

History of the Geauga County Fair Band

as remembered by Vernon Howard

In 1933 I started playing at the Geauga County fair in the All County high school band. This band, under the direction of Mr. Raymond Dehnbostle, played until 1936. It was the forerunner and inspiration for our present-day, all-volunteer fair band.

After the fair in 1936, Cliff Rossiter 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. Cliff Rossiter asked Mr. Azro Cheney, from the Chardon school band, to be the director. Together they organized a band that was able to give a concert in the summer of 1937 at the Burton High School. By the first meeting in May of 1938 we had thirty members at practice. We became known as the Geauga County Fair Band and played at the fair that year.

At the first organizational meeting with Cliff Rossiter it was decided that the fair board would pay all expenses including the director and music. Also each musician would

receive \$.50 per day for food and drink during the fair. Then during the Christmas holidays, when band members were home from college, the fair board gave us a banquet in appreciation of playing. Each member was allowed to bring one guest. For many years Audre Blair and the "Orchetts" furnished music for dancing at our Christmas parties.

Cliff Rossiter acted as our band manager and found hometown events and parades for us to participate in during the summer. This served as 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 the state of Ohio.

Mr. Chris Bogasky was a fair board member also. He enjoyed the band music, and acted like a clown during the concerts while directing the band. The band would respond to his clowning by playing sour notes.

In 1941 the band played for the Ohio Farm Bureau Field Day in Columbus. There were 72 bands and a mass band of three thousand musicians.

From the very beginning the band has played for the horse races. Starting when the little grandstand and race track were by the main road. To avoid boredom during the races the band would bet a penny a race.

Mr. Hugh Johnson, from Middlefield, acted as our president for 12 years, and Mr. Robert Fowler, from Chardon, acted as our secretary/treasurer. "Mr. Hugh" advanced money twice to help pay for uniforms. Also, as long as he owned Grandview Country Club, he invited us for a concert and refreshments.

In 1953 we played for an American Legion Parade in downtown Cleveland. Also, we

played in the Christmas parade down Euclid Avenue on a cold day in December.

When Frank Lausche was Governor of Ohio he attended our fair and marched behind the band. Later, he complimented the band by saying, "That band plays the best marching music I have ever heard".

About 1950 several band members formed a clown band. When the full band couldn't play, the clown band filled in. Later we changed the name to "Leftovers" so anyone who wanted could play.

Over the years the band has become one large family. We have played for weddings and anniversaries. There have been twelve husband and wife members, six sets of sisters, several sets of sisters and brothers. Also, eleven sons or daughters of members have become playing members. Over the years the Howard family has had eight members, the Fowler family has had five members. The Parker family has had five members, and the Hazen-Ricca family has had seven playing members.

We were asked to play several years for Memorial Day parades in Chester and Chardon. We led the parade and played Taps at the cemetery. We have also played other parades, such as the Middlefield Swiss Cheese Festival and July 4th celebrations. One time in Middlefield, the band was marching down the street and made a sharp right turn. Our tuba player, reading music in the front row, kept going straight down the street, leaving the band around the corner.

Another event involving our equine friends, is not so popular; it is generally referred to as "following the horses." 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 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.

As the band members became older and unable to march, Vernon Howard furnished a farm wagon which was sometimes pulled by tractor, but mostly by truck. On a few occasions the band has been pulled by a team of oxen. They could not pull the load up the hills, so the band members had to get off and walk. During the fair we have ridden in a high-wheeled band wagon pulled by a six-horse hitch. In 1988 the fiftieth anniversary of the band, Vernon Howard built a new band wagon which had better seats and would hold more people.

As membership and conditions changed sometime in the late fifties, the band assumed it's own financial support. We had to charge a fee for playing and the Fair Board gave us a lump sum for playing during the fair. This money paid the director and bought what music we needed. The band still pays each member \$.50 per performance at the fair. We have nine performances during the fair.

During the five day fair, the band plays fourteen to eighteen hours. We give concerts, play the midways and play at the grandstand for the horse races and evening performances. In one instance, we played while riding on the 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. For many years, the band would lead the Senior Parade in front of the grandstand. The parade consisted of livestock, machinery and fair dignitaries.

Each summer, we give free concerts for the residents of the Pleasant Hill County Home and for the blind campers at the Highbrook Lodge. In 1993 the band started a winter

program. We go to the surrounding nursing homes to give concerts . In 1990 we started emphasizing the John Philip Souse marches and we offer a free Souse concert to the townships in the county.

During its existence 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.

Through the years, we have received twelve trophies or plaques for participating in Community parades.

Two of our most loyal supporters have been Mr. and Mrs Cliff Andrew. They live in Carrolton, Ohio, but are at every practice and concert.

In 1988 for our fiftieth reunion, we invited all the old band members back to give a concert with us during the fair. We then had a pot-luck dinner in the evening. Our most distant member was Dr. James Castillo, who came all the way from California. Dennis Eckart, U.S. Congressman presented the band with a certificate. He also gave each of the four surviving original members, Dwight Ladd, Barbara Ricca, Betty Palmer and Vernon Howard, a certificate. Others have been band members for 40 to 45 years.

Our most recent appearance at the Ohio State Fair was in 1987. The Fair Board paid our expenses for a bus and motel. We had three concerts and enjoyed the fair.

Our first uniforms came in 1940. They were blue coats with white pants, blue and

white hats. Shoes were provided by individual band members. Mr. Hugh Johnson paid for these uniforms. In 1950, new uniforms were bought. The Fair Board donated \$300 and "Mr. Hugh" helped too. These uniforms were wool with red coats, grey trousers, and red & grey hats. White belts and arm cords gave the uniform a military style.

In 1956, at a cost of \$4000.00, new uniforms were purchased. They were a rayon material also with red coats and hats. The trousers were grey. They also had white belts and arm cords.

In 1970 it was decided to buy uniforms again. These were two-toned blue with blue hats. Also at this time it was decided to have each member pay a \$20.00 deposit for the uniform. The deposit was returned if the uniform was turned in clean and complete.

Our present uniforms were purchased in 1984. The fair board donated \$15,000 for sixty uniforms. These are maroon coats and hats. We have maroon and grey trousers which we change at fair time, wearing each color alternate years. We now charge \$30.00 deposit for a uniform. The band has purchased twelve more uniforms for the increased number of members.

The following directors have served the band in the last fifty-six years:

Azro Cheney.....	Four years	1938-1941
Edsel Pfabe.....	Three years	1942-1944
Ray Gerkowski.....	Five years	1945-1949
Emil Scholle.....	One year	1948-1949
Fred Austin.....	Four years	1950-1953
William McLaughlin.....	Twenty-one years	1954-1974

Ray Gerkowski.....	Three years	1975-1977
Bill Rudy.....	Four years	1978-1981
Nick Licurie.....	One year	1982-1982
Bob Alexander (present director).....	Ten years 14	1983-96

In 1994 a typical summer schedule includes approximately forty practices and performances. For instance, in 1994, we played at the following places:

- Lyndhurst
- Chagrin Blossom Time
- Auburn..... July 4th
- Chardon..... July 4th
- Bass Lake..... July 4th
- Chesterland
- Highland Heights
- Andover
- Swine Creek
- Camp Whitewood
- Hambden
- Troy
- Claridon
- Highbrook Lodge Blind Camp
- Pleasant Hill

7 yrs Jack Blaney 1997-2003
 11 yrs Greg Hillis 2004-present

TV 5 Morning Exchange Program, done live from the fair grounds

Our membership comes from a wide circle, with players from the following counties; Geauga, Portage, Lake, Cuyahoga, Ashtabula, Trumbull, and Lorain. Also two players come from Bucyrus, Ohio. Some of our former members make special arrangements to be able to play with us during the fair. They come from North Carolina, North Dakota, and Washington D.C.

This summer, (1994), the fair board enlarged the band room under the grandstand that we use during the fair. Also this year, the fair board Ladies' Auxiliary for voted to support the band. With this financial support we will have a permanent pavilion on the fair grounds to give concerts in.

For about the last ten years, since 1984, the band has had a pot-luck supper at the fair for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Each member pays a dollar to provide a meal and brings a dish to pass. This is organized by Barbara Ricca and several other members. Camaraderie is shared by all.

The fair band is a self-governed organization, but we are sponsored by the fair board. We have an election of officers each year. They are: President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, Librarian, and Uniform Chairperson. The six member board of directors serve a three-year term, two being elected each year. The band hires the director each year.

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.

Thanks to Dwight Ladd and Diane Barriball for helping to prepare this history

Typed by Megan Arnold, granddaughter of Vernon Howard

The Band

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 and through the eye
On the fairgrounds down in Burton
When the band goes marching by.

I remember marching proudly
In my suit of grey and red,
One eye always looking downward
If the horses were ahead;
Days of rain-and sweat-soaked garmets.
Sunburned faces, throats parched dry,
All are part of the big picture
When the band goes marching by.

Fifty years and more of tooting:
Summer, autumn, sun, and shade;
And some players now are stepping
Down the trails their grandsires made;
And a number now are waiting
In that bandroom in the sky
Where there's no one late for practice
When the band goes marching by.

If my life on earth allows me
To escape the sinners' fate,
I prefer no tinkling harp strings
When I reach that golden gate,
But some good old solid Sousa
To re-echo through the sky
And set angels' feet to tapping
As the band goes marching by.

T. Dwight Ladd