

The Legacy of the Kits Band

by Gordon Laird

Friday, December 15, 2000

It is only recently that I have thought of the changes in my life which are owed to the Kitsilano Boys Band and Arthur Delamont.

Love of Music:

This did not start for me in the Kits Band. It started by listening to Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman on the radio, following my sister Daphne's example. I started by loving "swing". Everything else has been derivative for me. In the Kits Band we learned a lot of other kinds of music. I was introduced to classical musical "from the inside", that is, by playing it, rather than by listening to it. I still would rather play music than listen to it. But almost every time I hear a classical selection I remember playing it in the band, and sometimes where we played it.

There was something special about "Hymn Toons". Dee never put his religious ideas onto us. But they were there, and the closest I came to it was when we played "Abide with Me" "The Lost Chord" or "Denton Park". The close harmony, the organ-like effect, particularly of the clarinets in the low register, was unforgettable.

Presentation and Showmanship:

All my education about how to present things came from Dee and the Kits Band. Mostly it was unexplained. We watched, listened and learned. Every concert the chairs would have been set up before we arrived. Then Dee (Mr. D to him) arrived and proceeded to have us rearrange them into a pattern which suited his pleasure. This had to do with eye appeal and effect. In England, when the stage curtain opened onto the stage, there we were, resplendent in shocking white, electric red and black. We made a tremendous immediate effect. This was combined with a strong and effective opening number, such as the Washington Post march. There was immediate impact on the eyes and the ears. Verboten was: slouching, crossed legs, different coloured stockings, instruments akimbo. Marilyn told me that when we witnessed the final practice in the Armories for our 1998 concert, that it looked like a bunch of sloppy old men. BUT when the

PERFORMANCE happened, there were the white shirts, red ties, black stockings and shoes, and all the instruments on the knees in a row. Marilyn can guess, with great accuracy, which of my present band colleagues were once in the Kits Band.

Dee almost never explained his philosophy. We had to watch and learn. In contests it was the aspect evaluated as "Department".

40 years later I was shocked to sit beside a young student clarinet player who slouched in her chair, with one leg over the other. She was not bad on the clarinet, but at that moment that didn't matter.

Dee looked for opportunities to give bands the "stage experience". He didn't explain that either! In the West Point Grey Band, having played the clarinet for a few months, we were on the stage in the huge auditorium performing. I learned from that experience that it is necessary to take every opportunity to give the players the experience of performing.

It was a common experience for a young player to be given his first experience "on stage" only to have Dee say to him, just before the concert began, "Don't play a note!", or "Fake it!".

I don't consider myself a very disciplined person in most aspects of my life. But at performances with any band I am totally uncompromising. I want my clarinet up on the knee at the correct time, and I want to see everyone else's there as well. Dee spoiled me for other conductors. If they don't show enough strictness and strength I am disappointed. I don't want a conductor who wants to be a "pal" with me!

An International Outlook:

In 1950 I was 19 years of age when I embarked with the band to Europe. I had traveled during summer holidays with my family, but the farthest would have been Washington State and Vancouver Island. When my brother, Doug, was working in Williams Lake I drove with my Father and Mother to see him, so we experienced the old, unpaved, Cariboo Highway.

That was the extent of my travel in the first 19 years of life with my family. My horizons of travel began to broaden for me with the Kits Band. We had a trip to the Calgary Stampede, one to Vancouver Island and the biggest of all, to

Hollywood, California. But this was only a foretaste of the trip of all: the one to come.

We boarded the train at the C. P. R. Station in downtown Vancouver on Saturday, May 13, 1950, we played "a couple of marches and a hymn" (I am indebted to Norm Mullins and his daily diary entries for our trip for the accuracy of the historical notes) and we were off on the greatest adventure of our lives.

The band had commissioned a couple of train cars, and two mothers helped cook the food for us. We were exploring Canada and stopped at many towns to play our concerts. (Norm: Revelstoke, Calgary, Swift Current, Regina, Brandon [in place of Winnipeg which was suffering its worst ever flood], Port Arthur, Sudbury, and Toronto).

I dare say that none of the boys had been farther east than Calgary before this trip, except for any who were born in the east. We were discovering our own country!

Along the way I had the "ambassador" experience of having lunch with my Aunty Bess and Uncle Merv in Toronto, and my Uncle Douglas and Aunty Daisy in Montreal. By that I mean the unique experience of being a representative: representing your family, representing your City, and ultimately representing your Country. We were all to have many more "ambassador" experiences.

In Quebec City, Tuesday May 23rd we boarded the Cunard liner R.M.S. Samaria. This was my first ocean voyage longer than the ferry trip from Vancouver harbour to Victoria! And it was a ten-day trip! This was something very new for me and for my whole family. I was the first to take a trans-Atlantic voyage since my father emigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1913. When we arrived at the Tilbury Docks in the Thames Estuary outside London, I was the first of my family to set foot in England.

It is only now at a distance of 50 years, that I can assess the impact of my arriving in England.

The oldest monument I had ever seen in my life would have been the Legislative Buildings in Victoria. Now I was to see Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus and Buckingham Palace. In a few weeks I would be in Holland (the first in my family to set foot in Europe) and then a few weeks later to be in Paris standing in front

of the Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame, the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower.

In the space of weeks I had been exposed to many different lives and customs. Everything we ate for each meal had its own national or local tradition. Coming from the unilingual west coast of Canada, I was hearing all kinds of accents and languages, even within England. I learned to love the Manchester accent, and to be able to compare it to Cockney, as well as "B.B.C. English".

When I set foot in England I became international and never looked back. Never good in languages in high school, I now embarked on a love of language which has involved me with a half-dozen modern and ancient languages. I knew that this trip would not be my last trip to Europe. It was 23 years later that I brought Marilyn and five children back to Europe, to live in Germany. We visited Holland and England, and remembered the places and relived the experiences from 1950. Many of my Kits colleagues have done the same.

Ambassadors for Canada:

We learned what it was to be Ambassadors for Canada. The most vivid memories of this was the one week in Holland. We were not prepared for the overwhelming appreciation and love shown us by the people in Holland. We, in Canada, had a relatively tame experience of the war. Unless we had a relative in the forces the experience was "way over there". Yes, we were part of the "War Effort" but that had nothing to do with personal imprisonment or personal physical danger to ourselves, our families or our homes.

We were to learn very quickly that it had been an entirely different experience for the Dutch. Their country had been invaded and all their rights were denied. They had been starved of their daily food rations. This lasted four years under increasingly worsening conditions. All of this was very recent to them in memory.

They also remember that the first troops



Bill Cave greeted by the Lord Mayor of London

they saw at the liberation were the Canadian troops. They remembered vividly their first sight of the healthy, friendly, Canadian soldiers. One Dutch person commented on the fact that they were tanned and well-fed. Many of the Dutch people must have vowed to never forget a Canadian person in their lives and to treat all Canadians with great respect.

So we, who had no part in liberating them, inherited the respect which our Canadian soldiers had earned some 5 years before our trip. We were presented with flags which stated: "Holland Thanks Canada".

None of us will ever forget this experience and many of us have returned to Holland since to share with our families our wonderful experience.