

**Memories of
The Perth Citizens' Band
1966 to 1970
By Peter Moskos**

The plan was simple: the band would march from the audience's left, along the racetrack to the right side, with the Perth Fair's prize-winning cattle, in a single file, following the band. At the right, the cattle would peel off to the barns while the band would counter-march (a 180° turnaround), and parade back across the track in front of the grandstand.

It was after the counter-march that things went wrong. The cattle had left for the barns, but the band now faced a track layered in cattle dung. For a minute or so, we bravely headed back along the racetrack until the soft squishy feeling around our feet told us what was happening. The trombones, leading the band as always, stopped playing first. The gentlemen lowered their instruments as they gingerly picked their way through the cow pies. The trumpets were next, the horns, and finally the drums. The music stopped completely as we carefully stepped first to the left then to the right to avoid the squishy piles. Only the bass drum kept up a steady beat. The grandstand crowd cheered our bravery.

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I had the privilege of playing in the Perth Citizens' Band during the summers of 1967, 68, 69, and 70 when I came home from university to help my mother run our candy store. I also played with the band in Perth's Santa Claus parades when I was home for Christmas holidays.

The band and I had many adventures together. One of the most memorable occurred when we were invited to play for the Strawberry Social one June evening on Big Rideau Lake, just by the famous Rideau Ferry Bridge. When we arrived, one of the locals had brought along his large pontoon boat. Buoyed by two pontoons attached to a large flat platform, and powered by a 7 ½ horse power Evinrude at the back, the boat seemed

like the perfect place for the band to float offshore and entertain the crowd. About half of the band members (I was not among them), sat on chairs on the flat deck. The bandsmen lifted their instruments to play while the pontoon captain pulled the motor's starter cord to take the band offshore.

Things went well for a few seconds, then the captain speeded up a bit and all hell broke loose. The end of the pontoon boat tipped way back and submerged its stern into the water. Half of the boat was underwater before the captain had a chance to cut the motor. My undying memory was of poor Bill Armstrong, our sousaphone player, who was completely submerged with only the gigantic sousaphone bell above water. We quickly rescued Bill and the soaking wet trumpet players and got them on shore. We retrieved our chairs and music stands and got everyone dried off. Soon we continued our concert of Strauss waltzes on shore while the crowd, still reliving the near-death accident, feasted on ice cream and strawberries. To my knowledge the lads never once again ventured on the high seas.

(I say "lads" because, in those days, there were no women in the band. Thankfully, that changed shortly after when Barb Martin, a female woodwind player, joined. The band now has many female members.)

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The Perth Citizens' Band was then, and is still today, the longest continuously running town band in Canada. It was founded in 1852. For some time, the band has met in a special second-floor room directly above what was then the Perth Fire Hall, behind the Town Hall. I remember the storage spaces under the eaves around the room. They were filled with old instruments and with piles of band music, including pieces with names like *Moonlight on the Rideau* written by previous band masters and town musicians.

We practiced in the room above the fire hall and, on many Thursday nights, we performed in the beautiful band stand in Stewart Park, just a hundred



feet from the town hall. A roadway, called Market Square, circled the bandstand and cars parked off the roadway. The cars were filled with families, there to hear the music— and to honk their horns in appreciation after every number.

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The roadway around the bandstand reminds me of another of my Citizens' Band stories. This one is quite personal and requires some background.

When I came home for the summers, I used to visit a high school friend whom, to protect the innocent, I'll call "Jane." Jane had a rough and tough boyfriend whom I feared wanted to kill me out of jealousy. I'll call him "Billy" because he may still want to kill me. Billy worked as a garage mechanic during the day and, with his car full of cronies, stole hubcaps at night. We ran into each other several times at Jane's parent's house, and Billy was convinced that I was trying to steal Jane away from him. (Every Friday night he brought a diamond ring to Jane's home and proposed marriage to her.) I am skipping a lot of the detail here, especially of how on several occasions Billy tried to run me off the road with his souped-up hardtop convertible.

In the middle of one Thursday-night band concert, I was surprised to see Billy's hard-top circling the band stand with Billy leaning out the car window yelling a terrible profanity: "Pete, ya old %#\$* &#@!%*." My body went into shock until I realized that my band mates and the sizeable crowd listening to the concert thought Billy meant Peter Code, a popular town councillor and our very skilled euphonium player. Shouts went out: "Get the police to follow that car." Billy escaped without being caught while I pulled my boater hat over my face and ducked behind my music stand. There were other encounters with Billy but none of them, thankfully, involved the Perth Citizens' Band.

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At that time, the band consisted of about 25 players: brass and drums. The exception was one clarinet player—my good friend, Doug Beesley. Doug and I were in our early 20s. The rest of the band members were middle-aged. Many of them owned shops and businesses in Perth or worked for the Ontario Provincial Police. Most of them had learned to play their instruments while enlisted in the armed forces during the Second

World War or the Korean War. The result of their training was that they were extremely good musicians. They could play any type of music and they needed to sight-read a piece only once to know it. If we were faced with a piece of music filled with tiny sixteenth or thirty-second notes, the lads would complain. Our band master and lead trumpet, Ron McCandless, would bark back, “Ah just ignore them. They are nothing but fly sh*t.” The lads played accurately and with a wonderful tone. Our most popular numbers were marches by the great British bandmaster, Kenneth Alford, works like *Colonel Bogey* and *The Thin Red Line*.

I played a strange instrument called a mellophone. I found the instrument under the band room eaves. It was a bit rusty but some valve oil loosened it up and the band members said that they needed it to fill out the band’s sound. The mellophone looked like a French horn, but instead of rotary valves, it had piston valves like a trumpet. I could play just over an octave on the instrument, but that was enough. For waltzes, the tuba went *oom* and I went *pah, pah*. Marches were easy too. The tuba played *oom* and I played a single *pah—oom pah, oom pah, oom pah*. Marches in 6/8 time were a little trickier as I had to play *pah pah, pah pah, pah pah, pah pah*. I don’t know what the tuba played.



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One of my favourite episodes occurred in the town of Almonte (some 46 kilometers from Perth). In 1970, Almonte was celebrating its centenary and we were invited to join the massive parade that weaved its way around the town’s many hills and street corners. We were placed pretty well smack in the middle of the parade. In front of us was a rather sad float built on the back of a blue pickup truck. While the float was sad-looking, it was speedy and, as the parade progressed, the truck got further and further ahead of us. Soon it was just a small blue speck off in the distance. To our horror, the truck took a right turn. Our problem was that we had no idea which street it had turned down. We marched forward until our drum major figured he’d risk it and swung his great baton to the right signalling a right wheel (turn). Unfortunately, this was not the street that the blue truck had turned down. Suddenly, we were at the head of the second half of the

parade, leading it we knew not where. Our drum major was a resourceful fellow and he led us down many streets but nowhere could we find the front half of the parade. Finally, after about 15 minutes, we bumped into the first half, which had come to a stop. We waited until the parade restarted and joined in at the end. The parade was whole once again. Thus, many Almontians saw only one half of the parade. Still, the town had a great centennial celebration and little mention was made of the fact that half of the parade, led by the Perth Citizens' Band, had been lost for a quarter of an hour.

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I was in Perth only a short time over Christmas holidays. I did play in a number of Perth Santa Claus parades. The Citizens' Band was usually placed just in front of "Benny K's Army." Benny K's store sold army surplus and hunting clothing. And, Benny K's Army consisted of young lads dressed shabbily in Benny's cast-off clothing; many of them hiding behind World War II gas masks. They were much loved by the crowd.

But the highlight of my Christmas holidays in Perth occurred when handfults of bandsmen would gather their instruments and go about town playing Christmas carols and songs. We would approach a house with our instruments wrapped in blankets to prevent the valves from freezing and our lips from sticking to our mouthpieces. We would play one carol, usually "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" which would draw the inhabitants to the doorway. Naturally, we would be invited in. But we had our terms: We would come in and play only if we were each guaranteed a tumbler of dark rum. (A number of our members were Navy men.) By the time we had imbibed at three or four houses, we felt full of Christmas spirit and ready to move on to the next house, playing less accurately but still with gusto. In some houses, granny was invited to sit down at her electric organ to play with us. Needless to say, the electric organ was not in tune with the band and the conflicting keys created an awful racket. No one seemed to mind and there was no slippage in Christmas cheer. It was usually a late bedtime on those nights.

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I believe that my proudest moment with the Perth Citizens' Band occurred in late August, 1970 when we played in the massive parade for the Central Canada Exhibition

(known to us as the “Ottawa Ex”). The parade formed-up in Hull (now Gatineau) at the site of the old Standish Hall. The floats and bands were lined up on side streets waiting to fall into place when called upon. On this particular day, the band was small in number (17 as I recall). Because it was Saturday mid-day, many of our members were in Perth tending their merchant businesses. Nevertheless, we were good bandsmen all, and made a tightly tuned musical sound.

The parade started off briskly enough and soon we were crossing the Interprovincial Bridge into Ottawa. We marched down Elgin Street when the parade suddenly came to a halt. We were at the point where Elgin Street ends just before the Pretoria Bridge and the Queen Elizabeth Parkway begins. The Parkway went right along the back of the exhibition grounds. What halted us was that the first floats and bands had reached the gates of the exhibition grandstand. At that point, each band or float was announced over the loud speaker and some of its background and history was given. This took several minutes for each band or float, and the parade inched its way down the driveway.

Naturally, our 17 members were bored until someone noticed that there was a pub at the corner on Elgin Street and the Parkway. The idea formed quickly and we realized that if we moved into the pub, a cold beer would help pass the delay. In we all went, including Doug Beesley and I who may not have been at Ontario’s legal drinking age. By the time we returned to the street, the parade had moved a few hundred feet, but we quickly found our place in the parade’s line.

Finally, it was our turn to enter the Exhibition Grounds and then into the area in front of the grandstand. The announcer shouted out, “The Perth Citizen’s Band. Winner of the prize for the best band in the parade.” Suddenly, we snapped to attention and broke into Sousa’s great *Liberty Bell March*. (Think Monty Python.) We had never played that march, or any other, better and the crowd roared its approval. By the time we marched off the parade grounds, it was time for another beer. We were a long way from that fateful day when we marched the cattle in front of the grandstand at the Perth Fair.

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The Ottawa Exhibition parade was the last time I played with the Perth Citizens' Band. By September, I was off to England to university. I recall that, at Christmas, I wrote a letter (Aerogram) to the band and sent it to Peter Code. I explained how there were many brass bands and Salvation Army bands in England, but none of them came close to matching the Perth Citizens' Band. Peter came into my mother's candy shop to tell Mom how much the lads appreciated hearing from their old mellowphone player.

Peter Moskos is now retired and living in Vancouver. He had a long career as a teacher and as a writer and editor. He managed the writing services of gordongroup, an Ottawa marketing and communications company. Peter no longer plays the mellowphone, but he does play the recorder and sings American show tunes in a rusty baritone voice.

Many thanks to Susan Code McDougall for all of her help in filling in the gaps.

For more information on the Perth Citizens' Band, go to www.perthband.ca.