

Vernon Howard contributed music and more to the Fair Band

BY GLEN MILLER

Nearly hidden away behind several buildings on the north end of the Great Geauga County Fairgrounds in Burton is a pavilion named in honor of Howard Vernon, one of the charter members of the Geauga County Fair Band.

The distinction of being a charter member makes the now-deceased Mr. Howard a historical figure in Geauga County, not to mention the fact his trumpet could be heard loud and clear in the band for 44 years. It was only silent on his death in 1982.

There is another little-known fact about Howard's musical career. He was a member of the renowned Ohio State University Band who, while marching with fellow bandmates during a 1936 performance, was among those who marched into formation to write "Ohio" for the first time on any football field.

Two years later, Mr. Howard was among those who stepped forward to create the Geauga County Fair Band, one of the few county fair bands in the country. Not only does it have daily shows during the Fair, but it also performs at events throughout Northeastern Ohio.

But Mr. Howard holds another distinction as the author of the only known written history of the Fair Band. It seems music was heard on the fairgrounds years before the fair band was formed. It was 1933 when he began playing the Fair as a member of an all-county high school band, which performed until 1936 and "was the forerunner and inspiration" for the all-volunteer

fair band that exists today.

After the 1936 Fair, Cliff Rossiter, a county fair official, called a meeting with some of the high school band members and other older musicians in the county.

"His idea was that a band for the Fair would give the musicians an opportunity to continue their musical skills along with providing music for the fair," according to Mr. Howard's history.

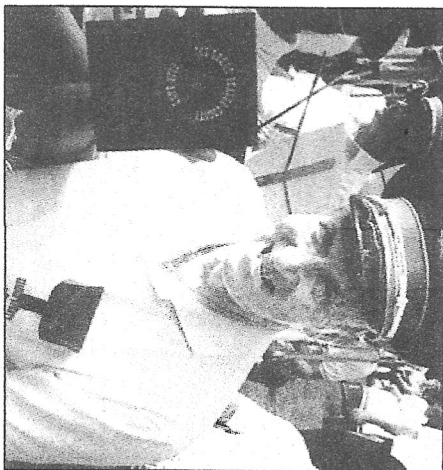
Mr. Rossiter recruited Azro Cheney, the director of a Chardon school band, to be the fair band director, and "together they organized a band that was able to give a concert in the summer of 1938 at the Burton High School."

At the organizational meeting, Mr. Rossiter decided that the fair board would pay all expenses, including the director's pay. Each musician was to receive 50 cents per day for food and drink during the fair.

Then, during the Christmas holidays, when band members were home from college, the fair board held a banquet in appreciation of the band and its performances.

"Cliff Rossiter acted as our band manager and found hometown events and parades for us to participate in during the summer," Mr. Howard wrote. "This served as an advertisement for the Geauga County Fair, which was held over Labor Day Weekend. He also arranged for us to play at the Ohio State Fair. It was learned that we were the only band sponsored by a county fair board in Ohio."

In 1941, the band played for the Ohio Farm Bureau Field Day in Columbus. There were 72 bands and a mass band of 3,000



Vernon Howard holds a plaque honoring him on the Fair bands' 50th anniversary in 1988.

musicians. The Geauga Fair Band performed at state fair horse races. To avoid boredom during the races the band would bet a penny a race, Mr. Howard added.

Around 1950, several fair band members formed a clown band. When the full band couldn't play, the clown band filled in and eventually became known as the "Leftovers," open to any musician who wanted to play.

By 1953, the fair band's performances won it more coveted jobs. It was featured in a downtown Cleveland American Legion parade and played in a Christmas parade held on Euclid Avenue. When Frank Lausche was governor, he attended the Fair and chose to march behind the band. He later complimented it saying, "That band plays the best marching music I have ever heard."

"Over the years the band has become one

large family. We have played for weddings and anniversaries," wrote Mr. Howard.

At that time, band members included 12 husbands and their wives, six sets of sisters, several sets of brothers and 11 sons or daughters of members. As for his family, Howard said it contributed eight members followed by other members, who each contributed five.

Over the years there were some band errors, some of which drew laughter. While performing at a Middlefield festival, the band was marching down the street and made a sharp right turn. Its tuba player, reading music in the front row, kept going straight down the street, leaving the band as it turned the corner.

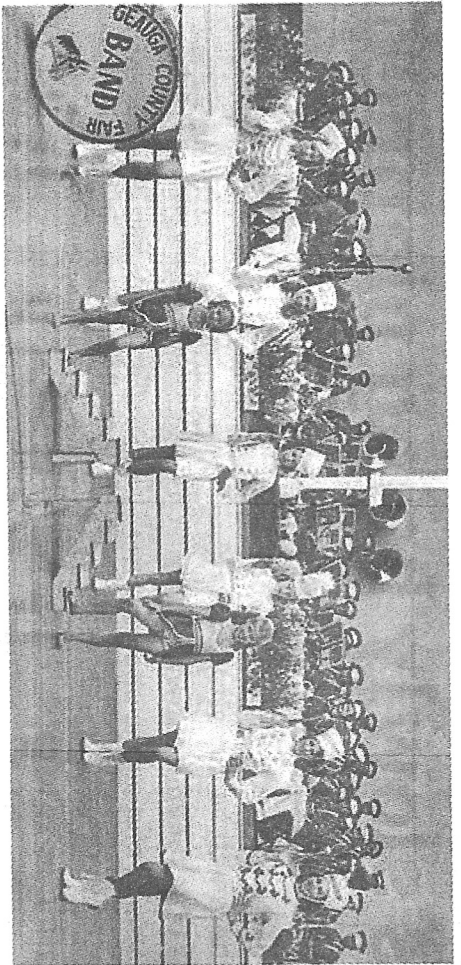
Mr. Howard had a sense of humor and expressed it in his history when recounting the deposits distributed by horses ridden in parades in which the band marched.

"If a parade is led by a mounted unit, a normally straight file will sometimes make a sharp turn to the right or left. That simply means that (when) one of the noble steeds has answered Nature's call, the manure spoils the symmetry of the band, but it is easier on the shoes."

During one Fair, the band played while riding on a Ferris Wheel. "We have kept the crowd entertained when the lights went out or when the entertainers were late for shows. We were always available to fill in when asked by the Fair Board," he wrote.

As the band members became older and unable to march, Mr. Howard said he provided a farm wagon pulled mostly

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In 1940 majorettes performed alongside the Great Geauga County Fair Band.

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by a truck, although on a few occasions the bandwagon was pulled by a team of oxen. If the oxen couldn't pull the load up a hill, the band members had to get off and walk.

In 1988, the band's 50th anniversary, Mr. Howard chose to use his carpentry skills to build a new bandwagon that had better seats and could hold more people.

Over the years, he wrote "the band has played everything from the William Tell Overture to The Beer Barrel Polka, and has even performed from memory when the lights of the grandstand went out, and has met all challenges except one.

"Sometimes we were called upon to play 'Happy Birthday' and tried to do it with no music. This produced some very weird harmonies in a simple children's song. Eventually, we acquired the music and had no more problems, but it has always been one of the 'in' jokes of the organization."

Mr. Howard concluded his Fair Band history by writing, "The Geauga County Fair Band is a unique organization. We have played at every Great Geauga County Fair since 1938. All of our members, past and present, are proud to be part of the history of the Great Geauga County Fair."

He credited two people, Dwight Ladd, a retired teacher and local poet, and Diane Barrball with helping him prepare the history that was typed by Megan Arnold, his granddaughter.

The history ended with "The Band", a poem that Mr. Ladd had penned.

*"When it comes to tastes in music,
I'm not one of the elite,*

*For my choices run from Mozart
Down to lower Basin Street*

*But I get most satisfaction through
the ear & through the eye*

*On the fairgrounds down in Burton
When the band goes marching by."*