

# Those Electrifying Alliance Singers

By DAVID J. FANT, JR.

**T**he Cleveland Coloured Gospel Quintet of the C&MA, as they were originally called, were electrifying singers. The vociferous singing of this quintet not only lifted an audience, it almost raised the roof. Between 1912 and the 1950's members of the group made significant contributions to the history of the Alliance and had an international impact for Christ.

## A Fabulous Story

Anyone hearing the quintet sing would covet an orchestra seat at their next appearance. The prestigious Columbia recording company produced their phonograph records with such favorites as "It's Real"; "I'm on the Hallelujah Side"; "I'm Glad Jesus Won"; "Goodbye Pharaoh"; "Lord, Didn't It Rain"; and "Preacher on the Fence." Eventually they gained an international recognition.

How this group came together is a fabulous story. None was preciously acquainted, and all came from distant places. But each was drawn by the Spirit of God to the same church—Alliance Branch Number 2 in Cleveland—as by a lodestone.

First of the future quintet was J. W. Parker, who was born in Ontario of a slave father who possessed an ear for music and fiddled at neighborhood dances though he could not read a note. His son J. W. was youngest of 11 chil-

dren. When the family moved to Cleveland in 1900, J. W. began to sing and play a mandolin with the local Buckeye Quartet. From there he advanced to the Stage as an entertainer.

During revival services at Branch Number 2 he was converted, and the entire course of his life changed. Dedicating his talents to the Lord, he joined the church orchestra and organized a male vocal quartet.

Number 2 of the quintet was Alexander E. Talbert, born in Washington, D. C. Influenced by his Christian wife, he was born again in Pittsburgh, and when they moved to Cleveland they attended the Alliance church. Shortly thereafter



Alexander became seriously ill, and for a month he lingered between life and death. When medical science failed, the church set aside a day for fasting and prayer for him. God answered, and Alexander fully recovered. Number 3, H. D. Hodges, came from a Christian home in Carthage, North Carolina. While serving in the Navy during World War I his health was impaired by chain smoking. He described himself as a "cigarette fiend." He made strong resolutions, but repeated failures brought depression and contemplated suicide.

Then one night at a church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, he was convicted by the Holy Spirit that he was not only a victim of vicious habits but their source—inbred sin. However, three years later at an open air Alliance service in Cleveland he surrendered to the Lord and joined the Alliance church.

He later found his slot in the quintet, and after 15 years with the group he happily retorted: "I can testify to the faithfulness of my heavenly Father who has kept me busy in His service, mightily blessed my ministry and taken care of all my needs as I committed them to Him."

Number 4 was Spurgeon R. Jones of Asheville, North Carolina, who with his family later made their way to Cleveland via Pennsylvania and Ohio. Spurgeon became addicted to gambling and other evils. But his mother had been saved at the Branch Number 2 Alliance church, and one summer while visiting her, Spurgeon followed her example. This was his testimony: "The Lord broke every chain that bound me. Whom the Son sets free is free indeed. Old habits disappeared along with my old companions, but indescribable joy and a new power filled my soul."

Number 5 was the inimitable Floyd H. Lacy of Sutton, West Virginia. For 12 years Parker had struggled with his tenor singers; none was high enough. Once a week the four met faithfully to rehearse and pray. One of them, hearing

Lacy sing at a wedding, coveted him as the man they needed.

But Lacy was not a Christian and at the time was an important entertainer with *The Musical Magpies*.

### **Altitudinous Tenor**

Lacy invited his mother to visit him in Cleveland, where a revival was in progress at the Alliance church. His mother, a devout Christian—entranced by the power of God manifested there—insisted on regular attendance, and Lacy considered it his duty to accompany her. The result? Both Lacy and his wife were converted, and the quartet became a quintet—at one stroke gaining both an altitudinous tenor and an accomplished piano accompanist.

Lacy became the leading spirit, imparting new life. And there was an evident divine seal on their harmonies. The quintet began singing all over Cleveland—in churches, homes, hospitals, on the streets, in missions—wherever there was an open door.

Then Paul Rader and the Bosworth brothers invited the quintet to participate in mass meetings in Chicago, Toledo, Pittsburgh and other places. Often this involved driving all day Saturday, singing all day Sunday, then driving back overnight to go to work on Monday morning.

Dr. Charles S. Morris of Richmond, Virginia, a noted colored evangelist, accepted a mother's engagement at the Christie Street Tabernacle in Toronto and invited the quintet to accompany him. But how could this be arranged?

All were securely employed. They talked to the Lord about it—then to their employers. Wonder of wonders, all gave their consent. Securing a secondhand, seven passenger car and with baggage bulging inside and out they set forth.

### **Heroic Sacrifice**

The Christie Street Tabernacle, with a seating capacity of 2,000, was soon overflowing. At one service the Holy Spirit seemed to fall on the quintet members themselves, demanding full-time service.

Lacy demurred, deeming the price too high. He held a good government position and had a family to support. But eventually all said yes to God and prepared for an awesome adventure of faith.



Heroic sacrifice on the part of these brethren was involved in their decision. Back home were five families to support. However, at the end of their first tour, as they divided the gifts they had received, they discovered they had enough to pay most of their bills, and their hearts were overflowing with joy. Parker philosophized, "What does a little sacrifice matter when we witnessed hundreds of souls born into the Kingdom of God, each worth more than the entire material universe in His sight?"

During the following six years of travels with a number of outstanding leaders, the quintet made a notable contribution to the expansion of the

Alliance in North America. At General Council and summer conventions they were star attractions.

### **International Ministry**

They met the Welsh evangelist John Thomas in Toronto. Feeling the ministry of the quintet would be welcomed by his people, he arranged a mission for them to the British Isles. There they ministered in many cities, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, London and Dublin.

In 1934 they made a second tour, this time adding Wales, Norway, Sweden and Latvia. At their Silver Jubilee celebration in 1937 they reported: "Little did we dream of the far reaching effect of our choice that night in the Toronto Tabernacle when we threw up our hands and surrendered to God.

"Looking back over the years, and recalling the thousands of miles we have traveled in the United States and Canada, our three trips across the Atlantic, the multitudes drawn under the influence of the gospel, and the thousands saved and blessed through five colored men whose educational advantages were limited, with little musical training, we feel it was because we placed our little loaves and fishes into the Master's hands."

"It has been God's work, not ours, To Him be the glory!"

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*Dr. David J. Fant, Jr., served in pastoral and administrative roles throughout his career in the C&MA. He died in April 1982.*