

**STAFF GOSPEL QUARTETS AT RENFRO VALLEY: 1940-1950**  
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## **Background**

Since the beginning, Renfro Valley's cast often experimented with different artist collaborations, sometimes necessitated by Lair's song requests and sometimes just for artistic enjoyment. One such manifestation of this was in the formation of gospel quartets. With a cast made up of numerous fine singers, it is only natural that over the course of time various aggregations of such singers got together and sang, and sometimes they sang quartets. On many of Berea College's Renfro Valley radio recordings, such groups would be referred to as simply "the quartet," and they may have sung anything from gospel to sentimental songs to barbershop tunes.

Occasionally, however, there emerged staff quartets who primarily focused their repertoire on gospel songs and gained considerable popularity specifically for their performance of such material. It is these quartets on which I focused part of my research, which I limited to pre-1965 Renfro Valley. During this time two quartets existed that deserve mention: the Rusty Gate Quartet and the Gloryland Quartet. One quartet active during this time that I did not heavily research was the Memory Men Quartet. Their repertoire was weighted more with sentimental, barbershop-style songs and not gospel songs. As the Rusty Gate Quartet and the Gloryland Quartet were both active only between 1940 and 1950, the subheading of this section reflects that.

## **Rusty Gate Quartet**

In the spring and summer of 1944, there was a "new" quartet being heard on stage and over the airwaves at Renfro Valley. Although the group was left unnamed in the program scripts, they appeared often singing a gospel repertoire drawn heavily from spirituals and African-American traditions. Songs included "Oh Mary Don't You Weep," "[Steal Away](#)," "The Gospel Train," "[Standing in the Need of Prayer](#)," and "[I Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me](#)." The *Renfro Valley Bugle* from April, 1944, listed the personnel for this new quartet as Glenn Pennington, Jerry Behrens, and the Turner Brothers (Red and Lige). By the early fall, the group had achieved such popularity with audiences that Lair decided to make it a permanent fixture on Renfro Valley broadcasts. In the September issue of the *Bugle* a thorough biography of the new group finally appeared. Wade Baker was now in place of Lige Turner and the group was called the Rusty Gate Quartet.

Pennington was born and raised on a farm near Renfro Valley and had been involved with the entertainment there since his late teens, beginning as bass singer with the Crusaders Quartet for a short time. Baker was a recent arrival to Renfro and by late-1944 had become quite popular as a versatile soloist who could sing a wide variety of different material. Red Turner, another newcomer, was a native of Middlesboro, Kentucky, and also served as staff bassist for some of the Renfro Valley morning programs. Jerry Behrens was the veteran of the group. He arrived soon after Lair moved to Kentucky as part of the Mountain Rangers trio. By 1944 he was helping Lair in a variety of duties, including planning, arranging, rehearsing and timing the programs.

This personnel seems to have stuck for some time, with Behrens singing lead and playing guitar, Baker singing tenor, Turner singing baritone, and Pennington providing the bass. Due to the nature of a quartet made up of members who also performed in other



**Rusty Gate Quartet. From left: Troy Gibbs, Glenn Pennington, Wade Baker (seated), and Jerry Behrens.**

configurations, substitutions were not uncommon. By mid-1945, the August *Bugle* announced that Carroll “Shorty” Bradford and Bob Simmons had been occasionally appearing with the Rusty Gate Quartet. By mid-1946, Troy Gibbs had replaced Red Turner, and late in 1947, Pennington left the group to lead the Rose Hill Quartet, specializing in barbershop numbers. Bob Simmons filled the bass vacancy left in the Rusty Gates.

This final aggregation of Behrens, Baker, Gibbs, and Simmons seems to have remained consistent until the group stopped regularly performing sometime in mid-1948. It is unclear exactly why the group ceased, but it might have had something to do with the increasing strains created by the pullout of sponsorship from Ballard and Ballard during late-1948. Jerry Behrens also temporarily lost his job at Renfro Valley in early-1949, apparently due to an altercation with John Lair. He was not rehired until Lair landed the General Foods sponsorship in 1950.

Eight recordings of the Rusty Gate Quartet survive in the Berea College Sound Archives. Six of them are from mid-to-late 1946, and the others from 1948. As mentioned above, the repertoire of the quartet consisted primarily of spirituals and African-American gospel songs, and Lair promoted the group as specializing in such material. Similarly, the style represented on the recordings very much reflects the famous jubilee quartets of the 1930s and 40s, and they even occasionally sing lyrics in minstrel dialect, such as on the verses of “[Look Away to Heaven](#).” Even their name is an allusion to this African-American influence.

According to their 1944 *Bugle* biography, another cast member heard the quartet rehearsing before they had acquired a name and remarked how they sounded “just like the Golden Gate Quartet you hear on the radio.”<sup>1</sup> Behrens responded to the observation by pointing out that if the group “didn’t start rehearsing more and get the squeaks smoothed out, they’d sound more like a RUSTY Gate Quartet than anything else.”<sup>2</sup> The name stuck, although the quartet members were apparently not altogether taken with it. Interestingly, as if perhaps wanting to remove the quartet from this association, the group’s short bio in the 1947 *Renfro Valley Keepsake* mentions that “they still don’t know how they came to be called the Rusty Gate Quartet.”<sup>3</sup>

All of the surviving recordings represent a standardized stylistic approach to the material typical of the jubilee quartet style. Repetitive refrains are sung together, while verses almost uniformly feature Behrens’s lead voice backed with humming or nonsense rhythmic vocables from the other singers. Despite the lack of variation in arrangement and questionable use of dialect, these are musically great performances by a very professional group of singers.

The personnel for the 1946 recordings—captured on both the *Barn Dance* and the *Gatherin'*—are most likely Behrens, Baker, Gibbs, and Pennington. The group was in its prime during this period and performing often, and you can hear it. Their performances are tight and polished. With the possible exception of "[Pearly Gates](#)" and "[Look Away to Heaven](#)," the selections represent classic black gospel songs: "[Steal Away](#)," "[I Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me](#)," "[I Ain't Gonna Study War No More](#)," and "[Standing in the Need of Prayer](#)." It is also not surprising that the two *Barn Dance* selections are rousing and energetic while the *Gatherin'* selections are generally more subdued.

Especially worthy of note is Behrens's guitar work and Pennington's skillful bass singing on "Look Away to Heaven" and "Standing in the Need of Prayer." The 1948 recordings—both of which are performances of "[Ezekiel Saw the Wheel](#)"—likely feature the same personnel except that Bob Simmons is singing bass instead of Pennington. Both versions are virtually identical except that Simmons adds an ornamental flourish at the end of the version from the short-lived Breakfast Party program, prompting Lair to request an encore of the ending.

### Gloryland Quartet

The Gloryland Quartet had a much shorter lifespan than the staff quartet that preceded it, the Rusty Gate Quartet. Interestingly, they emerged in late-1948, right around the time that the Rusty Gate Quartet left the scene. The group was made up of the Mulkey Brothers (Shug and Ray), Shorty Sheehan, and Emanuel "Old Joe" Clark. The Mulkeys were a singing duo from North Carolina, Sheehan was one of the Valley's fiddlers, and Clark did Grandpa Jones like singing and comedy. Their quartet assignments were Ray - lead, Shug - tenor, Sheehan - baritone, and Clark - bass. The group appears to have been very popular until the fall of 1949, when it rather abruptly disappears from the program scripts.



The Gloryland Quartet.

Only two recordings of the Gloryland Quartet survive in Berea's Sound Archives, one of which features only a trio due to the absence of Clark. Despite the paucity of audio material, a couple photographs of the quartet and a repertoire list survive, giving some idea of the niche filled by the group. In one respect they appear to have satisfied the void created by the Rusty Gates' departure, singing a fair amount of spirituals. However, they also favored material popularized by quartets heard on country radio that covered Hank Williams and Bill Monroe songs. In this way they were different from both Reual Thomas's quartets and the Rusty Gate Quartet. Examples of such songs in their repertoire include "I'll Have a New Life," "Lord Lead Me On," "I'll Fly Away," "After the Sunrise," and even Monroe's arrangement of "Drifting Too Far From the Shore."

One of the surviving recordings is a well-known spiritual which they title "[Dese Bones Am Gonna Rise Again](#)." This was one of the groups most frequently performed songs, appearing on multiple program scripts, and sometimes twice during the same month. The

other, "[When He Reached Down His Hand For Me](#)," is a good example of a gospel song popular with country radio performers of the time, and the Gloryland Quartet's version—although just a trio—represents that style quite adequately. In addition to the fiddle and guitar accompaniment, the vocal blend is more akin a sentimental country song rather than the full-bodied sound of a southern gospel quartet.

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<sup>1</sup> "Rusty Gate Quartet," *Renfro Valley Bugle* (Sept. 15, 1944): 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Renfro Valley Keepsake* (Renfro Valley, KY: Renfro Valley Enterprises, 1947), 14.