

The Melody Maids of Beaumont, Texas

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the history of Melody Maids, a private chorus for teenaged girls in Beaumont, Texas. Results indicate that the choral ensemble was very unusual. Initially formed to provide entertainment at a War Bond Rally during World War II, the chorus performed mostly at military installations. Melody Maids never accepted remuneration for concerts and was never affiliated with any institution. Yet the all-female choir existed for thirty years, allowing hundreds of girls to travel extensively over much of the world. The director, Eloise Milam, exerted complete control in both musical and non-musical matters, and she held strong opinions regarding proper behavior for young women. Under her leadership, Melody Maids became not only a community chorus that performed solely for the satisfaction of sharing music with others but also a finishing school for Southern ladies.

Keywords: chorus, female, military, 20th century, Southern

1. Introduction

One afternoon in June of 1942, the telephone rang at the residence of Eloise Milam, a well-known voice teacher in Beaumont, Texas. Milam had selected a group of high school girls, some of them her own voice students, to provide patriotic music for a War Bond Rally on July 4, and now they were rehearsing in her home. In an interview with the author on January 5, 2005, Milam explained that Gladys Quilliam, a newspaper reporter who was writing an article about the Rally, called and asked the name of the performing group. According to Milam:

We weren't calling ourselves anything, but Gladys demanded a name. I held the phone, called to the girls seated on the living room floor, and asked for suggestions. Several names were mentioned. Someone said, "Melody Maids." Gladys was in a hurry, so she printed that. I never intended to use the name again, and I certainly never intended to start a chorus, but the first show was glamorous and exciting.

Milam states further:

Following that rally at the Jefferson Theater, we were overwhelmed with invitations. Before I realized what was happening, we were appearing at Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, The Women's Club People swamped us with requests for performances, and I was trapped.

Milam had no way of knowing that the ensemble she organized for the Bond Rally would lead directly to the creation of a chorus, the Melody Maids, which would endure for thirty years and provide an opportunity for hundreds of teen-aged girls to perform over much of the world.

2. Appearances

The most immediate explanation for the Melody Maids' phenomenal success lies in their physical appearance, for no audience could resist young, pretty girls with smiling faces.

Performance reviews almost inevitably contain favorable remarks about the choristers' good looks, describing them as "easy on the eyes,"¹ and even referring to them as "a beautiful display of Southern womanhood . . . pulchritudinous assets of Texas."²

Eloise Milam, the Director, was not unaware of the importance of making a pleasing visual impression on the listeners. In her 2005 interview, she explained that she arranged the girls according to height and refused to let them wear glasses while performing. She also insisted that the choristers comb their hair away from their foreheads, since bangs or curls created shadows.

The Director's concern for the Maids' appearance extended to the selection of their costumes. For their first performance in 1942, the choristers wore white dresses that were already in their wardrobe. However, when the group began appearing on a regular basis, they decided a formal costume was necessary. In handwritten notes that Milam donated to the author, she states, "After much experimentation, the girls and I chose a southern-style, white taffeta, floor-length, hoop-skirted dress." Merita Mills, an arts critic for the local newspaper, mentions the striking effect of these long evening gowns:

Nature seems to have endowed the whole lot of them with a goodly show of American beauty. The picture they make in their gleaming white bouffant dresses is stunning . . . as evidenced by the gasp of delight which swept through the large audience when the curtain parted for the first time.³

Many of the photographs of the chorus from this period re-enforce Milam's concern for a pleasing image. In the 1940s, the Melody Maids often appear in a formal pattern, exhibiting symmetry and balance, somewhat akin to a military emblem. During the next few years the girls are frequently grouped in kaleidoscopic arrangements that recall synchronized swimming scenes from Esther Williams movies. Later on Milam announced that the girls could vary their white dresses by adding flowers and ribbons of their own choice. However, in unpublished notes about the early history of the choir, the Director writes, "I was chagrined to see that a large number [of girls] chose red—a real rebel chose black. [I] quickly amended [the rule] to say your choice of *pastel* flowers and ribbon." As the years went by, dozens of other costumes were used—everything from formal gowns and long white gloves to raincoats, pinafores, and cowgirl outfits with hats and boots. In Milam's words, the costumes were "unbelievably fantastic[,] even when made largely of paper, glue and glitter!"⁴ The Melody Maids Museum, which is housed in the Julie Rogers Theater in downtown Beaumont, offers a glimpse into the variety of the girls' performance attire. In addition to a long pink gown that was worn by one of the girls in the 1946 "Salute to the South" Revue, the Museum contains thirty Barbie-sized dolls, each one displaying a different miniature version of the Maids' costumes.

3. Local Performances

Although youth and beauty initially garnered attention for the Melody Maids, it was their musical artistry that ensured success, and soon the group became renowned for its superb musical productions. The Melody Maids performed for almost every type of event in Beaumont, whether a PTA benefit or a program for the Chamber of Commerce. The girls' willingness to provide free entertainment for all types of organizations endeared them to local townspeople and led to even further requests for their performances. By 1944 the Maids were constantly before the public. In that year alone they not only presented fifty-one concerts or programs but also sang for three War Bond Rallies, traveled five times to Camp Polk [now Fort Polk, near Alexandria, Louisiana], and recorded fifteen-minute radio broadcasts each week.⁵

The choir's numerous performances did not go unnoticed, for countless reviews and notes of appreciation by individuals praise the girls for their "marvelous civic and cultural contributions"⁶ and describe them as "a fine asset to our community." It was not long before the citizens of Beaumont were able to express their gratitude in a tangible way. When Milam's modest ensemble of seventeen expanded into a chorus of more than sixty girls—a number too large for the family's living room—the city donated a Quonset hut that became the Maids' rehearsal center, and the townspeople began to regularly contribute money to defray expenses of the choir. The girls also earned money by selling cakes and sandwiches on street corners and by holding style shows and rummage sales. While explaining their fundraising techniques, Milam adds, "We did everything legal and moral we could think of!"

4. Travels

Although the Melody Maids performed for many different organizations in the community, they never lost sight of their original purpose—to raise funds and build morale for the War effort—and they continued to sing for many military groups. In December of 1942, the chorus was asked to present a Christmas show to the men stationed at Camp Polk. Milam’s friends were horrified that she would agree to take her girls to “that out-of-the-way place.” Later Milam wrote about the circumstances of their performances at the Camp:

We went with many misgivings [about] . . . the dangers, pitfalls, and stigma connected with the visitations of young women at military installations.

We were totally unprepared for what was to happen on a military base, but we loved it. We learned in one visit that a GI audience is like no other.

Having no place else to go, they will applaud with such force and persuasion that we invariably felt that we received much more than we gave. At Camp Polk, we also sang for our first military hospital. These were men who had been wounded in combat. They were miserable, lonely, and discouraged.

Their appreciation for the few minutes we spent in each ward made us feel grave and humble but with a sense of satisfaction that comes from sharing one’s self without desire of compensation.⁷

After that trip the chorus and Milam decided: “[we] might as well sing for the audiences that gave us the most pleasure. We vowed that we would get ourselves to as many [military] installations as we could, especially the military hospitals.”⁸ In the following years the Maids sang many times at Chenault Air Force Base in Lake Charles and Camp Polk (both in Louisiana), and at Fort Hood (Texas). They even planned their tour itineraries by writing installations along a chosen route and offering programs in exchange for lodging and meals.⁹

During the thirty years of their existence, the Melody Maids traveled extensively across the continental United States, toured Hawaii seven times, and went to Mexico and Panama five times. They also made four trips to the Caribbean and four tours to the Far North. In addition, the Maids traveled several times to the British Isles, toured Western Europe four times, and made three trips to Asia.¹⁰

5. Director’s Rules

Many of the Melody Maids have written recollections of events concerning the choir, and these reminiscences provide a fascinating glimpse into behavior and attitudes of the mid-twentieth century, revealing that perhaps Milam’s philosophy of life has exerted even greater influence upon the choir members than her musical legacy. In addition to guidelines governing stage appearance and performance, the director demanded strict adherence to hundreds of rules, affectionately dubbed “Eloise’s Bible” by the girls. Some of the regulations include selling suggestions for the Melody Maids Ad Book and the most suitable glove length for an afternoon tea, while others deal with morals: “It has long been understood that a Melody Maid does not smoke or drink.”¹¹ There is also advice on how to attract boys: “Be sweet, refreshing, lady-like. Don’t know all the answers. Have stars in your eyes instead of dollar signs.”¹² Short sections of the Melody Maid Bible contain tips on posture, good grooming, and make-up application, while a significant portion is devoted to table etiquette, including rules that Milam borrowed “from an old book of Etiquette:”

Come not to the table without having thy hands and face washed and thy hair combed.

Make not a noise with the tongue, mouth, lips or breath in eating or drinking.

Foul not the tablecloth.

Throw not anything under the table.¹³

Milam provided rules for every possible scenario while the girls were on tour—how to behave at military clubs and chapel services, in hotels, airplanes, busses, trains, and even on the street:

Walk in twos on right side of sidewalk.

Walk briskly. Do not saunter or shuffle.

Wear hat, hose, gloves, tailored clothes, not fluffy.

Do not go out alone; only in groups of four or more.

Walk with girls your own height.¹⁴

Certain topics were strictly forbidden:

Don't become involved in heated discussions on politics, religion, the Civil War or other problems that you cannot solve anyway. . . .
Subjects to avoid: your dreams, your weight, your diet . . . dating status . . . any subject that smacks of gossip . . . bragging or boasting, especially on Texas . . . dirty jokes, suggestive subjects, personal or intimate information about anyone in the group Don't ask:[,] How old are you[?] how much [money] do you make, how much [money] does your father make[?]¹⁵

Many of Milam's rules were filled with common sense:

Control animal reflex of scratching.
Never yawn in public.
Shouting or whispering in public is rude
Don't gossip.
Don't interrupt
Complaining can be a habit. Resist grumbling
If someone pays you a compliment, answer, "Thank you," and hush.
Don't hog the spotlight
Curb your jealousy¹⁶

Almost all of Eloise Milam's rules were marked by a consideration of others:

The key to good manners is thoughtful consideration of other people. The ability to sense the right thing to say or do depends almost entirely on an individual's ability to forget self and think of others.¹⁷

6. Advantages of Membership

Milam's ensemble was thus not only a choir but also a finishing school for ladies, and virtually every young girl in Beaumont yearned to belong. An autobiographical narrative by Martha Kate Jordan illustrates just how badly some girls wanted to be in the choir:

The second day I ever put my foot in the Melody Maid [Harmony] Hut, I worried myself into a rash. You, Eloise, were looking at your supply of new girls. There were so many, you said . . . at the beginning of the rehearsal . . . you were going to have to let some go I just knew that I was going to be on the eliminated list. I wanted to ask you, I HAD to know for sure! It was so important to me.¹⁸

Jordan continues by stating that her anxiety and eagerness to please Milam led to "all sorts of problems. I would never have thought to wax a floor at home, but since we were going to have 'open house' at the [Harmony] Hut, I waxed (by hand on my knees) the whole Hut." According to Jordan, she was so excited about the open house and so tired from waxing the floors of the rehearsal area that "[I] worked myself into a fever and was not even able to attend the party."¹⁹

Once accepted into the choir, each girl was happy to oblige Milam by conforming to the group, whether it meant blending in her voice or cutting her hair to the proper length. Glenda Walters Brown remembers her neighbor, a Lions Club member and strong supporter of the Melody Maids, insisting to her family that their daughter MUST become a Melody Maid. In a personal interview with the author in October of 2007, Brown describes her audition with the Director:

[Milam] told me she would be delighted to have me . . . but I would have to cut my long Shirley Temple curls OFF!! Of course, I did.

Forty years later Brown discovered that her mother had been devastated by the new hairdo, but Brown states:

It was worth it!!! I would have done anything to be a Melody Maid, and I remained in the choir until I was engaged to be married. I was honored to be Eloise's sidekick.

Membership in the Melody Maids offered enrichment opportunities that were not available elsewhere.

In an era in which most women were housewives and most teenagers' activities were limited to events in local communities, the girls in the choir had opportunities to travel to distant lands, to meet many different kinds of people, including celebrities, and in general, to enjoy a wide array of experiences. The choir also provided a sense of belonging to the girls, making it easy for them to develop a sense of camaraderie while working together on projects or traveling on tours. After returning home from the summer tour of 1947, Melody Maid Olive Rae "Bobbye" Stallings writes in her diary:

This has been a wonderful trip so far and it will probably continue to be[,] for there is no bunch of girls more easy to get along with than the Melody Maids. Always polite to each other, always trying to help. It seems unusual but it's the truth.

The trips were equally exciting for the chaperones, one of whom has described her experience as ". . . full of music, song and glamour . . . lots of fun and never a dull moment."²⁰

According to Donald Kuhn, father of two Melody Maids, parents were just as eager for their daughters to join the choral group as the girls. In an interview with the author on January 4, 2005, Kuhn stated that mothers and fathers knew that membership in the choir would provide much-needed entertainment and ensure development of their daughters' vocal talents. But most important of all, family members knew that after the girls had spent several years under Milam's tutelage, they would emerge as young ladies—well groomed, graceful, poised, and with all the attributes of a proper Southern woman. In Kuhn's opinion, "Eloise did more for the girls culturally than musically."

7. Director's Philosophy and Legacy

Perhaps Milam's importance to the choir members is best summed up by one of the Maids:

We've learned a lot more than singing. We've acquired confidence, poise, tricks of good grooming, and—most important—a sense of fair play. Many of us were literally too shy for words when Eloise took us in. She brings out our best qualities. If you have special talent, she will feature you as a soloist. If you haven't, you have fun anyway. Why, if it hadn't been for Eloise, some of us would never have been out of Texas. She's changed our whole lives.²¹

The Melody Maids were never associated with a church or school. Yet this lack of affiliation with an institution proved a blessing, for Milam was free to mold the choir as she saw fit, both musically and morally. In the words of Betty Addison, who served several years as Assistant Director, Milam was also able to impart to the girls one of her strongest beliefs—a belief that may seem strange to professional musicians today but one that ensures the uniqueness of the choir—that music is a gift that should be shared with others with no thought of remuneration. As a result, throughout the thirty years of the choir's existence, neither the director nor the Maids ever received any financial compensation for their services. They accepted money for group expenses, but received nothing as an individual.

According to Addison in an interview with the author on September 12, 2004, not all the choristers made every trip, but Milam did. As the Director, it was necessary for her to attend every rehearsal and every performance. Milam was also in charge of all details concerning the choir. She auditioned the girls, planned the programs, and selected the music, even arranging or composing the songs, if necessary. In addition, Milam managed non-musical matters, including logistics of the trips, the design and construction of the staging, scenery, and costumes, as well as financial details and correspondence. What had begun as a pleasant diversion became a demanding full-time job, and after thirty years such a strenuous schedule began to take its toll. Milam had attempted to resign in 1950, and in 1970 she even took a year's leave of absence following the death of her mother. Two years later Milam's husband, Mason, retired from Mobil Oil, and Milam reluctantly decided to discontinue the choir.

However, the Melody Maids did not disappear. In fact, from 1977 to 2007, many former members of the choir returned to Beaumont each September to celebrate Milam's birthday, to visit with each another, and to perform in public. During August of 2008, the city of Beaumont was severely damaged by Hurricane Gustav, and the choristers were forced to postpone their annual get-together for one month. Milam celebrated her 100th birthday in September of that year but passed away just before the Maids' reunion in October.

However, Milam's steadfast philosophy—that music is a gift and should be shared freely with no thought of financial reward—continues to live on in the hearts of her former choristers, making the Melody Maids one of the most unusual choral groups ever.

Endnotes

- 1 James C. Owens. (April 21, 1950). The Hypo.
- 2 Phil Lovejoy, Musical Entertainment at New York To Be Outstanding, Rotary International, No. 18 (April 1, 1949).
- 3 Merita Mills. (April 13, 1946). The Beaumont Enterprise.
4. Eloise Milam. (2002) The Melody Maid Story in Pictures 1942-1972, 1.
5. Gunn, Glenda Gary, comp. (2001). the Melody Lingers On, I. Beaumont, 43-53.
6. Rotarygram's Weekly Bulletin of the Rotary Club of Beaumont, Vol. XV, No. 34, (10 April 1946).
7. Gunn, Melody, 32.
8. Gunn, Melody, 13.
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10. Gunn, Melody, 14.
11. Gunn, Melody, 20.
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