

CHAPTER VIII

DECLAMATION CONTESTS - WEST AND EAST

The Wausau high school took part in many interscholastic declamatory contests and had its fair share of successes. An incident in one of those contests seems unusual enough to merit mention.

There were two types of contests - declamation and oratorical, the difference being in type of selection declaimed. For each of these there was a series of four contests - a local tryout, a sectional contest with nearby schools, a Northeast Wisconsin and a State final. The two series were staggered so that together they presented contests for eight successive Friday evenings.

One year a boy, Conrad Althen, decided to compete in both series. He had won the local and the sectional meets in both series and the Northeast Wisconsin meet in the oratorical contest, when his voice suddenly quit from over-rehearsing, and as the second Northeast Wisconsin declamation contest came due, he could not speak above a whisper. A doctor, however, advised him that if he would have his throat sprayed with cocaine just as his turn arrived, it would temporarily paralyze the muscles which caused his trouble and he could speak audibly.

So, just as his turn arrived, someone sprayed his throat and he stepped out on the stage of a packed opera house at Oshkosh, uncertain whether he could speak above a whisper. No one except the Wausau delegation knew the circumstances and they all held their breaths to see what might happen. To be sure, he could speak plainly and with plenty of volume but, alas, his voice for all the world sounded like a phonograph. It had lost all its human quality. One judge marked him first - the other

two marked him down on quality of voice, but after they heard the circumstances expressed regret they had not given him the chance to represent the district in the State contest.

The school produced a number of actors, the best known of these is Charley Winniger. He came from a family of actors and his inheritance and family training was primarily responsible for his talent. John O'Brien was a product of the school's declamatory system - he played Shakespearean roles with Southern and other famous actors, but died before reaching full maturity of his powers.

The most promising speaker the school produced was a lad with the marvelous name of Lilingvist - a fine looking lad with a shocky head of blond hair, a three octave voice and an unusual power of emotional expression. When Professor Frankenburger at University of Wisconsin first heard him, he said that he was the man he had been waiting for a lifetime to find to take the part of Othello.

After graduating from University of Wisconsin, he toured with a company playing Shakespearean plays and then went to Chicago to perfect his voice. But his uncle persuaded - practically coerced him by threatening to cut both him and his sister off from his will unless he would give up the stage and study law. Years after Grandfather asked him whether he regretted having given up the stage, and he said: "No. If I had been four inches taller, nothing could have induced me to give up Shakespearean plays, but I am only average height and a Shakespearean hero needs to be taller than anyone else on the stage."

The moral of this tale is that unless you can stretch out skyward quite beyond the family standard of height, don't get stagestruck.

This is all preliminary to telling you a story about George.

When George's class was preparing to graduate from Eighth Grade at Newton, Massachusetts, the school authorities decided to celebrate the occasion by having, for commencement exercises, a declamation contest, each of the six or eight schools of the city being represented by one contestant to be chosen through competition in his own school.

George decided to speak "The Black Horse and His Rider", a thrilling tale about Benedict Arnold, a piece which Charles had previously spoken with success in a high school contest. In the first tryout, two judges marked George first and one judge marked him last. In Wisconsin, if two judges agreed on first choice, the opinion of the third judge was disregarded. But in Newton the marks of all the judges were averaged and George lost out. It seemed to Grandfather strange that a contestant who received two first could receive one last. However, he decided not to interfere.

But shortly George came home saying that his teacher said she did not wish her best speaker thrown out by one erratic judge, and if George wished to learn a new piece, he could start over. So he learned a new piece and this time won the right to represent his school.

George was now allowed to return to "The Black Horse and His Rider", but brought home discouraging reports about his rehearsals. Grandfather, who had heard many students declaim the piece, thought George rendered it exceptionally well. George could not tell just what criticism the teacher had. All appeared to be wrong - the way he spoke and looked and gestured.

As the day for the contest approached, Grandfather said: "George, one thing is clear - you cannot win trying to follow suggestions you don't understand. Be yourself, give the piece your own way. It's your best chance to win." The hall was packed the night of the contest. George was

toward the end of the program. As soon as the first speaker uttered a word, Grandfather knew what was the matter with George's rendition. The speaker tripped lightly over "The Charge of the Light Brigade", another with soft diction and restrained emotion gave a delicate rendition of Daniel Webster's "Eulogy of Massachusetts". Grandfather whispered to Grandmother, "George is either first or last - he is nowhere in the middle."

A hundred or more girl graduates filled the front two rows and when George stepped briskly to the stage with a western swing, the girls, who were from other schools and had never seen him before, tittered, and when with a good Western accent and plenty of emphasis on the R's, George shouted out his first sentence, they laughed out loud. But soon with a delivery filled with fire and emotion, he had the girls cowered and held his audience spellbound. Was he first, or was he last? Was declamation power to sway an audience, or was it beauty of diction and restrained expression of emotion? The judges gave George first place, the Mayor made a speech and pinned a medal on him - it was a night which seemed well worth recording in the family annals.