

History of Port Neches-Groves High School Band Program

From the earliest beginnings until the present day, the school bands in Port Neches and Groves have maintained the highest standards in citizenship, music education, and performance. Students learn discipline, cooperation, loyalty, hard work, and the value of team effort. These musical groups have promoted a tradition of excellence that has made the band program not only one of the prides of the school but an organization that is recognized throughout the state.

Port Neches High School's band was first organized in 1933 by Prof. Dickerson, who was then director of the Lutchter Stark boys' band in Orange. Mr. Dickerson taught a short time, then he was replaced by Clayton Smith before the school term had ended. In 1934 Ernest Volpe was hired as director, built the band to its pre-World War II standard, and stayed until the end of the decade. In 1936 the Indian Band performed at a halftime. Betty Ruth Wagner was the first drum major. The band had forty-two pieces but only twenty-seven were uniformed. The band attended a contest held in Huntsville in April and placed third in its division.

When Volpe took over as director of the band, he charged tuition for each member of the band. However, beginning in 1939, he was a regular hired member of the faculty under jurisdiction of the school. Tuition of \$2 per month per pupil was charged by the school to gain funds for new instruments and replacement of uniforms.

The school at that time owned some \$1500 worth of instruments and had set aside \$1200 for purchase of new uniforms. Practice opened for the 1939 fall term, and school officials indicated the band had some 50-odd instruments.

During the war years there were several band directors, but none stayed very long. John Long of Rusk, Texas, came to Port Neches in the fall of 1942 after teaching band several years in Burkeville. He replaced Kenzie Gibbs, the 1941 band director. Gibbs left the schools for a job at the Orange shipyards. Long had several meetings with band students during his first week. There were 50 students attending that meeting, However, John Long did not remain as band director very long. He left Port Neches in January of 1943.

In the early war years, several Port Neches Chronicle news articles mentioned that the Port Neches High School band had marched in parades and had played concerts. However, in 1943-44 there

was no marching band because of instrument shortages. There was also difficulty in hiring directors many of whom were in the armed services or working in defense industries. One year the band uniforms were gray because of shortages of materials.

Frank Gioviale, Ernest Volpe's stepson, came to Port Neches as the band director in the fall of 1946. He started a long line of band directors who stayed in the district for many years. Frank taught band in the Port Neches schools until he retired in 1976. When Frank became band director, the high school, junior high school, and one elementary school were housed in one big building, one smaller two-story building (the elementary) and another building which housed the cafeteria. The athletic field house was in back of the main red brick building. The field house was a corrugated tin hut and near it was a small building that was the band hall. This was small and had a very low ceiling. In fact a bass player couldn't stand up with his sousaphone around him without slamming the bell against the light fixture.

Later a larger clapboard band hall was built. This square building had a small porch and windows all along two sides (the side facing the adjacent football field and the side facing the industrial plant). The inside consisted of a medium-sized rehearsal area (part of which was taken up by a large wall heater), a fairly large instrument room with no illumination, and two rooms at the front end of the building in which were an office and a music library. There was a shortage of equipment and furniture. All of these buildings were on Main Street in Port Neches adjacent to the plants.

When Frank arrived, there were twenty-seven students in both the Groves and Port Neches band programs combined. The band did not march at football games for the first three games during Frank's first year. He started a drive to enlist more students, and by the fourth football game he was able to field forty-eight students for a halftime show although the only participants who played an instrument were the original twenty-seven members. Everyone was very proud of the group as the students marched down the field from one end to the other and then returned to the small bleachers which were on only one side of the field next to the band hall. Back in the stands the band played one of the three tunes they knew. Everyone played the melody for most of the first football season. As the students gained proficiency, they were able to form a letter or two on the field by the end of the season.

There were many problems such as lack of an adequate music library and a scarcity of instruments, both school and privately owned. To aggravate this situation, buying new horns was very difficult because few had been manufactured during the war and also because money was not readily available. There was part of a set of white uniforms and later a set of uniforms was bought which consisted of gray pants and red coats. A few years after this, a set of uniforms with gold coats and black pants was purchased for Pt. Neches Junior High students. Also, a set of green uniforms for Groves Junior High was bought. A school board decision changed the school colors to purple and white and a new set of high school uniforms was purchased in those colors. Later the junior high colors were also changed to purple and white. During the mid-forties, Frank taught the band classes by himself. He also taught tonette to every student in the fourth grade.

This was a far cry from the band department in later years. Gradually, instruments, uniforms, music, electronic and recording equipment, and furniture were bought until the bands were outfitted with state of the art equipment. The current two-year-old band hall is the third one to be built onto the high school building in the past fifty years. Karl Wadenpfohl, Jr. helped in the design. To this acoustically treated area are attached a directors' office, a big instrument storage room, a repair room, and a room for percussion equipment. Across the hall still in the band area are a small rehearsal studio, a music library, a room for uniform storage, a loading area, and eleven practice rooms.

In the early 1950s Frank Gioviale was instrumental in starting a girls marching group that became the famous Indianettes.

Beaumont High School's school song was "Our Director." So was Port Neches'. Frank decided to compose a tune that was different and unique to Pt. Neches. He did, and the choir director wrote the lyrics. In fact, Frank wrote two songs but the people in the community did not like them. They wanted "Our Director." So it stayed as the school song. Around 1955 the band began playing "Cherokee" as a pep song. Frank arranged this song to be played as a chant that would instantly be recognized. Lynne Jeffrey (now Lynne James) wrote the words to "Cherokee" in 1959. Also in 1959 the twirlers created white fringe traditional Indian uniforms with sequined belts. Cecile Holstead, drum majorette, wore the first headdress. In the early and mid 1960s the Marching "I" was developed and added to the half time performances.

In 1961 Albert Long*^{1[1]} and Frank* exchanged positions as high school director . Albert had been teaching at Groves and later Woodlawn Junior High Schools. Other head high school band directors were Sammy Almany* (who taught in the district from 1969-79 and 1981-97), and Karl Wadenpfohl, Jr.* (who taught in PN-GISD from 1974-2002). High school assistant directors included Mark Williams, Almany, Wadenpfohl, and Fred Turner* (who came to the Port Neches district in 1988). Most of these men had taught or would teach at the Groves schools. Some would also teach at the Port Neches Junior and Elementary Schools.

By the early 1950s junior high and elementary band classes were established as regular programs. These classes introduced hundreds of young people to the world of music annually and provided a formative environment for those who wished to advance into the award winning Port Neches-Groves High School bands. They continue to do so. The middle school (formerly junior high school before the 1982-3 school year) has served as many as 250 students a year, and the high school band program has also.

In 1950 William Paul Beard was hired for the band classes in Groves. His job was taken the next year by Albert Long, who taught band in Groves until exchanging positions with Frank Gioviale at the high school. Long was involved in the design of the second band hall in the current high school building.

Although there had been other band directors at Port Neches Junior High School (Clement Splaingard in 1951-2), the program started as an independent entity in 1953 when Harry Charles* became the band director until he retired from band in 1976. Charles retired from PN-GISD in 1988. Other Port Neches Middle School head and assistant directors were Richard Keyton, Curtis Doucet, Ken Austin, Laurel Brownlee, Junelle Gatza, Donnie Todd, and Matt LeBlanc* (who came to Pt. Neches in 1985 and is the current PNMS director). LeBlanc's middle school bands were twice in the finalists for state honor band. Directors who assisted and divided their time between Port Neches and Groves were Ray Rhodes* (1960-88), C. A. Ward, R. H. Lee, Ramon Ramos, Almany, and Gioviale. All had also been head band directors at Groves. Other assistant directors at both middle schools were Teresa Morris Francis, and Wendy Fontenot.

^{1[1]} The asterisk * indicates directors who taught band in Port Neches and Groves schools for more than twelve years.

Each year the Port Neches-Groves bands participate in a full schedule of events including football games, parades, pep rallies, concerts, contests, festivals, and school and other civic events. Over the decades all the Port Neches bands have presented programs for senior retirement homes, childrens' and Veterans' Administration hospitals, library openings, and many other community activities.

The Indian marching band is renowned for its excellence as a contemporary marching organization, and the Marching "I" is famous throughout the Golden Triangle. In concert the band's music is representative of all genres thus insuring that the students get a well-rounded musical education.

A long history of top ratings in University Interscholastic League competition in marching, concert, sight reading, solo and ensemble contests at the local, area, and state level is a source of pride for band alumni and the community. The bands have excelled in countless interstate and invitational contests over the years. The Port Neches and Groves Middle School bands have consistently brought home fine ratings at the U.I.L. contests in which they have participated.

Since 1969 the high school marching band has won 29 first divisions in 33 contests and has represented Region 10 at the U.I.L. Area Contest for 13 seasons. The High School Concert and Symphonic bands have also earned impressive ratings in the contests they have attended. Among many other honors and prizes, the band won the Bluebonnet Bowl marching contest in 1964 and again in 1966. The band attended the state marching contest several times in the late seventies and early eighties. The Wind Ensemble won first in 1991 at the U.I.L. state Wind Ensemble Contest. Then in 1994 this band was named Outstanding Band in Class 4A at the UIL State Wind Ensemble Contest. And to top these accomplishments, in May 2002 the Wind Ensemble earned a superior rating and Grand Champion trophy in the Music in the Parks Festival in San Antonio, Texas.

Musical accomplishments by individual students in solo and ensemble competition are notable. In the 2001-2002 school year, the high school band students brought home 75 Superior medals, and 25 students qualified for the Region X All Region Band. Nine of these advanced to Area, and one was awarded a position in the All State Band. Over the years the middle school bands also have made outstanding showings at solo and ensemble contests as well as all region band.

For the 2001-2002 school year the band directors in Port Neches-Groves ISD were Karl Wadenpfohl, Jr. and Fred Turner at the high school, Matt LeBlanc at Port Neches Middle School, and

Ramon Ramos at Groves Middle School. They, along with all the other directors during the past years, have developed successful and worthwhile organizations. Dozens of college students have requested and performed their band student teaching in the PN-GISD. The Port Neches-Groves band program has produced professional performing musicians; band, chorus, and public school music directors; school and industry personnel; and others with a life-long appreciation of music. Today Port Neches-Groves band alumni can be found actively using their talents and training throughout their communities.

As the 2002-2003 school year begins, there have been personnel changes in the PN-GISD band staff. Karl Wadenpfohl, Jr. retired and Fred Turner became head high school band director at West Brook High School in Beaumont. Mike Westbrook came to PN-G High School as head band director, Ramon Ramos moved to the high school as assistant band director and David Jernigan became band director at Groves Middle School. Matt LeBlanc remains in his position as band director at Port Neches Middle School. The future looks as bright as the past for the band organizations and for students in Port Neches-Groves ISD.

Information for this article came from back issues of The Port Neches Chronicle, 20th Century Reunion booklet, school and library records, and interviews with the people mentioned.

Presented to me by Harry Charles in 2010. I am not certain that Harry, longtime band director and teacher in PN-GISD, compiled this document, but he can be appreciated for his devotion to the band program.

Charlie L. Reynolds, retired principal of Ridgewood Elementary

Addendum: Alex Wells was the Assistant Band Director at PNGHS in 05-06 and was named the Head Band Director in 2007-2008.