

# Biography of Sigvart J. Steen

By Richard S. Steen

*Adapted from biographical material in "Berlin Diary, 1929-30" of Sigvart J. Steen which was edited and privately printed in December 2004 by Sigvart's son Richard S. Steen. In this volume, the biographical narrative is documented and illustrated with photographs, reviews, letters, and programs for various recitals and concert programs, most of which do not appear in the following adaptation.*

## Clinton, Minnesota (1900-19)

Sigvart Julius Steen was born on March 26, 1900, the first child of Olai and Caroline (Storheim) Steen of Clinton, Minnesota. Sigvart's mother soon after gave birth to Ernest, then Marie, and after an interval, Beatrice and Julian.

Clinton (current day population of 500) is a rural farming community located on the western edge of Minnesota bordering South Dakota, near a westward bend in the Red River at Big Stone Lake which forms a noticeable protrusion in an otherwise straight vertical border.

Olai and Caroline's families had emigrated from Norway in the 1880's and, after some difficult first experiences, migrated west to homestead in the relatively unsettled territory of the eastern Great Plains. The family farm, gradually expanded to cover 560 acres, was located a few miles outside of Clinton and fourteen miles north of Ortonville (current day population 2200), which was located on the east/west rail line. The nearest cities from Clinton were Fargo/Moorhead just over one hundred miles north and Minneapolis/St. Paul located one hundred and eighty miles east and slightly south.

Operating a family farm with crops and livestock placed heavy demands on Sigvart's parents and the growing children, all of whom had chores to perform as early as 5 a.m. and again after school. Maintaining livestock provided a modicum of insurance against highly taciturn weather conditions which could easily cause crop failures. The farm produced a large acreage of wheat, corn, soybeans, and other rotation crops using horse drawn farm implements, and later, early steam-driven tractors. Livestock included mostly milk cows, horses, pigs and chickens.

Naturally, cows required milking twice daily and over the years various farm stories (many funny and some worrisome) were passed down in dinner conversation by Sigvart and his siblings. Reciting the names of the cows in their stalls was done with mirth in a lilting cadence. Near the end of his life, I asked [Sigvart's brother] Ernest to repeat the names of the milk cows (which I had heard many times from Sig but could not quite remember). He laughed and then with a glint in his eye, recited in cadence - "Well we had Maggy, Daisy, Flossy, Rose and Nancy, Lilly, Lady, Grace! And then there was Maude, our beloved horse ... plus Dolly, Daisy and Rex" (the other draft horses).

*[Some of Ernest's recollections about adventures of the Steen children growing up on the family farm are included as notes on the Steen family pages on the genealogy site <http://web.me.com/lasteen/Genealogy/Genealogy.html>]*

Regular school and church attendance was Olai and Caroline's top priority for each of their five children. Unlike some fellow farmers who kept their children away from school for lengthy periods to work the farm, the Steen children rarely missed time during the school year and all completed high school and college.

Sigvart showed early talent in music, as a boy soprano in church solos, and he and Ernest also took an active interest in sports. Sigvart was held [back] a year so that he and his one younger brother, Ernest, could attend grade school together two miles from the farm. They were also classmates through high school, a five mile trip by horse carriage or sleigh, graduating from Clinton High School in 1919. Despite the demands of chores and school, Sig and Ernest found time to play baseball as a pitcher-catcher battery using the farm's barn as a backstop. They continued interest in sports, playing both basketball (Sig Steen wore number sixteen!) and baseball against other local high school teams.

Olai and Caroline were stalwart supporters of church worship and education within the Clinton community. The Steen and Storheim families were founding members of the local Lutheran church, even donating a plot of land for the erection of a picturesque country (Lutheran) church on the road leading to the farm. At a time when few farming children completed the eighth grade, Olai and Caroline made sure all their children graduated from high school and college, paying the way for Sigvart and Ernest to attend Luther College in Decorah, Iowa and for Marie, Beatrice and Julian to attend St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Commemorating their outstanding commitment and sacrifice, there are now annual memorial scholarships in the name of Olai and Caroline Steen at each of these institutions of higher education.

Both Olai and Caroline embraced music and worship as the two sustaining pillars in life, and this strong influence is reflected in their children's education and even vocational choices. Ernest felt a strong calling to the ministry and went straight on after college to seminary and ordination; later, he earned a Doctor of Divinity degree. After serving numerous parishes, he completed a distinguished ministerial career as Senior Pastor in Madison, Wisconsin at one of the largest Lutheran congregations in the country. Sigvart also first headed for the ministry (even completing two years at the seminary following college) before focusing completely on music as a career direction.

In addition to Sigvart, both Beatrice and Julian were professional musicians and teachers. Julian as a high school teacher, then piano technician, also composed music including a fine choral composition entitled *The Same Star Shines* which

was performed over the years in major venues by Sigvart Steen's choirs. Beatrice Steen Boe possessed a warm and distinctive soprano aided by an unerring sense of pitch and excellent musicianship. She taught and performed with Sigvart in many of his early choirs and then had a full career as high school, church and university performer and teacher.

Music also held a strong focus for Marie Steen Malmberg; one of her sons, Allan, was a prodigy as a cellist and after a first career as a scientist is now an audio engineer/producer, composer, and performer of classical music. In fact, of the more than twenty grandchildren of Olai and Caroline (Steens, Boes and Malmbergs) there is an unusually large representation of performing and teaching musicians (singing, choir directing, cello, organ, harpsichord, vocal methods and composition) plus theologians, philosophers, and scientists.

### **Luther College (1919-23)**

In the fall of 1919, Sigvart and Ernest began matriculating at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, located in the state's northeast corner and some 250 miles southeast of Clinton. Since both Ernest and Sigvart were considering the ministry, their undergraduate curriculum, already focused on liberal arts, was comprised mostly of religion courses and language study with very little, if any, math or science. This included several years study each in German, Norwegian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and of course, English.

Sigvart took music lessons (singing and cornet) and both he and Ernest (who played valve trombone—a precursor of slide technology) performed in the renowned Luther College Band conducted by Carlo A. Sperati.

During college, Sigvart had the opportunity to study singing technique—refining his fine natural tenor voice—and to further develop his musical skills. Luther did not have an a-cappella choir at that time but the Decorah Choral Union under Sperati presented Handel's *Messiah* each Fall and Sigvart began studying the oratorio's very challenging tenor solos.

Sigvart was also on the debate team and took up gymnastics, developing a very strong upper body on the parallel and uneven bars and rings. Both Sigvart and Ernest were pitcher and catcher on the Luther College baseball team (with Ernest as a first string catcher).

Ernest was the stronger student academically while Sigvart undertook so many extracurricular activities that he was challenged to complete all academic requirements in time to graduate with his brother as a member of the class of 1923.

### **Luther Theological Seminary (1923-25)**

Since Ernest was quite sure of his calling to become a minister, and having already shared sixteen years as classmates through undergraduate school, it seemed natural for Sigvart to enroll with his brother at Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Sigvart studied at LTS for two years out of a three-year post-baccalaureate degree as preparation for the ministry. From his surviving handwritten notebooks, his courses included:

Church History (2 years covering Pre-Christianity through the Reformation and up to the early Twentieth Century),  
Old Testament Exegesis (1 year)—Prof. Wee;  
New Testament (1 year);  
Biblical Hermeneutics—Prof. Bruce;  
Theology (Exegetical, Historical, Systematic, Practical)—Prof. Weswig;  
Catechetics;  
Hymnology;  
Inner Missions [*Author's note*: very puritanical overtones];  
Principles and Practices of Foreign Missions;  
Homiletics (Norwegian Sermons)—Prof. Stolee; and  
Homiletics (English Sermons).

Sometime during his second year Sigvart realized that music was really his true calling. A *Messiah* program from December of 1925 with Steen as the tenor soloist attests to his receiving strong reinforcement for his musical achievements, likely in marked contrast to struggling with the stiff dose of formal theological studies at Luther Seminary.

### **St. Olaf College (1925-26)**

By the fall of 1925, Steen had enrolled at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota presumably to begin work on a two-year Bachelor of Music degree. Steen studied formal music theory, music history, both choral and instrumental conducting with the renowned director of the St. Olaf Choir, F. Melius Christiansen, and voice with Miss Ella Hjertass. Steen was a member of the choir and the touring St. Olaf Quartette that year.

The College Quartette is an institution within the St. Olaf Choir doing special ensemble work in male quartette singing. They have our best wishes for success in all their painstaking work and high artistic aims.

-- F. Melius Christiansen

On the last day of May, 1926, a vocal recital program was presented by Sigvart J. Steen, tenor, assisted by Miss Comfort Hinderlie, accompanist, at the College Gymnasium and was very favorably reviewed in the *Manitou Messenger*, the College's newspaper, on June 8, 1926.

### **Park Region Luther College (1926-29)**

Steen taught music and directed the choir at Park Region Luther College, a Junior (two year) College in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, from 1926 to 1929 leading up to a year spent abroad studying music in Berlin. A program from the choir's concert in those years illustrates Steen's evolving talent for choral programming designed to engage and sustain the interest of the listening public, a clear result of his training in the Luther College and St. Olaf College traditions.

Steen quickly developed a strong a cappella choir comprised of nearly one out of every three students at the small 160-student college. This must have been a particular challenge at Park Region, a two year college, necessitating a greater than fifty percent annual turnover in choir personnel.

### Study and Travel in Berlin (1929-30)

Steen resigned from Park Region College and spent the next year (and his Park Region earnings) studying music and European culture in Berlin, Germany. He studied music (especially voice and piano), language (German), and regularly attended the opera (at Berlin's three resident companies), the Berlin Philharmonic and numerous vocal and instrumental recitals by world-class performers.

Steen's handwritten diary of his year abroad is the centerpiece of *Berlin Diary, 1929-1930*. Berlin of the late 1920's enjoyed a brief cultural renaissance between the great wars. Steen, a young Minnesota man who turned 30 on this first trip abroad, also retraced his cultural roots, exploring the Europe that, just 35 years before, his Norwegian grandparents had left to emigrate to the "new country."

Steen's diary documents weekly routines of study, eating, church-going and socializing (over coffee) punctuated with descriptions of cultural highlights—world class performers in operas, recitals, choral and instrumental concerts—with soundbite critiques such as "best yet" or "not very artistic."

Another well documented routine is Steen's travel across the city from his one room apartment with grand piano (located in the west side of Berlin just south of Charlottenburg) to pick up mail from the American Express office and attend classes at the University of Berlin (located on Unter den Linden in the east side of Berlin).

Handwritten correspondence was Steen's only lifeline to his homeland and he received letters quite regularly from his friends, parents, and siblings. His father Olai managed Steen's accounts back home and wired money as needed. Ernest, by then a young Lutheran minister, and perhaps Sigvart's most trusted lifelong confidant, encouraged him from afar.

The diary also reveals some of Steen's existential struggles at a pivotal point in his life. Steen had already committed two years of preparation for the ministry before trying music. In one late spring entry he ponders, "what is going to become of me." He also enjoyed discussing music and theology with his new friends, mentioning lively dialogs in German on varied topics: music performances, theater performances, cutting edge developments in German art films, observations on Christian theology and art in Germany, Italy and the Holy Land.

On a practical level, one intermittent thread acknowledges the darkening economic news from the states (later recognized as the calamitous October 1929 stock market crash) and subsequent entries progress from limited awareness, to deepening concern back home and finally full comprehension of the economic ramifications. Steen had entertained offers to continue study in Paris during 1930 but realized this was not prudent considering the deteriorating economic (and political) climate. Resigning himself to leaving, Steen marshaled his time creatively, visiting many cultural institutions, parks, beaches, and nightlife venues in the Berlin/Potsdam area, and even splurged on tickets to a four-performance Wagner Ring Cycle in Berlin.

As a committed and educated student of Christian religion, Steen explored Christian traditions (especially Lutheran) with German clergy and friends. One particular musical disappointment (missing a unique pre-Christmas *Messiah* performance in London) provided a fortuitous opportunity in the theological arena. By staying the holidays in Berlin he was introduced to a widely traveled theology scholar who inspired Steen through lectures and individual conversations to take a six-week tour of Palestine and Egypt in the spring of 1930. To reach the tour departure port on the Mediterranean, Steen first traveled south through Germany, visiting many of Martin Luther's and J.S. Bach's most famous sites and then on to Rome (the Vatican and art museums) and Florence.

The well-run intercity rail service across Germany was highly developed with first and even second-class providing a well-attended and enjoyable means of conveyance. Steen even went to the rapidly developing "Berlin Airport" and hired a pilot to fly him over Berlin (presumably in a two seater bi-wing "aeroplane"). By contrast, one evening when he wanted to travel up to the forest-bound Wartburg Castle where Martin Luther had lived and worked, Steen simply hired a horse-drawn carriage in Eisenach where he was lodging and proceeded to use his home-bred experience from the farm to guide the horse and carriage up and back.

Steen capped off his year abroad by attending performances of the St. Olaf Choir on their tour of Norway before returning to the states in late July and taking up his studies at St. Olaf again.

### St. Olaf College (1930-31)

Following his year of independent study in Berlin, Steen returned to St. Olaf College to complete work on a Bachelor of Music degree which he had begun in the 1925 school year. He again studied with F. M. Christiansen, sang in the choir and even performed two arias on the St. Olaf Orchestra Commencement Concert.

Steen's younger sister Beatrice and brother Julian, who were matriculated at St. Olaf at the same time, received their Bachelor of Arts degrees and Sigvart a Bachelor of Music degree in the same St. Olaf graduation class of 1931. (In April of that year, Beatrice presented a Senior Voice Recital.)

### Northland College (1931-42)

Steen spent the remainder of the great depression and pre-war years as a Professor of Music at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin located in northern Wisconsin. Steen capitalized on this promising opportunity at a four-year college by quickly establishing a touring choir with a reputation for excellence in a cappella choral singing. The choral programs for some of his earlier choirs at Northland already show sophistication in programmatic construction with a significant level of musical difficulty in many of the selections. His sister, Beatrice Steen, came to Northland College to work with Sigvart and she appears as soloist on most of the Northland College Choir programs up until at least 1938.

Steen's Northland College Choirs toured not only the mid-west and Canada but took several tours to the east coast as well. The New York Times Programs of the Week listings for the week beginning April 7, 1935 announce the choir performing at the renowned Broadway Tabernacle Church which was located just around the corner from Carnegie Hall at 211 West 56th Street. The following week the choir received an outstanding critical review by *The Washington Times* just one evening before their appearance at the D.A.R. convention in Constitution Hall.

It was singing that cannot be described by such expressions as "marvelous," "beautiful nuances," etc. These young Scandinavians weren't bridled by any repressions that would cause them to give more attention to the position of the tonsils than to singing—they sang!

Coming out of the great Northwest with little heraldry, this choir composed of 40 young voices, 22 of them freshmen, selected from a total enrollment of 200 students, gave a recital of sacred music that can scarcely be equalled in America unless by the older A Cappella Choir of St. Olaf College.

-- *The Washington Times*, April 19, 1935

By the late 1930's, while regularly directing numerous choral organizations (Northland College Choir and Male Quartet, Ironwood Jr. College Choirs and Ashland Community Chorus), Steen also formed the Northland College Concert Band (taking separate tours for the band and choir). He still found time for singing recitals and even soloed with the Duluth Symphony Orchestra. He also conducted numerous *Messiah* performances with orchestra and chorus including one which featured the now married Beatrice Steen Boe singing the contralto solos.

Exemplifying its expanding reputation, the Northland College Choir was invited for a guest appearance at the 1937 St. Olaf Choral Festival. The Northland ensemble performed an F. M. Christiansen selection (in homage to Steen's mentor) and also the challenging Motet for Advent, 2nd movement by Gustav Schreck with Beatrice Steen Boe as soloist.

Once on tour, choir members accustomed to the intensity of Steen's many preparatory rehearsals might be completely caught off guard by some of his humorous antics. Adept at tumbling a bowler hat over his arm and snatching it back out of the air, he once overstepped slightly just above Niagara Falls, slipping on a mossy rock and nearly falling into the river and over the falls. Lore has it that some big bass grabbed the conductor, but not the hat!

Employing his gymnast training plus some vaudeville experience (Northfield Theatre), Steen would also appear impromptu at college basketball games impersonating Charlie Chaplin (shoes backwards and all), rendering a very entertaining *incognito* half-time performance.

By the late 1930's, Steen had established his own Choral Festival featuring combined forces of more than one thousand singers plus the Northland College Concert Band. The schedule and programs from the 1940 choral festival show the festival choirs singing in the afternoon and the Northland

College Choir performing an evening concert. The evening concert included *The Same Start Shines* composed by Sigvart's brother Julian, which was performed frequently over the years by Steen's choirs.

In 1941, Steen was awarded a Doctor of Musical Arts degree by Northland College in recognition of a decade of distinguished contributions to the cultural life of Northern Wisconsin.

It is worth discussing how Steen had managed to attain such consistent excellence with his Northland Choirs, considering they were drawn from a small student body of several hundred non-music majors. The following is an excerpt drawn from an annual report prepared by the choir's director and manager to the Northland Board of Trustees following the 1941 choir tour.

Annually the matter of choir tour objectives is discussed by the director and manager of the choir, and although there are numerous objectives for touring one is of particular importance, namely, the necessity of achieving and maintaining a high standard of artistic accomplishment. All other objectives of the choir and the tour must follow this primary one.

In the satisfaction of this objective the choir has accomplished a great deal. Critics throughout the entire area where the choir has appeared have been more than generous in their remarks; sponsors of choir concerts have expressed themselves only in the highest terms, and annually a number of repeat concerts are secured. However much has been done in the satisfaction of this end, the director and the manager of the choir are not satisfied. Perhaps total satisfaction with the performance of the choir will never be achieved, but there is still much to gain. Limitations in the student body, in the available talent, and in the time militate against the complete satisfaction of artistic goals, but improvements in these factors are steadily being made.

A related quote describing Steen appears in the 1942 Northland College Choir brochure:

Those who have sung under his direction know that he is a severe conductor, but their love for him is great because of his severity.

Steen believed that pursuit of excellence was a moral responsibility throughout life, and he especially applied this ethic in leading young adults in the preparation and performing of sacred choral music. Combining all of his first rate musical training at St. Olaf with his strong will, especially intense in his late thirties and early forties, Steen exhorted his young charges to perform beyond their previous life experiences and even beyond their imaginations. At a fifty-year Northland College reunion held in the 1980's, memory of Steen's driven, and sometimes 'severe', approach had mostly receded, while many recalled their experience in the Northland College Choir as life-transforming.

The Northland College years, boarding in a hotel and working excessive hours at multiple jobs, produced growing physical and emotional stress that affected Steen's health, and began to manifest itself in the form of asthma. At the same point, Steen seemed ready for new and different challenges, probably

feeling he had achieved all he could at Northland without beginning to repeat himself.

Steen continued as Professor of Music at Northland College until 1942 when he was offered an appointment as Chairman of Music at his *alma mater*, Luther College. While this was a new and welcomed opportunity, the timing was quite inopportune due to America's entry into World War II. His new direction became clear to Steen when he applied for and was accepted as a non-commissioned officer in the United States Navy. Fortunately, Luther College agreed to hold the position open for Steen until he completed his service. It was four years before Steen took up his post at Luther College.

### The United States Navy (1942-45)

As Steen entered the U.S. Navy in the fall of 1942 he was stationed at Great Lakes Naval Training Center and soon assigned as officer in charge of the Navy's famed Blue Jackets Choir. The Choir's size, at one point as large as 200 singers, fluctuated widely due to rapid turnover as troops were deployed to the fleet for combat after completing basic training. In all, over 23,000 young sailors sang in the Blue Jackets Choir during the war.

During World War II, the Great Lakes Blue Jackets Choir won acclaim for its Sunday radio broadcasts. Some 30 million listeners tuned in weekly to hear the broadcasts on CBS radio stations, and it was sent by shortwave to Central and South America.

Steen who regularly directed the ensemble over the air took particular notice of the fine contralto singer Margery Mayer, then soloist with the *Hymns of All Churches* professional choir, during the broadcast of its 10th anniversary program from Great Lakes Naval Base. A transcript of that May 8, 1944 radio broadcast narrated by Franklyn MacCormack documents the Blue Jackets Choir directed by Lt. Commander Steen accompanying Margery Mayer. After this initial and unusual introduction, Steen asked for Miss Mayer's address and arranged to see her briefly just before shipping overseas in mid-1944.

Steen traversed the equator on August 27, 1944 and took up his new assignment in Brisbane, Australia. Lt. Commander Steen was the officer in charge of Welfare and Recreation initially at the Naval Supply Depot and then the Fleet Hospital Base, which entailed organizing social events and sports activities for the sailors.

A fellow officer, Lt. Commander Rudolf Custer, wrote to Steen:

We were all quite disconcerted by the scuttlebutt that you were in the Naval Supply Depot ... but it's pleasant to know that the set-up is to your liking. ... I see you have the pleasant job as liquor ration officer. I suspect that is a real headache. You sure are a great organizer, if I am to surmise from the way you put on those parties.

Among many duties, he oversaw a baseball league, including military serving professional baseball stars Phil Rizzuto and Dom DiMaggio, and press coverage of sports events.

After great success in Brisbane, Steen was transferred to the main Navy Base in Manus, Papua New Guinea. On October 26, 1945 Lt. Cmdr. Custer writes again:

Many reports of your fine work in Brisbane have gotten back to us, and already, we have seen the results of your administration at Manus. You sure fit into the war picture very well, and due to your own initiative and resourcefulness, you have helped to put it over with a bang.

Steen's reporting Commander during his assignment to the Pacific Theater was George Halas, who was, before and after the war, the renowned head coach of the Chicago Bears football team. Two of Halas' letters compliment Steen on his contribution to morale of the military in Australia during the final push to Japan.

Halas was not the only officer to receive a bottle of scotch as a gift from Steen. Though Steen reputedly was not a drinker himself, it seems there were distinct advantages to taking on the "thankless task" of being liquor rations officer.

UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET  
AND PACIFIC OCEAN AREAS  
HEADQUARTERS OF THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF

27 October 1945

Lt. Comdr. Sigvard J. Steen, USNR,  
Welfare and Recreation Officer,  
Staff - U. S. Naval Base, Navy 3205,  
c/o Fleet Post Office,  
San Francisco, California.

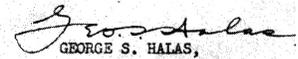
Dear Sig:

A little while ago, when Comdr. Ernest showed up in Pearl Harbor, he brought me a little gift from down Australia way, bearing on the label, a pleasant greeting from you. What an unusual way that was to get a letter. Needless to say, the contents of the item to which the message was attached were particularly appreciated. Thanks for that welcome gift of scotch.

I was pleased to note that you are now located at Manus, and to hear about the fine job you are doing there, and the fine job you did while you were in Brisbane. I receive copies of the ADMIRAL TSE each week and read all about your new contributions to the welfare and recreation program there. It's obvious that you recognize the triple importance of your job during the demobilization period, for you are certainly providing activities that help keep the men busy.

Here's hoping that things are going along well at Manus, Sig. Thank you for your conscientious assistance. I hope you will be able to return to the United States in the near future. With kindest personal regards.

Sincerely yours,

  
GEORGE S. HALAS,  
Commander, USNR.

In late 1945, Steen returned to the states from Australia aboard the USS Hancock, an Essex class aircraft carrier whose deck was over 900 feet in length and 100 feet wide with a normal crew of 3500 men. Steen recounted how the deck was so large he could stage two baseball games at once, and though the troops were certainly anxious to get home, the commanding Admiral would angle the ships course for the duration of the games to ensure favorable winds—such were the good spirits of men returning from the war. Steen earned a commendation from the Admiral on the bridge of the aircraft carrier in front of the fully assembled company for his excellent efforts in making their return home an enjoyable voyage.

As his orders to come home drew near, Steen began corresponding with Margery Mayer, the Chicago-based contralto he had met at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. She recounts receiving his daily letters in batches over a period of two months. When he arrived home, they courted briefly and were introduced to her family in Chicago and his family in Clinton, Minnesota. Sigvart's parents naturally wondered if this vivacious opera singer was the best match for their son, at least the one they remembered from before his Navy service. So his mother Caroline took him aside and asked her forty-five year old eldest and only unmarried child if he had thought carefully enough before jumping into this marriage proposal! Luckily, Sigvart's parents were really happy for the couple (after the initial shock), and both families attended their wedding in Chicago on January 26, 1946.

Sigvart formally adopted Margery's five-year-old son from her first marriage, Lynn Arthur (Berthold) Steen. After biding time cautiously for forty-five years, Steen had acquired a ready-made family within 3 months of landing back on American soil!

### Luther College (1946-48)

After a four-year hiatus for Naval service and getting married, Steen finally accepted the position first offered him in 1942 as Professor of Music and Chairman at his *alma mater*, Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. While Luther had long standing traditions in its concert band and choral union, Steen took the opportunity to found the Luther College Nordic Cathedral Choir, an a cappella touring organization.

The Nordic Cathedral Choir of Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, made it plain that it would have to be classed among the superior college choirs of the country.

The choir may be of recent origin, but its director, Sigvart Steen, is no novice. He is a master of detail, choral effects, and tone production, not to mention a personality that can win friends and influence people.

—*Valparaiso Messenger*, April 15, 1947

Sigvart Steen, director, lived up to advance notices as a musician of high ideals with the added ability of being a drill master par excellence. ... One could not help but marvel at the seeming ease with which the choir sang ...

—*St. Cloud Times*, April 21, 1947

The choir program from the 1948 concert tour leads off with J.S. Bach's great motet for double choir, *Sing Ye to the Lord*. The band program from that same year illustrates a quite challenging but entertaining program.

Steen toured each year with both the Nordic Cathedral Choir and the Symphonic Concert Band while his wife Margery traveled often between Iowa and New York to capitalize on singing opportunities. Richard Spencer Steen [author of this biography] was born in Decorah, Iowa exactly on his father's 48th birthday, March 26, 1948 and three days prior to his mother's birthday of March 29. This seems to have fit nicely between the Choir and Symphonic Band tours.

### Wagner College (1949-68)

Steen with his wife Margery and two sons moved to New York City in the summer of 1948, settling at first in the newly built Levittown on Long Island. He then matriculated in a graduate program in higher education at New York University. In the fall of 1949, Steen joined the faculty of Wagner College on Staten Island as Professor and Chairman of the Department of Music. In 1951 he completed his graduate program and earned a Master of Science degree in Higher Education.

Steen immediately began a concert touring tradition with the Wagner Choir as a way to cultivate musical discipline while also attracting a wider audience.

The simple Scottish Psalter, *My God How Wonderful Thou Art*, was a signature hymn of personal significance for Steen throughout his career in music. Occasionally, after leading the choir in a warm vibration humming of the hymn melody, Steen would turn slowly to face the audience and sing a verse in a plaintive tenor voice, then turn back and lead the choir in a fervent four-part concluding stanza.

Steen forged a new a cappella choral tradition at Wagner and quickly gained critical acclaim including a favorable 1952 review of the choir's performance at New York's Town Hall. After just three years the Wagner Choir was invited as the only collegiate representative from the United States to attend the 1952 Lutheran World Federation gathering in post-war Hanover, Germany. This must have been a poignant event for Steen, returning to post-war Germany where he had, in the more innocent late 1920s, been privileged to study music and observe European culture.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Steen toured the entire United States and Canada with his choirs at Wagner. Perhaps a culminating event was the sold out concert on February 17, 1966 at New York's new Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center. President Arthur O. Davidson honored Steen that evening for his many years of dedicated service to Wagner College and its students and a lifetime of dedication to the art and purposefulness of sacred choral music. Steen also received a congratulatory telegram from Mayor John Lindsay on behalf of the City of New York.

Although diagnosed with cancer of the bone marrow (multiple myeloma) in 1965, which caused serious pain in his back and ribs, Steen continued to train new choirs and plan ever ambitious coast-to-coast tours. In 1967 he was presented with a Distinguished Alumni Service award by his *alma mater*, Luther College. By late fall of 1968, Steen had just finalized arrangements for the winter 1969 cross-continent train tour of Canada and the United States as well as a return trip to Europe in the summer of 1969. Steen was vigorously rehearsing the choir for its annual Christmas Concert when he fell seriously ill and was admitted to the hospital. He had in fact made music with his students up to the week before he succumbed to the fatal illness on December 20, 1968.

[Note: A remembrance of Sigvart's life by his brother Ernest can be found at [http://www.steen-frost.org/Pwd/Docs/Steen\\_files/1968\\_SJS\\_Eulogy.pdf](http://www.steen-frost.org/Pwd/Docs/Steen_files/1968_SJS_Eulogy.pdf) .]