*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**Concert finale offers reminder of why I love America**

Recently, our Indianhead Chorus was invited to sing at Como Park in the Twin Cities. Having lived in the Northwoods for a couple of years now, I have never driven anywhere besides to my cooking classes and to visit my son and his family in the Cities.

Naturally, my good friend Dan drove. He used to live in the Cities and had a summer home in Amery. He drove back and forth for over 40 years and knows both places well.

I have to learn my way around and get my bearings; I am determined, I have to. I know the main highways: Hwy. 8 that goes east and west, Hwy. 46 and Hwy. 63 go north and south .. and that’s about it.

It is pathetic, especially on county roads at night when I can’t see signs and there are no streetlights. I’ll be so lost.

One time, I drove home from River Falls after my cooking class right after a terrible thunderstorm. Thank goodness the rain had stopped, but then the fog set in. It was like driving in a Dracula movie.

To make things worse, part of Hwy. 63 was closed and therefore blocked off. I took a detour and ended up in the same spot where I started after 30 minutes. Worse, I could hear the coyotes howling not far away.

Anyway, Dan was driving on roads that were also clearly marked with detour signs. Somehow, he knew where he was going and got us to Como Park long before anyone else from our group showed up. Nice to have smart friends.

We pulled in just as a car at the front parking lot was pulling out. Was that luck or skill?

Como Park is indeed a great place with all kinds of activities all year long. I was told that more than 1.5 million visitors come each year and spend time at the lake, the zoo, picnic areas and other attractions. Just the pavilion itself can hold almost 1,000 people!

Wow, I was most impressed. It was a sing-out for seven groups of barbershoppers; all were from the Minneapolis area except us, the only group from Wisconsin. We did hear a few boos during our introductions; must be some jealous Viking fans.

We do live in a different area where there is no animosity between our football rivals. Going to restaurants, coffee shops, or shopping malls and seeing someone wearing the rival team’s jersey is no big deal, since a lot of folks who live here are actually from “there.”

It is not like living in Milwaukee and wearing a Chicago Bears jersey during a Packers game; that is like risking your life — well, kind of; most likely no one would offer to buy you a beer.

The show started at 7 p.m. and all the seats were taken by 6:30 p.m. Latecomers would bring their own folding chairs as both sides and the far back were starting to fill up. It was most exciting.

The highlight of the evening was that all seven chorus groups sang a few patriotic songs together. We had been practicing the songs during our own rehearsals, but to finally come together and sing them, the experience was beyond words.

Each of the seven groups ranged in number from 10 members to 100. I think there were at least 300 or more of us in total. Can you imagine the power of 300 singers all singing as one voice? It was my first experience and let me tell you, I will not forget those moments for the rest of my life.

Usually, barbershop singing is about harmonizing with each other while singing the old tunes from back in the ‘40s and ‘50s. These days, it has improved big time as we have become performers and entertainers.

While we all sang well, there were two groups that struck me as unique and different; they involved the crowd with clapping, singing and dancing. It was entertainment at its best.

One group sang “YMCA” by the Village People, wearing costumes and all that. When they did the “YMCA” hand signs, the whole audience stood up and followed suit. In the audience there were people who were 70 and 80 years old. How would they know the hand signs?

Again, this proves that music is universal and everyone is young at heart. Just clap your hands, hum along and words will flow with it. It was indeed a touching moment.

Then came the grand finale, when all the singers got onstage and sang the final three patriotic songs. We sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “This Is My Country” and “God Bless America.”

We all sang with strangers that we didn’t know, each singing different parts whether it was lead, tenor, bass or baritone. We all stood next to each other and sang our hearts out and the power of the song was beyond overwhelming.

We all became brothers in song at that moment. I know the audience felt it too. It was the most enchanting moment. But the best was when we started to sing “God Bless America.”

This song has meaning to me as I wasn’t born an American citizen. It was my choice to become one. Thanks to my mom and dad, I became one and I am so proud and thankful.

When we sang the first verse, it was dead silent in the audience. Can you imagine 300 voices sounded as one? No one tried to outsing the other, we just wanted to get the message out.

Then when we hit the lyrics that say “God Bless America, land that I love,” one gentleman at the front stood up and saluted. Lo and behold, suddenly a sea of audience members followed suit and sang along, some with their hand over their heart.

For a moment, I lost it. Words did not come out and my eyes were filled with tears. What a proud moment it was. I regained my composure and sang my heart out, thanking my mom and dad for giving me this great opportunity.

America is indeed a great country and I am so proud to be a part of it.