

The Riverside Band

The musical tradition in our neighborhood, a settlement of Norwegian immigrants in the southeastern part of Hamilton County along the Skunk River, began with "*Store Per*" (Big Pete), my father's elder brother, the strong man of the prairie, who made music on the violin and who had once with his playing touched the better natures of a warlike host of Indians. My father was a good accordion player and the neighbors loved to drop in to listen to his performance of "Oh, Susanna!", "Nellie Gray", "From Greenland's Icy Mountains", "Auld Lang Syne", and other favorite tunes of those days. Francis Wier, located a mile south of us, played the same melodies on his flute. The two Kittelson brothers led the hymn singing of the congregation, then always rendered in unison. Lars Henryson, a near neighbor, bought a harmonium quite early, and Osmund Weltha had a "psalmodikon", a unique Norwegian stringed instrument. Henryson's three oldest boys, Henry, Oscar, and Tom, organized themselves into a drum and fife corps. Homecoming soldiers helped them obtain fifes. As for the drum the magic workmanship of Thomas

Tunge, a neighbor who was also a cooper, wrought an instrument from two calf hides which produced such a volume of sound that it could be heard as far as eight miles. So declared Sam Hegland who lived at Roland that distance away. He had just come from the war where he had heard the "identical tunes" now played on the drum by our boys at home.

My earliest recollections go back into the seventies when the prairie reached to our very threshold, the wagon trails zigzagged past our door, and the hunch-backed painter, Nils Meland, came and went as he plied his trade among the neighbors. He was a lover of children and sang as he worked to the delight of us little fellows who constantly hung on his heels. When we stumbled over his paintpots and smeared ourselves with red, white, and blue, he laughed and sang a ditty for our benefit as with wry faces we submitted to mother's soapbrush. Ole Sandness, a neighbor who was a carpenter, worked for us at the same time and, possessing a good tenor voice, he and Meland sang duos the like of which we had never heard. This was our initial introduction into the art of musical harmony and soon the old church hymns resounded to original settings of our own, not unharmonious, but scarcely according to the accepted rules of counterpoint.

We became more and more interested in the singing in church and soon took part with others in the local singing-school. Our musical pastor, Reverend Nils Amlund, encouraged us and Hans Dale, an academy student from Norway, became our instructor. He gratuitously taught us the art of four-part singing. We met in the old Sheldall Schoolhouse mostly — though not infrequently in private homes where a bountiful spread followed the practice hour. Courting, of the shyer sort, was in order. Through the efforts of the pastor and Mr. Dale a church choir was organized. Mrs. Amlund's Norwegian harpsichord was a grand revelation to us, and no Hoffmann ever thrilled his audiences more keenly than did that worthy lady when playing before her rustic listeners. We counted the days between each visit. Hans Dale not only led the congregational singing and church choir, but organized a male quartet with himself as first tenor, Lars Dale second tenor, Peter G. Tjernagel first bass, and Anfin Brandvig second bass. This excellent quartet rendered Behren's fine arrangements of Norwegian folk-melodies and other songs on uncounted occasions before appreciative home audiences.

The musical *geist* being aroused, we were not content merely with vocal expression but con-

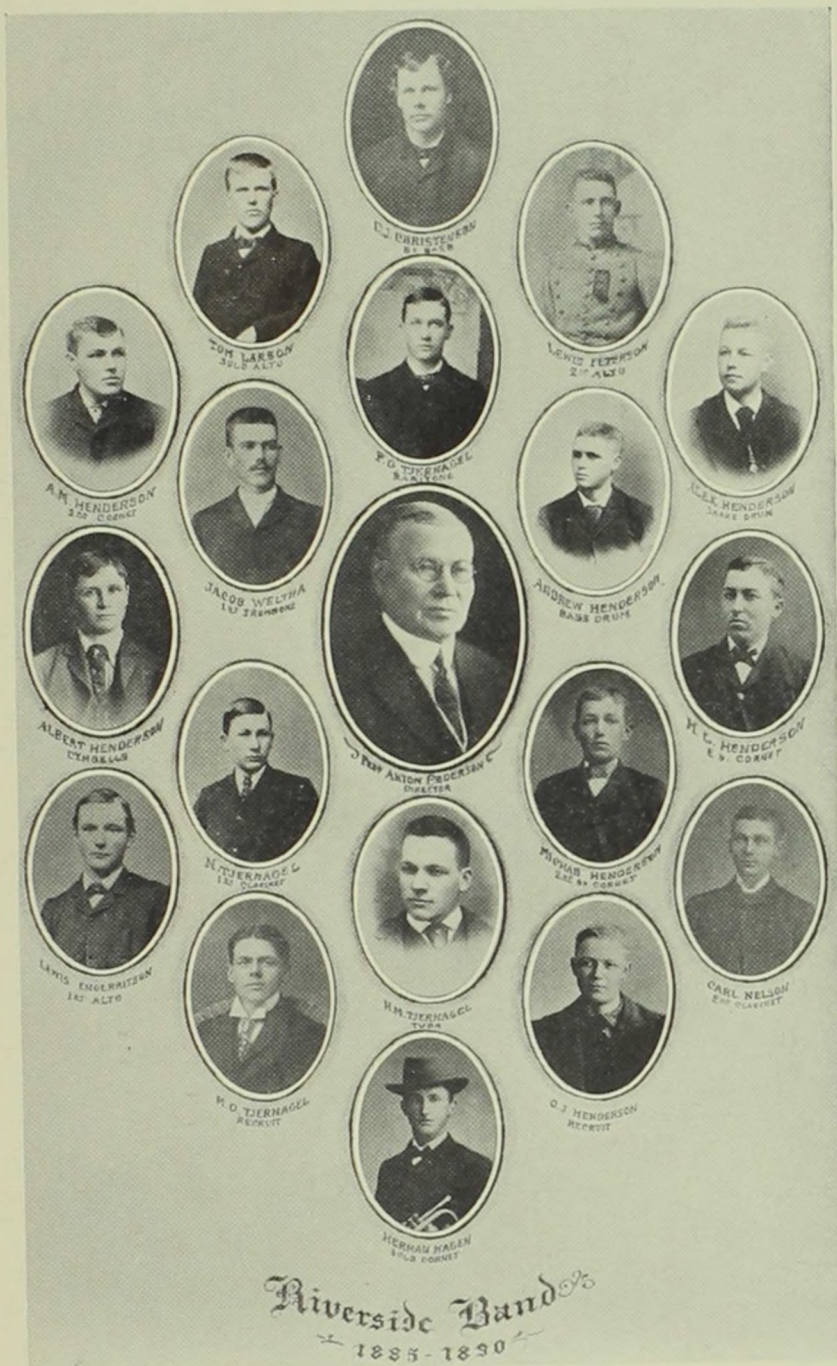
ceived the idea of starting a "string band". We had but the vaguest notions concerning instrumentation and orchestration, but by obtaining information here and there we decided that two violins, a cello, flute, cornet, clarinet, and snare drum would serve our purpose. Our neighbor boys Martin, Michas, Annas, and Alex Henderson and three in our family, Peter, Nehemias, and Henry Tjernagel, joined forces in the undertaking. Lack of funds put a damper on our enthusiasm, but odd jobs gradually produced some revenue. Annas, in due time President of the Iowa Bankers' Association, coaxed back to health a sickly calf which he sold to help augment his share, and Henry, now Synod president, tended a feathered flock for some of the eggs. Such contributions, together with help from our parents, finally enabled us to order the instruments.

That the train did not run off the track was, as no one will doubt, due to our fervent prayers that its precious burden might come through safely. The wait seemed interminable. After unpacking our treasures we feasted our eyes on the shiny things for the longest time in unalloyed delight. How to manipulate the wind instruments, especially, we had not the slightest idea. We thrust the mouthpieces generously between our lips and blew and blew till our cheeks bulged; the tears

came, but no sound. They were wind instruments sure enough, we thought. The never-ending yowling of the violins as they were intuned proved a sore trial to our doting mothers, but they bore it with fond patience. Music of its kind followed in due time and the string band was soon heralded as the eighth wonder of the world in Scott Township where we lived.

Once gratified, our ambition soared to even greater heights in the hope of organizing a brass band. Twelve of the neighbor boys including the members of the orchestra, all sons of Norwegian immigrants, began devising ways and means to bring our plans to fruition. But the age-old ogre, money, always seemed to stand in the way when we wanted to do anything of this kind. Nevertheless we worked valiantly and gradually accumulated coppers, nickels, and dimes, but alas, far from enough to enable us to make the desired purchase. Though our parents had their hands full on their own account, they noted the seriousness of our purpose and wisely decided to help.

The instruments were ordered from Lyon and Healy in the spring of 1885. In due time the station agent at Randall reported that "The horns have come!" As soon as possible our old Alma Mater, the Sheldall Schoolhouse, resounded to an ear-splitting din. Presently the clamor spread all



MEMBERS OF THE RIVERSIDE BAND

over the community, and eventually resolved itself into music. Unaided, except for an occasional consultation with our friend Captain W. A. Wier of Story City, we taught ourselves to play so that in a few months we were able to furnish a program of elementary music at a Fourth of July celebration held in a nearby timber-nook. Though we received a great deal of praise, much of it, I fear, was unmerited. It encouraged us, however. When Herman Hagen, a good cornetist who had played in a military band in Norway, joined us we were fairly well under way.

We engaged as teacher Professor Anton Pederson of Jewell, Iowa, who was a professional musician and had but recently come to this country from Norway where he had played in orchestras and military bands. He was an exceptionally fine flutist as well as a very able performer on the clarinet, piccolo, and violin. Eventually he moved to Chicago where he was engaged as flutist, often as soloist, in the Theodore Thomas Symphony Orchestra. He had come to Jewell to visit relatives and, becoming interested in the local musical work, he prolonged his visit till he became a resident and was loath to leave even when better opportunities were open to him.

Under Pederson's leadership the band soon became one of the best in Hamilton County and

eventually gained a Statewide reputation. In 1887 we decided to enter the Storm Lake band tournament, but to get our parents' consent, especially since the date of the event happened in the midst of corn plowing, took much tactful persuasion. Besides, the bothersome money question obtruded itself again and caused more difficulty. We had worked, begged, and borrowed the price of uniforms — thick, heavy ones, that made us sweat like troopers at the least exertion. Fervent entreaties, mingled with tears and rosy promises to work extra hard when we came back, finally moved our respective sires to furnish us with railroad fare. The joy in our hearts was almost too great to bear.

As our train left before cockcrow in the morning there was not much sleep for us the night before. We were determined not to miss that train and an eager throng was seen promenading up and down the station platform long, long before the glimmer of dawn. We stopped for breakfast at the Wilson Hotel in Webster City. Being ravenously hungry we were astonished at the size of the portions served which seemed only a meager introduction to a meal. There was not a morsel left on a single one of the sixteen plates at the finish. Aboard the train the passengers looked upon us with some wonderment not unmixed with

amusement, for the like of this red-necked, gaily caparisoned crew they had scarcely seen in all their lives. Arrived at our destination we were assigned quarters and could eat our fill, especially of fried potatoes. The other bands consisted largely of dapper, richly uniformed city youths, dudes we called them in those days, contrasting noticeably in appearance with the green-and-purple-accountered farmer lads. But we were not met for a fashion display and to our surprise stood up favorably with the others musically. Thanks to our excellent instructor, our ensemble and choice of classical music drew interest away from many of the other bands whose strength lay in the firecracker effect assumed in the rendition of musical misery called ragtime.

During the recreation hour one evening we slipped off by ourselves and Pederson, meaning no harm, took forth his flute and played a little for our benefit. Soon one, then another, joined us, and directly the whole camp was afire with curiosity as to who this remarkable performer might be. The next day, and thereafter, considerable attention was focussed on our particular group, and when our teacher and several members of the band appeared as soloists it came as a revelation to the audience and the bands present, none being able, it seemed, to present varied programs

of this kind. Mr. Eadie, the tournament manager, had hunted in distraction for accompanists for some singers that were to appear, but without success. Hearing this, Pederson volunteered assistance and forthwith arranged parts for our orchestra members, suitable instruments were secured, and the singers were furnished the support required. It was said by many that the Riverside Band did itself credit and ranked with the best bands present.

Covered with glory, but empty of purse, we be-thought ourselves of home. We went by train as far as Fort Dodge, but found there no suitable connection for Webster City — and we were hungry. Though we combed our pockets for coin, precious little did they yield that did not infringe upon the transportation fund. Having ransacked the town for possible conveyances, we finally came upon a grouchy Irishman who had two rickety wagons and a couple of scare-devil teams to match. We piled in and all went merry as a marriage bell till one of the aged wheels sagged with a groan. Our driver swore, ordered us out without apology, and returned to the Fort for another wheel.

But this mishap turned out to be sheer good fortune for it saved us from starvation. A camp-meeting was in progress right by the place where

we were wrecked, and no sooner had the host in the farmstead where it was held taken note of our predicament before he invited us in. A band was the very thing they wanted to put the capsheaf on their doings, and he for one preferred that we promptly play "Yankee Doodle". Besides, they were just sitting down to dinner and he wanted to know why we couldn't join them and eat a bite. We did! Though the pretty girl waiters made us bashful, we managed to consume what they offered, and not a few accepted helping after helping thinking it was the thing to do to show our appreciation of their willingness to serve. Filled to bursting with choice edibles galore, we nevertheless valiantly played that favorite medley, "The Good Old Tunes", and other pieces, to the delight of the assembled host. Meantime, our Jehu had arrived and we were off again much to the regret of our kind benefactors. We reached a late train at Webster City and stepped off at Randall poor in capital but rich in experiences.

One year the band went to Des Moines sixteen strong, with shining instruments and well-brushed uniforms, to play at the State Fair. Our music was well received at the Exposition Building and afterward we were besieged to play in front of concession stands at the rate of a dollar a number. We lodged in a small hotel in the city, where the

entire troop was quartered in one room. A veterinarian neighbor, with professorial mien and prophet's beard, who sometimes posed as our drum major, kept us in an uproar with his antics until the landlord protested. Said the horse doctor, "I have tried my best to keep order, but you see I stand helpless."

Hearing band music in the vicinity, Herman Hagen exclaimed, "Pshaw! That's nothing but a quick-step band. Let's give the crowd some real music." We played some classical numbers and lo, the fickle assemblage, motivated largely by curiosity no doubt, formed a jam about us. Later we learned that the other was the official band.

At this period our Riverside Band made several concert trips and succeeded in giving a number of creditable performances. Our expenses on these ventures usually exceeded the profits but, nothing daunted, we worked away with unabated enthusiasm. Money was not our primary object anyway, but pastime and inspiration for ourselves and entertainment for the community in which we lived.

Sometimes our fund-raising expeditions took us to country picnics and political rallies. On one such occasion we played at Webster City in connection with a meeting at which L. S. Coffin of Fort Dodge was the principal speaker. In compensation for our services we were to have all of

the money that accumulated during the day in the numerous slot boxes in Rosencrantz Park where the gathering was held. Inspired by those inviting boxes and noting the big crowd, we played generously and finished with a triumphant fanfare of rousing music. Flushed with a feeling of success we accepted our reward — one hundred and thirty-five cents!

The band fared a little better financially when we participated in the program of a joint debate at Webster City between Jonathan P. Dolliver and Joseph O. A. Yeoman during the congressional campaign of 1888. Much wit and wisdom was heard in that memorable discussion and the band interspersed musical numbers to fit the fray. Dolliver was particularly apt in repartee. At Ellsworth in the free silver campaign he reached the climax of a stirring arraignment of his opponent with the words, "And this is what he said." Just then a donkey brayed dolefully and Dolliver instantly retorted, "I did not know this was to be a joint discussion."

Though the old Riverside Band finally rested on its laurels, the spirit of the enterprise was perpetuated by new aggregations. There was no jealousy, however, for the parent organization regarded the success of its offspring with easy complacency. The pioneer band benefited not only

its own members, but also succeeding local organizations; and its influence extended to towns, schools, and colleges, at Decorah, Northfield, Jewell, Ames, and other places.

We were fortunate to have in our community during the eighties and some years later Professor John Dahle, pioneer song instructor and composer, designated as the Lowell Mason of music among the Norwegian-Americans. The lofty impulse he gave in fostering worthy singing and vocal work generally, combined with the excellent service performed by our old band instructor, has set its seal on the entire community; for have we not choirs, vocalists, and musicians galore in all the towns and rural districts hereabouts?

Some measure of credit for the development of such a condition is surely due to the musical pioneer work of the old Riverside Band and orchestra. The world-famous Kneisel quartet would scarcely have come straight from New York to Story City, the smallest town visited by them on their concert tours, unless the musical background of the community had warranted it. And when Walter Damrosch announced that the most numerous and appreciative radio responses came from Iowa, we felt that we, too, were partially responsible.

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