**Walter F. Anderson**

****

Walter F. Anderson was a marvelous addition to the Yellow Springs community when he and his wife Dorothy and young children Sandra and David arrived by bus in 1946, a glass jar of goldfish on Sandra’s lap. He had accepted the position of chair of the Antioch College Music Department where he served for the next 22 years. That “Music Department” initially consisted of a local woman who gave piano lessons when hired. By the time Anderson left in 1968, he had amassed a String Quartet and a music faculty of perhaps five others. He was soon noted all over campus for his popular “Music for the Listener” classes (among others), the Antioch Chorus, and

for being a major faculty presence on a number of college committees.

He was born in Zanesville, Ohio May 12, 1915, the sixth of nine children in a low-income family, and the grandson of freed slaves, with a red-haired Irish great-grandfather who had himself been a slave owner. His father was a foreman in a Zanesville glass-blowing factory, and his mother a housewife and a Zanesville Welfare Department worker during the Depression.

Andy (as he was fondly called by nearly everyone) was a child prodigy, and started piano lessons at age seven. He began playing the organ at twelve and graduated from Zanesville High School in 1932 in three years instead of the usual four. He won a full scholarship to the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, where he had a double major in piano and organ. He later earned a Doctoral degree in 1952 as a “Fellow” of the American Guild of Organists, especially noteworthy as there were a limited number of them in the U.S. Later in his career, he was commissioned to write a concerto for harmonica that was performed by the Cleveland Symphony in 1947, and at the suggestion of Eleanor Roosevelt, wrote a cantata based on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s words in his D-Day Prayer. This was performed on a CBS telecast for the sixth anniversary of WW II in 1950, and performed yearly thereafter on the radio to commemorate the anniversary of D-Day.

Between his Oberlin College days and his Antioch professorship, he spent his summers and later several years at Karamu House, a Cleveland settlement house known for its commitment to interracial theater and the arts. Then he began his academic career, teaching briefly at Wilberforce College and the Kentucky State College for Negroes before moving on to Antioch.

His initial hiring by Antioch made it to the pages of the New York Times as the first African American to chair any department in any non-black institution of higher learning in the United States. In addition, he and his wife helped to integrate the local Presbyterian Church. Andy was also very active in a number of local civil rights demonstrations and efforts in the village. One particularly memorable one was leading a group of 600 marchers, side by side with Arthur E. Morgan, the 85 year old former president of Antioch, on a ten-block silent walk around the village. At the conclusion, Andy led the crowd in singing “Freedom, Freedom”, “We Shall Not Be Moved”, and We Shall Overcome”. These activities were flanked over the weeks by a number of other demonstrations, including a sit-in in front of a local barbershop owned by Lewis Gegner (who refused to cut the hair of blacks). At this near-riot, students from Central State University, Wilberforce College, and Antioch College participated, with some actually being jailed. Lengthy details of these Civil Rights activities, with Andy being an integral part of them, have been written up elsewhere.

Meanwhile, even while teaching at Antioch, Andy managed to tour all over the United States and Europe as a professional composer, conductor, pianist and organist, giving concerts and participating in an American-Yugoslavia Seminar, as well as working with the International Quaker Seminar in Yugoslavia. In addition to all this, he initiated an Apple Butter Festival in the village, a tradition that continued for six falls. His love of gourmet cooking was also reflected in the toothsome dishes at both faculty parties and community-wide events. This effort led him to start a bakery and candy production company as a sideline in Yellow Springs that was ultimately forced to close when it was discovered his featured “bourbon balls” had too high an alcoholic content to be sent through the mails to shops wanting to sell them.

Among his students at Antioch was Coretta Scott King. They kept in touch over the years, even after he left Yellow Springs. Well after his career there, and after Andersonhad died, King was invited to give an address at an Antioch College Reunion. There she said of him, “…not only a superb musician and a brilliant educator, but also one of the kindest and most caring human beings I have had the privilege of knowing. A man of extraordinary compassion and generosity, he was one of those rare people who enriched the lives of everyone who had the privilege to know him.”

In 1968 he moved to Washington, D.C. to assume the post of Music Coordinator of the National Endowment for the Arts. By then, his children were pretty well grown and Andy had divorced his wife. He eventually moved in with Richard Price who was hispartner for the final 25 years of Andy’s life.

For the final part of his career at the NEA, Andy created grant guidelines that became a model for other programs and for establishing a challenge grant concept used to leverage private-sector support for the arts. One of his special efforts was to plan and coordinate 134 concerts to celebrate Jimmy Carter’s inauguration.

In 1994 the American Symphony Orchestra League named “Dr. Anderson as one of the 50 people whose talents and efforts had touched the lives of many orchestras in a significant way.” He died on Nov. 24, 2003 at the age of 88.

His people skills were legendary, no matter where he lived, how old he was, and what he did. His music enhanced his interactions with everyone around him. He welcomed African American students into his home in Yellow Springs to support them and counsel them about difficult situations they encountered. When living in Cleveland, he would walk home in the dark in the downtown area, and as he passed houses, he would call out to people he knew, and soon he would start singing, and the porch-sitters would join in. A wave of music would follow him wherever he went. So from playing a calliope at a car show in Zanesville when he was twelve, to having the Zanesville mayor proclaim November 10, 2015 to be the Walter F. Anderson Day with two hours of comments from townspeople there on that occasion, Walter Anderson has left a significant and indelible imprint on everyone who ever knew him.

Sources:

*Playing On All the Keys: The Life of Walter F. Anderson* by Joan H. Horn

*Joan H. Horn*