

# QUARTALIAN OF A CENTURY MINSTREL BOYS

**T**WENTY-FIVE years ago the members of a Young Men's Institute decided to make a special contribution towards a sale of work being organised for their church. They blacked their faces, and as a nigger minstrel troupe gave short concerts during the two-day sale.

That was the start of Chesham Minstrels. To-day, four of those young men are still active members of the concert party. They have long since ceased to black their faces, but their show has grown each year, in popularity and has been produced in nearly every school and church hall in Bury and district.

The four "founder members" are John Smith ("Bones" in the black-face days), who has never missed a concert since the Minstrels were founded in the 1925-26 season, his brother Albert, and the brothers Fred and Harry Spencer, now president and vice-president of the Concert Party. The Minstrels are a subsidiary organisation of Chesham Unitarian Church, and their shows have been the means of raising substantial funds for the church.

## First interlocutor

In their first five years, entertainments were given only at social events and at the annual New Year's party at Chesham School. The young men in cricket shirt and red neckerchiefs, and white trousers gradually

# 1925 THE CORNERMEN, THE COONS THE JOLSON STRAW-BOATER MEN. AND... 'SWANEE, HOW I LOVE YA'



Brothers John and Albert Smith are two of the four "founder members" who still take part in the Minstrels' shows. John (sitting), "Bones" in the early productions, has not been absent from one concert during the 25 years.

increased their repertoire—some tried their skill as banjoists—but the traditional nigger minstrel formation of a half-circle of seats with "corner-men" and "Mr. Johnson" as interlocutor was retained. Their songs included "Swanee," "Dixie," and other negro songs popular in the 'twenties.

The first interlocutor was Mr. C. R. Spencer, father of Fred and Harry Spencer. When, after seeing the troupe broaden the scope of its activities by giving shows for other organisations Mr. Spencer resigned because of ill-health, his place was taken by Mr. Harry N. Wilde, the present comper.

It was in 1930 that the Minstrels gave their first "outside

could the women members be persuaded to follow suit.

When war broke out the Minstrels took no engagements for a short spell, but in November, 1939, decided to continue. Ordinary concerts were restricted and the numbers made up by concerts at hospitals and Army camps.

## New show

About this time the members felt they had exhausted the repertoire of a nigger minstrel troupe and decided to develop the show along the lines of a concert party.

Throughout the war years they provided a new show each winter. Difficulties of transport and working conditions had to be surmounted, but never did they fail to keep an engagement. During the heavy snowfall in January, 1940, they did four shows in six days.

They were the first concert party to perform in a Bury park. During "Holidays at Home" in 1942 they gave a show in Rochdale-road Park. In the early war years the present accompanist, Miss Dorothy Birch, joined the company.

Although the Minstrels cannot comply with all requests for their services there are some applications they never refuse.

Each year they give shows at Fairfield General Hospital, Ailken Sanatorium, Broughton House for Disabled Soldiers and Sailors, Manchester, and for the Clarence Park Veterans and the Old Age Pensioners' Association.

## "South" revival

One artist whom the Minstrels are particularly proud of having introduced to the stage is Jim Tattersall, who with his ventriloquist's doll, is on the music hall stage as "Tattersall and Jerry." Miss Pat Lupino Thompson, who now has her own dancing school, was with the Minstrels from 1942-48.

In this, their Silver Jubilee year, the Minstrels show is reminiscent of their early days. One item is "Southern Melodies" and, although the players do not black their faces, the Negro songs and spirituals are retained.

The secret of their success, believe the Minstrels, is their aim to provide an entertainment

happy days are here again.  
sing to have time