

CIVIL WAR MUSICIANS*

By BERT B. CHILD

The fife and the drum have led the way for a large part of the splendid history of the United States and the American people. Few persons realize how important has been this part; and because of this, it will be appropriate to give a brief review of the work of the National Association of Civil War Musicians and Sons of Veterans, and also the activities of the Iowa division which has always taken an active and conspicuous part in the state and national encampments of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The story of the fife and drum in musical history, and especially that of the U. S. A., commences early. A good start could be made with the famous painting, "The Spirit of '76," with which every American boy is familiar, and the striking characters of that picture consisting of two drummers and a fifer—father, son and grandfather. The music from any just such groups had much to do with the history of the Revolutionary period.

Or, one might start with the year before, when on November 10, 1775, the Continental Congress said "Let there be Marines." Recruiting for the new organization commenced at once in Philadelphia, then the national capital, and the citizens saw on the drums of those authorized to recruit the men, the motto: "Don't Tread On Me." That was under the picture of a rattlesnake. The motto survives today on the drums of the Marine corps. The men with the fifes and drums were the fore-runners of the now famous "United States Marine Band," known the world over.

Fifes and drums were the only musical instruments used by the military bands in the American Revolution.

When it was discovered twenty-three years later that both the navy and the marines had been virtually permitted to disband, and an emergency arose that indicated

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need for a fighting force on the ocean, Congress by an act July 11, 1798, established the United States Marine Corps and with it the necessary musical auxiliary. It was President John Adams who signed the bill. Provision was made for a drum major, a fife major and thirty-two drums and fifes. In every American war since, the Marine Corps and their drums and fifes have taken part.

The national capital was moved from Philadelphia to the new location on the Potomac river in 1800. The Marine Corps led the procession to the new national capital. The commandant, Lieut. Col. William Ward Barrows showed his regard for his drum corps by having it accompany him personally to Washington, D. C. This was on July 12, 1800 when he and his Marines traveled from Philadelphia to Washington to make the last journey of the national capital, and to establish permanent headquarters in the new capital city. In December of that same year other instruments than drums and fifes were added, and the United States Marine band began its growth and enlargement.

ASSISTED RECRUITING IN CIVIL WAR

Soon thereafter, or in 1801, the musicians turned to brass instruments and brass bands sprung up everywhere, and the drums and fifes were not much heard until in 1861. They remained popular in the New England states, and as the war clouds gathered prior to the outbreak of the Civil war, there was renewed activity for the fife and drum corps. It was found they helped greatly in the work for recruiting volunteers everywhere in the north, and probably also in the southern states.

The musicians of the Union armies were enlisted as such and soon formed regimental bands, but they had much to do with the morale of the armies in the camps and on the battlefields, and many of them dropped their instruments when it seemed necessary and took up guns. Always they acted as stretcher bearers for their

fallen comrades and performed duty as first aid to the wounded. History does not give these Civil war musicians full credit for the part they had in the great struggle.

In the final grand review of the Union armies, the famous march down Pennsylvania avenue at the national capital, the fife and drum corps made history. That event would have been incomplete without the martial music of the drums and fifes.

I have in mind another historic parade down Pennsylvania avenue, which will long be remembered, though the march was with much slower step though with all the enthusiasm of the soldiers who knew they were ready to go home after several years absence. This was at the national encampment of the G. A. R. seventy-one years later, or in 1936. It was a wonderful sight as many of those who had made the march in 1865 tramped along the same street and heard the cheers of the thrilled thousands who lined the famous avenue. They heard the same music, sang the same songs and shouted out their patriotism with broken voices.

The writer had the privilege and the honor on that occasion of leading one of the finest fife and drum corps ever assembled and covered the whole length of Pennsylvania avenue.

After the final grand review down Pennsylvania avenue, which was the signal for disbandment of the armies, there were annual parades and reunions, and always the fife and drum corps helped to stir the enthusiasm. This was especially true at national encampments in 1892, 1902 and 1915; but the parade in 1936, above referred to, was in my opinion more spectacular, and a really grand display of courage on the part of the veterans who wished to repeat the march of the final review seventy-one years after, and at a time when most of them were 90 years old or over. It was eventful for the veterans and for the spectators, for it is not likely it will again be repeated. It was a great occasion especially for the children and younger people who

cheered and waved their little flags. Many of the older folks could only wave their tear-stained handkerchiefs to encourage the old veterans on this their most eventual and for many last march.

THE G. A. R. ORGANIZED

The Grand Army of the Republic was organized in 1866 by Maj. B. F. Stephenson, a doctor of Springfield, and Captain Phillip, and others, a state convention was held at Decatur, Ill., and a national encampment held at Indianapolis in the following November. Always the fife and drum corps has been conspicuous at every annual encampment. For the first time, in 1942, when the national encampment was again held at Indianapolis, the National Association of Civil War Musicians was unable to hold an annual meeting owing to transportation difficulties. However a few musicians did attend in an attempt to hold up the long tradition.

The men who led the Union armies to victory with the fife and drum, or in the organized regimental bands, formed a National Association of Civil War Veterans, and by including the Sons of Veterans, the association has been able to survive. At state and national encampments the members have contributed greatly to the enthusiasm and spirit of the occasions.

The membership has generally been strongest in the middle states and the west. Up to a few years ago, Kansas, Colorado, Oregon and California were represented by Civil War veterans, but with their passing the associations were disbanded, but there is still one active member in California. There is now (1943) one Civil war veteran musician in Portland, Oregon, Comrade Hopkins. He is one of only two left, the other being Comrade Cummings, living in Florida, now over 100 years old. The ranks today are made up of sons and grandsons of Civil war veterans, and veterans of World War I. While there was great activity in the eastern states in organizing music for the war, no states east of Pennsylvania have affiliated with the national asso-

ciation for many years. The real life of the association has been by members from Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota.

Many of the members in recent years have been sons of the Civil war soldiers. Some have played alongside of the veterans for 50 or 60 years. They were taught the old army tunes by their elders and learned the drum beats from those who knew them in war.

Some there are, like the writer, who commenced at the age of 8, which was 64 years ago; and as their friends have suggested we have heard the soldiers tell their stories around the camp fires so often and so well that it is easy to draw imagination over time and almost smell the smoke of the great struggle of 1862-5.

The Iowa division has been active in state and national reunions. One of the early national presidents was E. J. Freeman of Audubon. Major B. F. Stow of Des Moines served as president ten years, passing away while in office in 1936. Another prominent Iowan, "Uncle Pat" Allred, of Corydon, was elected at Denver in 1926 to be national secretary-treasurer. He was still holding this position when he passed away March 4, 1939.

SONS OF MEMBERS GIVEN MEMBERSHIP

At first while the sons were permitted to play with members they were not admitted to membership, but in 1926 they were given membership and in that year the office of general manager was created. The writer was selected to fill that office, but had been assistant secretary for some time and in 1938 was made secretary-treasurer. Great credit is due to the large number of sons of veterans who have served their old comrades.

While there have been many who were musicians during the war a goodly number of soldiers took up the fife and drum after being mustered out. A drummer quite familiar in Iowa for many years was "Uncle Mac" McGeehon, of Atlantic, who fell in love with the big bass drum after the close of the war. He was a prominent

business man, but at the Iowa State fairs he was prominent with his "Old Soldiers Drum Corps." On account of his age and his long white beard he was a real feature. In 1936, on May 18, he passed his 97th year, but in June he played his bass drum at the encampment in Des Moines with all his old time vigor and enthusiasm. He answered the final roll call on August 10 of that year.

We all knew how much "Uncle Mac" loved his bass drum; and in 1924 the national encampment was to be held in Boston the same week as the Iowa State fair. The drum corps had agreed to play at the fair but "Uncle Mac" wanted to go to Boston so he could visit his old home near by, so it was arranged for him to go but leave his drum. But he said if he went the old bass drum had to go along, and the drum went along.

The National Drum corps, with sixty-five members, marched in the Boston parade and there was but one from Iowa. He was placed on the outside of the line and on his big drum was the inscription, "Iowa Dept. G. A. R." The Boston papers in their account stated "what a fine drum corps Iowa had in the parade." "Uncle Mac" had the laugh on his comrades when he returned and told how much Iowa would have missed had he not taken his drum along.

It is also true that "Uncle Pat" Allred was not a musician of the Civil war, but he so loved the fife and drum music that he would follow us around at the fair rather than go to the races. Finally he learned the drum and organized a drum corps in his home town, and the boys there are still carrying on in memory of the man who so endeared himself to all of them.

Much of the music of today is by the drum and bugle corps; and much praise is due the splendid work of the drum and bugle corps in Iowa and other states. There is such similarity between this and the fife and drum corps that many do not think of the difference. The drum and bugle corps make a wonderful showing and excite great interest in the manner in which they carry on and perpetuate the music of their wars, the Spanish-

American war and World War I. This is the work done by the Association of Civil War Musicians for the other war, and now it is a younger generation seeking to do honor to their comrades.

With the fife and drum corps of Civil War days, the fife could take on any tune with no limit and practical music was played. There is no restriction on our repertoire. Anything played on almost any instrument can be duplicated by the fife. All the drummers need to understand is the time and the beats are given for that. A good fife and drum corps can furnish music for a long time without repeating any number. But the bugles are handicapped and do not have such a wide range for their work. This is not a criticism, nor an attempt to rob the drum and bugle corps of their well earned reputation for entertainment.

This difference is responsible for the fact that recently many of the drum and bugle corps have added fifes to their band in order to extend their repertoire.

This is not perhaps all that could be said about the Civil War musicians. The records of their national association were destroyed prior to 1926, and reliance has been largely upon memory. As stated before, there are now (1943) only two of the Civil War musicians left, in the national association or any of the state groups. In Iowa, as in most of the states, the younger members who are sons or grandsons of Civil War musicians, or who have more recently become interested, are carrying on in memory of our old veteran friends and comrades of the long ago.

The State Department of History and Archives is on the honor roll of departments and organizations, in Des Moines, complying fully with the plan of the United States treasury for regular payroll deductions for the purchase of war bonds by the employes.

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