

**Interview with Dan Preston**  
**Interviewed on February 17, 1984**  
**by Bob MacLeod**

BM: Bob MacLeod

DP: Dan Preston

BM: Moorhead State University, 1925-1950, an oral history interview. Today we're interviewing Dan Preston and the interviewer is Bob MacLeod, 17 of February, 1984. Dan, where was your home originally?

DP: In Bangor, Wisconsin about 16 miles east of La Crosse.

BM: How in the world do you get from Bangor to Moorhead?

DP: At that time we went on the NP.

BM: I was wondering more, Dan. How did a fellow who went to high school in Bangor Wisconsin, how did he end up being the music director at Moorhead?

DP: The route was very [unclear]. I had to go to college at Lawrence University at Appleton, Wisconsin, and on my graduation in 1918, I contacted President Weld at Moorhead Normal and the time was arranged. My original plan going to college was to become a forest ranger because I had spent my teenage years mostly in the woods trapping and fishing and hunting. But my high school was so lacking in any scientific equipment that I had no preparation for the chemistry course that was involved with forestry. I flunked it flat. And the professor told me, "Daniel, you'll never make it here, you better change your major." But prior to that my mother had required that I learned to play the violin, which I began studying at the age of nine, and it was continued until I graduated from high school. I was a fair violinist to begin with. I went down to the music school at Lawrence to inquire if musicians were employable. And that was to take the place of my forestry degree. I decided to go into music because they said they couldn't train enough of them to fill the need at that time. That is how I came to be in a position to contact Moorhead State Normal School for a position.

BM: You say it was Doctor Weld that you contacted?

DP: Doctor Frank Weld, yes.

BM: What happened next?

DP: Before I could come to work at Moorhead, I was drawn into the army and was there until the last part of December. During the Armistice or just immediately after, I learned that it was possible to be employed at once. I wouldn't have to wait a long time to be busted out of the service if I had a job. So I called, wired Dr. Weld, if he could still use me. And a wire in reply said report for work on January 9, 7, and that is how I arrived in Moorhead.

BM: Was this your first trip to Moorhead after the war was over?

DP: Yes.

BM: What were your impressions of Moorhead?

DP: I had grown up in an area that was just back from the Mississippi River, so there were many valleys, many hills. When I got off the train at Moorhead and saw nothing but horizon miles and miles away, I wrote to my wife and said, "If I could stay in this flat place until spring, I'll consider it fortunate."

BM: How did you get from the depot to the campus?

DP: I walked.

BM: You walked. There wasn't any other transportation available?

DP: At least I couldn't find any.

BM: What did the campus look like at that time?

DP: It was small, very small campus. Weld Hall was almost new, there was no work done on the ground yet. The Old Main hall that burned was there, with an addition which was called the Training School, and two dormitories for girls.

BM: Where did they house the men at that time?

DP: They must have obtained rooms and homes; there was no other place for them, nothing like a dormitory for them.

BM: And President Weld, was he the president at the time?

DP: That's right.

BM: Who were some of the other faculty members you remember?

DP: Caswell Ballard was science. It's hard to recall, it's a long time ago. Sliv Nemzek was a student.

BM: Sliv was a student who later became the football coach. Do you have any impressions

of Caswell Ballard?

DP: Yes, very definitely. He was one of the most alert teachers on the college level that I've ever known. He had the history of teaching and experience that was rare. He served as county superintendent in the county where Alexandria is located. And he told many interesting stories about how at that time rural obtained their jobs by bidding for them. And one girl he told me about got a job for \$35 a month. They would provide her an unabridged dictionary, carry all the water for drinking, and build the fires. A young man came along and said he would do it for \$25 a month, they wouldn't need a dictionary and he'd do all the chore work.

BM: The teacher negotiations are a little different I guess. You mentioned Maud Hayes. Can you tell us a little more?

DP: Yes, she was a very superior teacher of speech and director of the theatre. If I remember correctly, the interest in the theatre at Moorhead State was on a par with what it is now on under Delmar Hanson.

BM: It seems that the faculty members you mentioned were very high in quality and that Moorhead State has had that attribute for all these years, really look for the highest quality people.

DP: I think that is true because on one occasion I was discussing educational problems with the superintendent of music in the city of Seattle. They had hired one of graduates here from Moorhead State to take care of their woodworking shop. He said, "The experience I've had with Moorhead graduates, we're going to run a pipeline right back there."

BM: How about some of the students of that period, do you remember any of those?

DP: Yes, I do. Not too many by name, but Arthur Storms was one of the first ones to return from WWI and begin his college career, or continue it. And there were three brothers that lived in Moorhead, the Gates boys, Ernie Gates, and Dewey, and I can't think of the other one's name.

BM: You were at Moorhead State then from 1919 until 1948?

DP: That is right.

BM: Could you tell us about the curriculum as you saw it as it changed over the period?

DP: The curriculum has, of course, become very much broader, but at the time, at that early stage, the music curriculum is the only curriculum I can speak about. But we were permitted to build up a curriculum that was pointed toward performing, not so much the teaching of methods. It was our notion that performing on a violin and a piano and singing required so much time and preparation that they surely could do some teaching with their experience, at least with a limited amount of appreciation.

BM: Did you have some performing groups during that period?

DP: The outstanding group was a group of eight boys that came together in 1928, they were called a Double Quartet. Two of them were music students, the others were in various fields. Very important people like Ruben Parson was one of them, and Oscar Thompson, all of these boys went on to be college teachers. That is those two. And the musicians became very well known. Robert Walls, for example, after teaching one year in high school went to Valley City to have the college choirs. Then he went to Idaho to have the college choirs there. Then he became the chairman of the department at Oregon State, where he retired about five years ago.

BM: The double quartet was the first of these...

DP: Yes, they had achieved some distinction through their trips out of the area, several times in Chicago for national conventions of educators and musicians, for Kiwanis club conventions and Regina and the likes. They were well known.

BM: There was another, a large group that developed shortly after your Double Quartet. The Amphion Chorus.

DP: Just following the very memorable closing of banks in 1929, our economy in the country did not respond at once at all, and many organizations became disorganized. One of which was a male chorus called the Gideons Singing Society in Fargo. They broke up, and a member of that group came over and asked me if I would conduct another male chorus, if one could be gotten together. And I told him that I would expect a community chorus to be really representative and should not be limited to membership to just people here, and they didn't. They came from all over this area, outside of Moorhead and Fargo, as well as in town. On the first meeting they had 125 men. I told Mr. Caldwell since I was a member of the community and wished to share in community affairs, that if these men would oblige themselves to attend rehearsals regularly, I would be willing to do the same thing and do my work for nothing. But they would have to agree to perform one concert at least, a year. And then see what would happen after that. As a result of that, the choir became quite a well known choir. Their first outside appearance was at the World's Fair in Chicago, where they did well enough to encourage us to anticipate something greater. In 1936 they sang at the Town Hall in New York, and the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, Orchestra Hall in Chicago. But they did one thing for the community that is I think of some importance. They were successful in getting the colleges to go put their funds for artists courses into a common fund that was administered by the Amphion Chorus Board so the Amphion, with the assistance of the colleges, were able to bring to Fargo and Moorhead at least 50 of the world's very greatest performers including quartets, string quartets, and symphony orchestras, and Brailovski, the great pianist, and Stern and artists of that caliber. So the wonderful musical atmosphere in Fargo and Moorhead at present time may well have been found its roots during the 1930s when the Amphion and the colleges collaborated and brought artists to the area.

BM: You mentioned earlier that when you were visiting with Saul Herrock [phonetic] in New York, a little story about the Russian singers.

DP: Yes, that was interesting. In 1927, my wife and I were in New York to get artists for

Moorhead State artist series. I asked Hererock [phonetic] if he had any male groups that could, were available. The reason being I wanted the boys on our campus to hear an excellent male singing group, and from there on, perhaps organize one of their own. That incidentally was the beginning point for the boys who decided to come together as the Double Quartet. Hererock [phonetic] told me of the Caudrough [phonetic] Quartet, four men who were voice teachers, or had been before the Bolshevik Revolution, they had been voice teachers at the National Conservatory of Music in St. Petersburg, Russia. They were available for concerts. I said, "Let's bring them to Moorhead." They were, Moorhead was the second concert they gave in the United States. When Nikoli, the leader of the group, and the head of the voice department, came into my office in Weld Hall, he noticed a bass violin standing in the corner. He walked over to it and plucked the lowest string on that bass and sang a note or two. I asked him, "Mr. Caudrough [phonetic] how do the Russian basses achieve such a bass voice?" He replied, "It's resonance, my boy." I asked him if he would then tell me how to achieve that kind of resonance. He worked with me about three hours, and we discovered, and I discovered that the upper lip, if you can keep it stiff for singing, as well as for everything else, it will work pretty good! A stiff upper lip is the secret.

BM: Going back to the Amphion Chorus, after your trips to the various places in the United States, I understand that there was a trip scheduled in Europe.

DP: Yes. When we sang at Town Hall, a Swiss by the name of Albert Marini [phonetic], who was an international booker of artists, heard us and he came out to Moorhead to discuss the possible tour of Europe. At that time, one was arranged for the summer of 1941. We had 18 concerts booked in Paris, Rome, England, and Germany, and the trip though never did mature because there was a conflict. Mr. Hitler's army was in Paris at the time we were to have given two concerts under the sponsorship of Alexander Bullet, who was then our ambassador there, or console.

BM: You taught at Moorhead State during some very distinct times, like the early twenties, the depression years, and the war years. I'd like to ask you your impression of the students and how the university, or at that time the college, survived the depression years?

DP: They, I think, if I recalled the attitude of the students, they were all more serious than, they were not so, addicted to being entertained. They worked a little bit more for an educational purpose rather than an all around personality that could play and work and enjoy life freely. That was true in the early '20s. That was after World War I, and then the depression came in the 30s, and there again funds were, determined the attitude of most everyone, not simply just students, but having gone through these many years, I have been in a teaching relationship with people, for 65 years. Those two periods, the early '20s and all of the '30s remain in my mind as the most steady years in regard to the attitude of people. There was not so much confusion. Everyone had a goal to aim for.

BM: I image some of the people that were going to school and singing in your various musical groups would use this experience to raise money by performing in the surrounding area, and if that's true, could you tell us about any of those groups?

DP: Yes, the students who were instrumentalists did a lot of performing in the area for pay. And four of them were the first students that Lawrence Welk put in his big orchestra.

They were with Welk for some time, Jules Herman of St. Paul and Dale Hallack in Reno, and Joe Best in Phoenix. And so they had a lot of experience professionally before they quit the concert hall and went into teaching.

BM: Going to the next period of time, World War II, I know that had some vast implications for the campus, but could you describe your implications at that time?

DP: Yes, World War II was a period of disaster in every way. The choirs on all campuses I'm sure suffered greatly because the boys were taken into service, and so what had been going on a number of years, routinely, now had to change all of the sudden and no one knew for how long. I had a choir here at Moorhead State, there were about 48 voices, and as far as I know, there were only two boys left on the campus who were part of that group. The rest of them all went to service.

BM: So the population or the enrollment became pretty much dominated by the women at that time.

DP: Yes, that's right, it did. I can't recall just whether people were happy and delighted with things around here, I'm sure they weren't, but everyone did their work though.

BM: When the Air Force moved some people in here for training, did those people participate in the choir and some of the other extra-curricular activities?

DP: No they did not; they were strictly contained in their own units.

BM: Dan, after these some 65 years of teaching music, what kind of thoughts do you have on it now, with, in retrospect?

DP: My experience with young boys and young girls, in the elementary grades, included working particularly with boys' voices. And I discovered they reacted to formal training easily, perhaps more so than adults because they had no bad habits to overcome, merely to create new ones. And so I began working with young boys nine years and older. Here at the campus we had two or three boys' choirs that developed excellent voices. Later on I had groups that traveled. They were stationed in Oregon. And one important thing physically I discovered with training boys voices until they were old enough to grow into adulthood, was their voices are not likely to change because they develop their singing voice, resonated by the head, rather than the pharynx, and so just for a practical reason it's good for boys for boys to learn how to sing and start early so they have the advantage of their vocal muscles growing with the rest of the body, and so having to do that strange thing with voice change when they're 12, 13, and 14. Those boys if they're trained to sing are not likely to have a voice change. They will become adult men in graduated stages. Until they drop from high soprano to a tenor or a baritone or a bass. So I'm eager to share information with any group that could use it. I'm particularly interested in helping churches stabilize their senior choirs by the young people, nine years and older, learn how to become singers after, with a scientific background. That program is nothing but a dream at the present moment, but I'm trying to find a way to sew the seed and let it grow from there. And then of course having taught 65 years I'm not exactly a kid anymore, and I hate to call myself a senior citizen, because I don't feel like that. But I do know they can sing, so presently I'm trying to promote

an idea that a senior citizens chorus could provide interesting, a happy background for people that are no longer connected with the markets, and law offices and such as that. If that gets off the ground I'll be very glad because I think it can help them.

BM: Dan, you left Moorhead State in 1948, what happened to you're professionally career at that time?

DP: I went to the University of Washington at Seattle to complete work for a doctoral degree. That was 1948-1949. During that time, one of Moorhead's graduates was the head of music at Olympic Junior College in Bremerton and Larry Peterson offered me a job to teach voice over there while I was working on my doctorate at the University. During that time, another former student, Robert Walls, who had become the chairman of music at Oregon State University, guided a committee at Forest Grove, Oregon who was looking for a dean for Pacific University School of Music, Walls directed the president to me at Seattle. So the consequent was I became a dean of music at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon. And I was there from 1949-1963.

BM: Was it easier being a dean than being a teacher here at Moorhead State?

DP: It required quite a different experience. As a dean, I became involved and traveling about the states of Oregon, and Washington, California, Idaho. Contacting high schools and trying to put together a student body of musicians that were extremely capable. At Pacific I had the authority to grant very sizable scholarships. If I found a superior musician I could give him a full scholarship. And with that authority I was able to put together a student body that became very, very successful in their performances.

BM: When did you leave that job, Dan?

DP: I retired from Pacific in 1962, and I came back to Fargo in 1963. Mrs. Preston had passed way in 1962, and I came back to the Midwest to become a vocal consultant for the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota. In that position, I was able to meet with several churches in the state before the position was disbanded.

BM: You just couldn't wait to get back to the flat country.

DP: I had a real reason for coming back here. My children never did leave this area. And so I needed to be back where they were. However, one of my sons, Bill, the youngest one, is still teaching in the school of Optometry at Pacific University. But most of my children, two of them, one at Cormorant Lake, and another in Minneapolis, and one in Grand Forks.

BM: Did any of them follow you in the musical profession?

DP: Yes, Jim, in Grand Forks, has been a teacher of music in the system there for a number of years; he'll retire in another year. And Molly, who's Mrs. Claire Flood, lives in Hawaii, near Honolulu. She has a degree in music. But she married a professional soldier and has been a resident of the world you might say, Japan, Germany and elsewhere.

BM: Dan, I know that since your retirement I know you've been very actively involved in

teaching students yet, and I've had a hard time running you down over the last few months because of all the lessons you're giving and everything else. I want to thank you for taking the time to come over and visit with us today.

DP: It's been a real pleasure, Bob.