phase of Iowa State’s music program in 1952.

Students describe McCowen as “a humanitarian—really interested in others,” “intelligent,” “dynamic,” “intense” and “demanding.” One girl, a 4-year Iowa State Singer, claims that she’s never met a more fiercely energetic person.

A natural showman, every day McCowen relates a couple of stories or jokes, usually labeled “corny” by both teller and listener, but no session of Singers or Glee Club would be complete without some mixed laughter and hissing at the “corn.”

Meets Wife in Band

McCowen and his wife met in musical activities at West Waterloo High School. “We probably would never have known each other if we hadn’t played in the band together. He played sousaphone and I played the baritone,” she commented. After high school McCowen worked a year (“Those were depression days, you know”) before enrolling at Iowa State Teachers College. A pre-law major, “I did everything in music but major in it for a year until I finally decided to switch,” he said. As a youngster, McCowen played in band and orchestra and sang in the church choir. Since college he has directed a church choir every year except one. He is director of music at the Collegiate Presbyterian Church.

He and Marcia dated all through his college years although she was working as an X-ray technician. Her job has established a family cliche that he “can’t keep a thing from her.” They were married in December, 1941, after his graduation from ISTC. His first job was director of Glee Clubs and assistant band director at West Waterloo High.

Shot Down Over Europe

McCowen enlisted in the Air Force early in 1942. He became a B-17 pilot and served in combat in the European Theatre. “I’m neither maudlin nor overly sentimental about my time in the service, but it was a very humbling experience. I often say I joined the Air Force and walked back,” he commented. The 6-foot 2-inch musician was shot down over occupied France the summer of 1943 and got to Gibraltar on the 10th of January the next year—on foot. He mentioned repeatedly that he was just one of many who had the same type of story to tell. After he admitted that he was blown out of his plane, I couldn’t resist asking him if he remembered to pull the rip cord of the parachute. “I never did pull it,” he said. “My mother used to say it must have been the long arm of the Lord who reached out and pulled it.”

After being on his own for 10 days after parachuting, he came to
a French farm home where he could safely stay. Five weeks later he started his 4½ month walk through France and Spain to allied safety. After a period in England, McCowen wound up as a flight instructor in Roswell, N. M., and Mesa, Arizona, until he was separated from the service in September, 1945.

He returned to West High in Waterloo in October, 1945, where he directed the high school choral groups. That same year Frank Piersol, present Iowa State bands director, was the West High band director. He came to Iowa State in 1948 and McCowen followed in 1949 on a temporary appointment. After teaching at Knox College and Western Illinois State College, McCowen returned to Iowa State at the beginning of the 1952-53 year.

**Tours the Midwest**

Now an associate professor at Iowa State, McCowen is in great demand to direct festivals and summer music camp sessions throughout the midwest. His family accompanies him for the summer trips. Pat sang in the choruses this year and played violin in the orchestras. Mike played French horn in the bands.

At Iowa State McCowen directs three sections of the Iowa State Singers, the Men's Glee Club and Festival Chorus in addition to giving private lessons. Having just completed the Christmas Festival of Music, for which he directed over 700 voices, McCowen and his groups now begin preparation for the Singers and Glee Club concert in March and the Singers tour before spring quarter.

(Cont. on page 12)
McCowen — Cont. from page 9

“As far as organization goes, the Christmas festival is the biggest effort of the year. Directing festival chorus each week in preparation for this is like working a regular festival every week.” Festival chorus is a 650-voice group which is open to all students without tryouts. They practice each Tuesday night of fall quarter in preparation for the Christmas Festival. The large chorus group has been getting larger each year.

“I can tell this year because people were still sitting in the window wells of Curtiss Auditorium during November rehearsals,” he laughed. He feels there is an increase in student interest in college music activities and says it’s partly due to the improved high school music programs.

Likes Students Here

What are his reasons for staying at Iowa State, where no major, minor or course work is offered in music? “I like the students here—their attitude and their willingness to work. There’s also a considerable amount of intelligence in these people—and they are in the organizations because they want to be.”

McCowen sings several oratorios and concerts throughout the state each year in addition to giving campus recitals. While working on his master’s degree at Northwestern University during summers, he sang with a quartet that toured, coming to Iowa State on one occasion. “I sometimes wish I had gone into singing professionally, but I like my home too well. I’m too happy with my family,” he asserts.

Has Even Temperament

What’s he like at home? His wife: “He’s pretty even-tempered all the time, except before a recital.” Pat: “Then he always gets a cold.” McCowen: “Yeah, but I never get any sympathy.”

“He’s really easy to cook for,” volunteered Mrs. McCowen. “We’re all eager-eaters. I have to put ‘no’ signs on anything I’m trying to save for a meal.”

Students like McCowen because his temperament is fairly steady, although he says “You can’t work with creative art or a group of people without getting excited to get some emotional response. This is particularly true in working with amateurs.” He continually needles students good-naturedly about their laziness and content with mediocrity.

Counts Yawns

While chatting with me one afternoon before Singers, McCowen happened to mention that according to one of his official surveys there are more yawns during 9 o’clock Singers than any other session during the day especially during the vocalizing. Before we could come up with a reasonable explanation of this, we were both yawning and he got up to start the rehearsal.

It was almost ritual—from beginning to end, starting with “Have you heard the one about ...” and finishing up the Friday session with the traditional ... “If you’re going someplace this weekend, be careful, and stay off the highways”—100 percent McCowen.

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