

Mad About Music

By William F. McDERMOTT===== OCTOBER 1945

NOW THAT the war is over, it soon will be time for another "Piano raid" at Winfield, Kansas, famous little music center of the western prairies. Sedate citizens, with sleeves rolled up, will help to "hustle" pianos from homes, churches and club rooms-but mostly from Cunningham's, the town's leading music store-to the huge gymnasium of Southwestern College. There the volunteer movers will set up "pianistic battalions," ready to renew one of the most unusual music festivals ever held anywhere. Winfieldites brag that practically every adult resident under fifty has at one time or another studied and played the piano. Yet, while the town of 11,000 ran riot with bands, orchestras and choruses, for years there was nothing to satisfy the ensemble desires of the piano players. A piano teacher, E. Marie Burdette, pioneered the idea of a mass piano festival and Paul Painter, high school the final directing..

The piano shifting is on a huge scale. Here and there home-built "dollies" are used to trundle two or three pianos of a neighborhood into one man's living room for a week or two. There a group of players practice every evening from supper until midnight. Next they assemble at the music store where up to fifteen pianos are used for a week's rehearsal each by consolidated groups-and finally there's the grand rush on the gym with 100 pianos.

For two days and a night at the gym, relays of players, assembling in company formation, rehearse in groups of fifty, polishing off their ensemble performance. A battery of tuners goes over the instruments and put them in harmony. Now the big night arrives. Gay bunting and decorations color the scene. Every seat is at a premium as the roots for its favorites.

There's a preliminary music director, took over taken and standing room crowd of 1,500 to 2,000 pep program and finally the fanfare: Through an arch come the performers-lawyers, bankers, debs in evening gowns, mothers in their Sunday best, bobby-soxers and college athletes, grocers and insurance men, barbers and preachers, They march with heads high and eyes gleaming to their places. At a signal the players seat themselves, two to a piano. The director lifts his baton, and 400 hands begin rolling over the keys.

The music pours out like a mighty wave, filling the vast room to the rafters. The crescendo passes, and the roar of 100 pianos played in unison diminishes to a note so soft that it seems impossible so many instruments are in action. The crowd holds its breath as the nuances make richer the melody of the piece. Here is more than unity of performance; it is a unity of spirit born out of love for music. As the last note of the concert dies away, the crowd breaks out into shouting applause. Winfield's amateur pianists bow to their fellow townsmen, wave to friends, then disappear into the throng. The festival is over-all but shifting the pianos back to their native haunts.

The unique piano concert is only one of many evidences that Winfield is "mad about music." Its Civic Music Association with 800 members brings to the town annually five or six of the high ranking

artists and provides 500 free admissions to worthy high school music students. The Winfield Oratorio Society, numbering 1,000 members-inactive during latter years of the war but soon to be revived-is accustomed to assemble a 500-voice choir for a spring choral festival, supported by an orchestra of seventy-five selected players from the community. The Winfield Music Club composed of former high school students, sets up juvenile music clubs to get youngsters into the atmosphere of music.

Not musically a stuffed shirt, the town annually staged, until the war, an old-time "Fiddlers' Festival," which drew contestants from all over Kansas and Oklahoma. One of the star performers was Bert Woodward, an eighty-year-old barber with a yen for music, who learned on a \$10.98 mail-order violin and branched out into making his own. To date Bert has whittled out more than 200 violins from wood he imports from Norway' and Bohemia. Another popular stunt was a barbershop Quartet contest. A number of Winfield firms and business clubs maintain male quartets, which occasionally meet at the local barbershops to get the proper atmosphere. The rivalry developed into a demand for a statewide contest. Fifty barbershop quartets vied for prizes on the Chautauqua Assembly tabernacle stage, a replica of an 1888 barbershop.

Winfield's -madness for music started back in the early 1880's when J. S. Mann, a snappy young Canadian haberdasher who enjoyed music but couldn't tell one note from another, migrated to the frontier town, and opened up a pants store. Business was good, but the primitiveness of the people irked him. He decided what they needed was aesthetic uplift and started a chain of events that has resulted in Winfield becoming "tops" in music among the smaller cities of America.

Mann ran for the school board and was elected. He advocated music in the schools, but when he broached the proposition of tying up with two neighboring towns and getting a teacher at \$35 a month--\$1 1.65 per town-a rumpus started.

"Tax our citizens for music?" shouted an aroused school board member. "Never!"

Mann was licked that time, but a couple of years later he won out, and Winfield took on the entire support of a music director. A "professor of music" arrived from New England, in Prince Albert coat, gray-striped trousers and bow tie, beribboned glasses and cane. But unregenerate kids took neither to the scales nor the professor and he finally resigned.

In the meantime, a young music teacher from Indianapolis, Louis M. Gordon, had quietly set up a studio in Winfield and began giving private lessons. The school board hired him. A lover of both youngsters and music, Gordon was a natural for the informal easy-going town. He quickly captured the hearts of the children. Day after day he plodded the village streets, giving youngsters a melodious "breather" between studies by teaching them simple tunes and telling them stories about great composers. Music began to take on glamour for the children, and before many years it was a common occurrence for boys to leave their baseball and girls their dolls to participate in the voluntary after-school instruction that Gordon instituted.

Meantime a couple of hardy but music-loving youngsters were growing up in the Gordon household. The older son, Edgar, decided to follow in his father's footsteps. He studied in Chicago, taught violin at Hull House, and at another settlement organized a chorus of 100 factory workers. Then he returned to Winfield to aid his dad, and together they so interwove music into the life of the community that it became known as the "town with the soul of an artist."

Young Gordon's achievements drew the national spotlight, and he was called to the University of Wisconsin to head the public school music department. Now Winfield has a periodic "Gordon Day," and when Edgar was last its guest of honor, hundreds of singing children greeted him, identifying themselves to him through their parents whom he had taught. In tribute to another great pioneering musician of Winfield, an annual music program is held in honor of the late Archibald Olmstead, who built the Winfield College of Music into a nationally known institution and who developed hundreds of children into skilled musicians by private instruction. To date twenty-one annual "Olmstead Days" have been observed.

For many years Winfield has not graduated a boy or girl from the grades who was unable to read elementary music. Fourth graders are given music evaluation tests. If a child shows no aptitude for music, that fact is not emphasized. This is rare, however, for tests over several years show that seventy-five per cent of all the Winfield children have musical ability to perform, while more than ninety-five per cent reveal the capacity to appreciate music. The 100 per cent, musical literacy -- of all to read music at least slightly which Winfield has attained is an extraordinary achievement when contrasted with the twenty per cent of the general population who can read music. The aim of the Winfield program is to make musical consumers as well as producers. Music is given the glamour and thrill of a game. Everybody gets a chance to play, but likewise is able to sit in the bleachers and understand and enjoy the fine points of the game. Music thus becomes, naturally, as much a part of a child's life as eating and breathing.

From 1930 until last winter, Paul Painter, one of those rare human dynamos, who eats, sleeps, loves and lives music, was the driving genius of the Winfield music program. Painter has never lost the common touch. His home across the street from the high school was a club house and permanent port-of-call for about 800 youngsters of the current crop and returning alumni. Following in Painter's footsteps is Don Pash, the current music chief. Supporting Painter and Pash is Lester sic (Leoti¹) (ed.)Newland, string teacher and choral director, who has shared extensively in music leadership of Winfield youths.

The town pride, however, is the High School Symphony Orchestra of eighty players, which Dr. Howard Hanson, director of the Eastman School of Music, recently said equals some of the better-known metropolitan symphonies. It tackles successfully a number of the most difficult works usually performed only by professionals. Besides this there is a reserve orchestra of the same size, which performs publicly and which acts as a feeder for the main organization, and also two junior orchestras composed of children from the fourth to the seventh grades. After school and on Saturdays, scores of grade school boys and girls train in the elementary symphonies. It takes twelve Saturday classes to accommodate the juveniles, and the competition to graduate into the big orchestras is as keen as it is to get on the basketball team.

In addition, the Winfield High School has a Symphony band and a junior band, aside from a variety of "specials." Last year the orchestras and bands gave forty-five public performances. High school choirs total 250 voices, and from the grades another 250 selected singers can be drawn. The a cappella choir has seventy voices, and the senior girls choir eighty. All orchestras, bands and choirs rehearse regularly an hour a day, with full school credit. In the last National High School Music Contest in 1941 Winfield won "highly superior rating" in almost every event - more than twice as

¹ Leoti Newland (Mrs. Foster Newland) was known personally by the editor of this version, J. J. Banks in March of 1999. Leoti was a "supreme" teacher of the Winfield "strings" and "voices".

many as any other school entered-and is one of few cities to have star organizations in the fields of public music.

Music appreciation in Winfield is caught, not taught. No textbook courses in music are offered; everything is learned at rehearsal. Yet the instruction is so thorough that many high school students are able to turn out acceptable orchestrations and arrangements. A junior, Robert Shanks, last year became one of the country's youngest professionally published composers, having had three ensemble works published that year. Herbert Hawk, bassoonist and honor student composed an entire work for the symphony orchestra and conducted it before an audience of 2,500 at the high school commencement exercises. For two years the National Federation of Music Clubs' competition was won by Dorothy Merriam, a high school student. Today ten of the leading high school music directors of Kansas are from Winfield, and Winfield graduates have gone on to big orchestras, to radio, and to the movies, or to become conductors, all over the country.

During the war, over seventy-five of the Winfield high school students were in Army and Navy bands and several of the boys worked their way up to be conductors. Others improvised small bands and singing groups all the way from Egypt to the Aleutians. One flyer got his fiddle into his kit and made music for a bombing crew while going to and from raids over enemy lines. Another boy, stationed on an island in the South Pacific, organized a few of the natives into a musical group, some playing on improvised reeds and bamboo instruments and others singing.

Record companies say that, in proportion to population, they sell as many high-grade records in Winfield as in any other city in the world. Music taste, as a result of the years of good music in the public schools, has so skyrocketed that jazz for listening purposes is only mildly popular. For instance, the kids are not a bit wild about Harry James's playing, but they take to George Gershwin like ducks to water, and the high school symphony orchestra was one of the first successfully to perform "Rhapsody in Blue" in the original, unabridged form. Delinquency is a curiosity in Winfield and nightclubs have been unable to get a start among high school youth.

Creativeness, originality and spirit of romance and adventure in music give zip and zing to Winfield's program. Fun and frivolity provide some of the unexpected twists in the setup.

Chamber music, which started in 1931 with ensembles of clarinets, oboes, and bassoons, has expanded until today the high school has ten groups, which go out to play for anything from a pep meeting to a funeral. Vocally, the girls and boys form volunteer mixed quartets, sextets, madrigal (sixteen voices) and treble clef clubs. They meet and rehearse on their own time and their idea of an evening of fun is to get cokes and sandwiches, invade a home and play and eat until parents chase them out.

If any group in Winfield wants a musical program the high school furnishes it free of charge. It contributes orchestras to Sunday Schools and singers to church choirs and to Women's Club meetings. A hilarious "Dutch Band," composed of five brass pieces, does the clowning for conventions, county fairs, and high jinks of various sorts. There is also a snappy "Little Theater" orchestra of twenty-six members, picked from the symphony, which plays for school stage presentations. There are baseball bands and football bands, but it's the basketball bands that go to town. A big band gives a pre-game concert and plays the opening exercises. A smaller "jeep band" wows 'em between halves with intricate drills and snappy formations, interspersed with acts by baton spinners and dancers.

The spell that music has woven over Winfield youth was dramatically shown during the worst flood in the city's history in 1944. The turbulent Walnut River crashed through the dike, split the town in two, and raging waters engulfed the business district, paralyzing light and water plants, and bringing everything to a standstill.

Prof. Joseph E. Maddy, founder of the famous National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan, was in southern Kansas and planned to visit Winfield and conduct the high school orchestra in a rehearsal. When word got around that he had arrived in spite of the flood, students kept the engagement and began to arrive by rowboat or wading, to the high school. When rehearsal started, ninety-eight out of 100 players--the other two were ill-- were in their seats. Symphony playing continued for six hours.

They warmed up on Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony." Then they called for Tschaikowsky's Fourth Symphony and, as Maddy told me later, "They not only played the score of the most difficult of all symphonies (first movement), but they observed every expression, every nuance, better than most professional orchestras--and how they loved it! In all MY experience I have never heard a high school orchestra play more artistically than those flood-bound kids that night."

It was long after midnight when those youngsters stored their instruments, grabbed their hip boots and set out for home. Some had to use boats to cross the swollen river to get home. They had had a glorious adventure--but the significance of what they had done was greater than the thrill. They had fulfilled the tradition of more than half a century of good music in Winfield. Of that Maddy said: "The joy of performing great music and the discipline imposed by that music has transformed the little city of Winfield into a living symphony of culture."

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ⁱ This version of the original publication in RECREATION pg. 339 October 1945 courtesy of Winfield Public Library, Winfield, Kansas (edited by J. J. Banks banksy@horizon.hit.net) March 30, 1999.