



STRIKE UP *the* BAND

A look into one of the city's oldest — and favorite — traditions.

By Deepa Sampat

Every Wednesday evening during the summertime, area residents come together at South Park to enjoy one of Lawrence's oldest traditions — the Lawrence City Band.

The band has performed in South Park for about 40 years in the gazebo that is more than 100 years old. However, the band's tradition goes much further back in history.

Its roots can be traced to when the first emigrants settled in the territory. Four men brought along two cornets, a bugle and a fife, playing music along the journey to the Kansas Territory.

"People from New England brought instruments on their wagons," said Robert Foster, who has been the band's conductor for more than 10 years and played in the band for 30 years before then. "They were able to start making music in Lawrence as soon as they unloaded the wagons. The band grew from there just like the city grew."

Grow, it did. Today, the band is composed

of 55 area residents, from students in high school to those in their 70s. Concerts occur Wednesdays at 8 p.m. A one-hour practice session precedes each concert, the only time the band will practice before performing each week.

"It's kind of awesome to play in the band," Robert Friauf said. Friauf, a retired University of Kansas professor, has played clarinet in the band for about 35 years. "You learn to show up on time and pay attention. You can't stop too often, even to work on tough spots. It's sort of breathtaking."

Lawrence native Jade Brown remembers the City Band from his childhood. This summer will be Brown's fifth year playing saxophone in the band. Brown said he joined the band because he wanted to play the classical repertoire of pieces with other talented musicians.

"They are so good at what they do," Brown said of the band members. "It's nice to play with a group that can sit down and basically sight-read through difficult literature and then

sit down and play a concert."

While Brown plays music for himself, he said his favorite part of being in the band is seeing all the people who come out to the concerts. He likes seeing kids running around the park having fun while parents sit on lawn chairs, listen to the show, drink lemonade and chat with one another.

"I think we as a society have fallen back in the walls of our home," Brown said. "We're not as engaged with our neighbors and our community as we used to be. To have a community event where everyone comes together at a common place to listen to the music is a great thing."

For Friauf, the concerts are nostalgic, evoking feelings of a simpler, less worrisome time.

"It's pure Americana," Friauf said. "The bandstand, the city park, the crowd gathered on the lawn. It's Midwest America at its best in the summertime."



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Esprit de corps

Though the band members are different ages, hold varied occupations and come from diverse backgrounds, they all have one thing in common — their dedication to the City Band.

“You can tell there’s an esprit de corps between the band,” Friauf said.

However, this “esprit de corps” — common spirit of comradeship, enthusiasm and devotion to a cause among the members of a group — doesn’t stop with the band’s roster. The value of the band to the community and its history is recognized by all the residents who attend the concerts.

Brown has played in other bands and in other venues, and he always noticed certain types of people going to certain types of shows. But the summer concerts in the park seem to transcend the specific styles of music people like, he said.

“The thing about this band that really sets it apart is the community involvement at such a grassroots level,” Brown said. “It pulls in a lot of people from a lot of different areas and backgrounds that wouldn’t usually come together.”

Not only are the band concerts a perfect setting for area residents to come together as a whole, it’s a place to reflect on Lawrence’s founding, history and present day.

“I think it’s a link to the history of the city,” Brown said. “It’s a way for the older crowd to keep the community bond alive, and for the younger people, it’s a gateway to the community. It shows what our community can be and what it was.”

Those four men who brought their instruments to Kansas continued to regularly play music for the settlers. They played at weddings, funerals and birthdays, and on warm summer nights. Their instruments, which surely showed the wear of several years and a strenuous journey, were replaced in 1863, purchased with funds donated by the community members who enjoyed the music. The first concert played with the new instruments occurred one evening in late August, greatly enjoyed by all who attended.

The day after the band concert marked Quantrill’s Raid, also known as the Lawrence Massacre. The guerilla attack by Missourian confederates resulted in 200 deaths and a destroyed city. Three of the band members were among those who were killed.

“There have always been trials and tribulations that have happened,” Brown said. “The music helps us remember and honor times and people that have gone by. It also serves to remind us where we are and what we can do as a community to make it better.”

Budget woes

A major portion of the funding for the band comes from the city. While the band is funded through this year, the current economic situation could make it difficult for the city to continue providing funds.

“I have people stop me on the streets and say they are concerned about the band concerts,” Foster said. “They ask if there is even going to be a concert.”

Lawrence Parks and Recreation funds the band through monies it receives from a state excise tax. Ernie Shaw, interim director of the department, said because the state is in as tough an economic situation as the city, it could create new legislation to keep the tax revenue rather than giving it to the city.

Shaw understands the value of the band to the community. But there simply isn’t enough money to go around. Many Parks and Recreation programs are self-supported, meaning user fees cover the cost of the programs. While special events such as the band concerts are important to the city, they don’t bring in any revenue.

“When money gets tight, that’s what we have to start looking at,” Shaw said. “How do we continue these types of events without cutting into the priority programs?”

In development of the 2010 budget, the department was requested to explore the possibility of outside fundraising to provide assistance to the band concert series. In response to this request, the department’s Marketing Division has implemented a sponsorship program for businesses to help support the band while gaining advertising recognition. Businesses can sponsor individual concerts throughout the summer and will get benefits for their sponsorships, including recognition at the concert and on all promotional materials.

Citizens wishing to donate can contact Roger Steinbrock, marketing supervisor, by calling 785-832-3450 or visiting the Administrative Office at 947 New Hampshire St., Suite 200B, Lawrence, KS 66044.