

TRIBUTE TO KEN BLACK – BEAVERDALE HISTORIAN

Harry Kenneth (Ken) Black

Prepared by Martha Nelson, BNA Board Secretary, September 2005

The BNA is very grateful to Ken Black for his many contributions to Beaverdale. He researched and wrote several Beaverdale history stories. Ken and Wink attended the BNA organization meeting in 1990. He was very active with the BNA beautification and history committees.

Ken and Juanita (“Wink”) Black purchased their Beaverdale home in 1951. Ken moved to Decatur, Ill in 2001 to live near his brother Gene. Wink, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, has lived in a nursing home in Illinois for several years. It is not known if she is still living as of September 2005. They had no children. Gene Black died in 2003. Mrs. Gene Black is still living in Decatur as of September 2005.

Ken was born in Lake City, Ill. He lived in Des Moines from 1938 until 2001. He worked at The Book Store in downtown Des Moines until he retired. He had been a professional singer with the “Songfellows” quartet, which performed on WHO radio for 20 years from 1937 to 1957, and a choir director with Central Presbyterian Church. He was an Army Air Corps veteran of World War II and a longtime member of Des Moines Concert Singers.

Ken Black passed away at age 85 on December 17, 2001 of a lung ailment in Decatur, Ill. Burial is at Graceland Cemetery in Decatur.

“Ken was a great friend, a great neighbor, and a great guy!” John and Jean Sample, Beaverdale neighbors.

Beaverdale History Stories by Ken Black

- 1900s Early Beaverdale Businesses
- Ashby Manor and Ashby Woods
- History of Beaver Avenue
- How Beaverdale Got Its Name
- Beaverdale Interurban
- Beaverdale Park
- Bob Zeller's Story
- Catholic Woods
- Ding Darling Cartoon
- Early Churches of Beaverdale
- Early Schools of Beaverdale
- Forestdale Area of Beaverdale
- The Times of George and Mary Hickman
- Hickman Home
- Memories of Margaret Louise Layman Staggs
- Mary Oaks Club
- People
- The Road to Brown's House and Brown's Woods

Did Santa Come to Beaverville?
School Notes
Wallace - Ashby District of Beaverville
A History of Westminster Presbyterian Church
Witmer Park

Ken Black: Beaverville's Music Man

By Sophie Vlassis, BNA Newsletter, Spring 1993

If you should ever see an ad for Wolfe Eye Clinic headlined "You can tell our patients by the look in their eyes," the couple shown is Ken and Wink Black. In fact, they have posed for several ads. After having spent some time with them, I can see why this delightful couple was selected for the ads.

It was truly a pleasure to spend an afternoon with Ken and his lovely bride of 55 years, Wink. They started dating in 1932 in high school and were married six years later in Decatur, Illinois, Ken's place of birth. Wink was born near Champaign, Illinois, and moved to Decatur at an early age. They have lived in their home at 2808 35th Street since 1951.

Ken is a unique individual whose hobby, music, ended up becoming his profession. His love of music goes back to junior high school days when he sang in the school's chorus. He comes from a family of musicians. One of his brothers was a minister and played the piano, and Ken played the banjo. His family formed a singing quartet, which consisted of Ken, his father, uncle and brother.

In 1935, Ken directed the choir at First Baptist Church in Decatur, then came to Des Moines in 1937 when he was hired by WHO Radio to sing with "The Songfellows" quartet. They performed fifteen shows a week, each lasting fifteen minutes. They had fans all over the Midwest. Especially remembered by Ken are two elderly sisters who lived in Griggsville, Illinois, and wrote them beautiful fan letters on a regular basis. Once when Ken and Wink were traveling to Illinois, they stopped to visit with these ardent fans. That visit developed into a friendship, which lasted the remaining years of the sisters' lives.

During World War II, Ken served in the Air Force and was sent to radio and radar school. He was stationed in England with the Eighth Air Force. After the war, he rejoined the Songfellows at WHO and continued until 1957. Ken's eyes sparkled as he spoke of his job with WHO Radio, which lasted twenty years but eventually pushed out by television. After TV stations went on the air in Des Moines in the early 1950's, demand for live performers on radio stations like WHO quickly declined. The Songfellows and many other radio musicians were forced to seek new jobs. After leaving WHO, Ken became program director for KWDM, an early FM commercial station. He wrote advertising music, or "jingles" as they were called.

Ken was a member of the musicians union during his entire career, playing bass fiddle with orchestras for dances. He was director of the Barbershop Chorus for several years and was a soloist in many Des Moines churches. He was also a musical director for two shows at the Des

Moines Playhouse. Ken later sold cameras at Younkers, then worked at The Book Store in Locust Mall for seventeen years until his retirement.

Wink first worked for Look Magazine during World War II, and then was employed for seventeen years by the State of Iowa in the Beer Permit Department where she became the state's foremost authority on beer laws. As an expert on the topic, she was invited to speak at state finance offers annual conventions.

Most couples that retire slow down and take it easy, but not Ken and Wink. They may be retired from their jobs, but certainly not from the community! While Ken was working at the Des Moines Community Playhouse, Wink became part of the crew as director of makeup. She continued to volunteer there for twenty years, serving as Production Chairman under directors Howard Orms and Ted Kehoe. She has been a member of the Des Moines Women's Club since 1949 and served terms as Secretary of the Board and Treasurer. Wink also belongs to a Questers Club, and is a member of BNA.

Ken is the new chairperson of the History Committee for BNA, previously served on the Beautification Committee, and takes pride in the lovely flowers he has planted in the median on Urbandale Avenue. He is also a member of Kiwanis Golden Key.

He is a twenty-year member of the Des Moines Concert Singers and continues to sing in the choir at Central Presbyterian Church where he directed the youth choir for fourteen years.

Although the Blacks have no children of their own, a young Japanese lady named Fumiko who lived with them for a year is very special. They still stay in contact with her and have fond memories of the time she spent in their home.

Ken and Wink like to travel and have wonderful memories of their three-week trip to England in 1985.

Ken's most memorable experience was the first time he sang on the Barn Dance at the old KRNT Theatre in front of 4,200 people. His biggest accomplishment, he says, was when he returned from the military and built a house using skills learned from his father, a paperhanger and painter. Ken's hobbies are singing and photography, and he wants to be remembered for his singing during the 1950's. When asked what he would like to bring back from the "olden days," his reply was "good music." His unfinished goal is to canoe down the Raccoon River so if anyone out there has a canoe to loan, call Ken!

Wink's hobbies include crafts, art and theater. She is concerned about the lack of trees on the east side of Des Moines and would like to see more planted there. Her most memorable experience was working with theater people at the Des Moines Playhouse. She feels her biggest accomplishment is having stayed married to the same wonderful husband for 55 years!