

The History of the Oskaloosa Municipal Band

The first settlers in the area brought along their instruments and a universal deep love of music. That led to the organization of a band in 1864. In 1880 the band was called the K. T. Band (for Knight Templars).

It was about 1882 when a double-deck bandstand was erected in the center of the city park. The band started playing in the city park when it was just a field. The construction of a brick walk through the park was done with money obtained from a local talent minstrel show.

In 1886, the K. T. Band went to St. Louis for their national conclave and was a tremendous hit. That marked the beginning of the band's prominence in the Midwest.

It was the genius of Charles L. Barnhouse that developed the band "atmosphere" from the time he came to Oskaloosa in 1891. He exerted a creative influence to build up a musical organization that would become the pride of the city. His band grew to statewide acclaim, becoming the official band of the Iowa State Fair for four years.

In 1904, the band became even more well known when it played at the National K.P. encampment in Louisville, Kentucky, and stopped off en route, by invitation, to play at the World's Fair in St. Louis. In the ensuing years the band became popular throughout Iowa and other states.

In 1907 and 1908, Oskaloosa had two bands playing concerts – the Iowa Brigade Band and LaRue's Band. The merchants on High Avenue West employed their own band to compete with the Iowa Brigade Band in the park on Saturday evenings.

In 1911, the citizens decided to beautify the city and they voted to fund improvements for the city park. The citizens recommended that a new bandstand be erected in the center of the park. The old double deck frame bandstand was moved to one side to be used while the new bandstand was being built. The first concert in the new bandstand was played on June 1, 1912, and the bandstand was dedicated on July 25, 1912.

The state legislature passed the famous Iowa band law in 1921, and shortly after, the community voted to support the band by levying a small tax. Since the band was supported by tax dollars, the band became known as the "Municipal Band."

World War II made serious inroads into band membership with a loss of over 30 members. For the first time in the history of the band, women filled vacancies during the 1943 season. In spite of the large loss in membership, the band played 23 concerts that season. The 1943 season opened with a Red Cross benefit concert in the auditorium.

The band made appearances at the Southern Iowa Fair until 1947 when a change in format no longer included the band.

In a study of Oskaloosa in a 1938 Fortune magazine article, a full-page picture of the bandstand appeared with the following caption, "Iowa is in the band belt and Oskaloosa's bandstand is in the center of Town."

In the 1940's, the Oskaloosa Herald featured full-page stories about the band and the soloists. A Saturday night concert in Oskaloosa was something to behold. There was an aura of the carnival atmosphere with the stores open, popcorn vendors, streets jammed with people, and happy children running around the bandstand

The band reflected the interests and special events in the community with special features in concerts such as presenting the newly-crowned Miss Oskaloosa on July 2, 1958, and presenting soloists from the Houston Symphony and the Boston Pops in 1958 and 1959.

In 1961 the Oskaloosa Municipal Band was chosen as the Honor Band of the Iowa Bandmasters Association in Des Moines and appeared before a packed audience. The Oskaloosa Municipal Band was the first band so honored by the association in more than 20 years.

In 1966 a "Henry Luce" concert was presented on Memorial Day in honor of Henry Robinson Luce, editorial chairman of Time, Inc., with him being recognized as an honorary citizen of Oskaloosa.

The 1969 band season closed with the dedication ceremony at the new Mahaska Community YMCA and YWCA Center. The 56 piece band performed selections including one published in Oskaloosa in 1887, the year the old YMCA was started.

On May 9, 1970 the Des Moines Tribune carried a beautifully written, half-page article by journalist Lillian McLaughlin about the band and bandstand: "The 58 year old bandstand set like a fancy cupcake in the center of City Park is Oskaloosa's Eiffel Tower, its Trevi Fountain, its Plymouth Rock – a symbol of community pride." "A replica of Oskaloosa's gazebo rode on an American Federation of Musician's float in the inaugural parade of the late President John F. Kennedy." "But for Oskaloosans and visitors passing through town, the gazebo's time of glory is when Bandmaster Ivan Kennedy and his 45 adult musicians mount it on summer evenings and play selections by Sousa, Iowa's Karl King and Oskaloosa's C. L. Barnhouse."

One of the great and most colorful figures in circus life opened the 108th season in 1972 when Merle Evans, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's renowned director, appeared to conduct an all-circus music concert with authentic scripts and music, mostly published in Oskaloosa.

The two-year Bicentennial began in 1975 as the band presented 200 years of American music featuring a

program of colonial music with D.A.R. members appearing in authentic dresses from the period. A special flag pageant entitled "Flags of Our Nation" was presented by the Delta Kappa Gamma teacher's society.

On July 3, 1976 the city celebrated the Bicentennial with an old fashioned celebration of which a major part of the evening program was a concert by the band. The Bicentennial concerts are listed in the U.S. Official Permanent Calendar of Events – page 970, No. 101783-001. On Sunday, July 4, 1976 a religious, patriotic rally was presented to a full stadium.

Excerpts from Ivan A. Kennedy's Iowa Brigade Band, Oskaloosa's Municipal Band