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“Texas News – The (Norwegian) Seamen’s Church in Houston”

Marching Bands in Texas

By Lars Sandbakk

We arrived in Texas three years ago, bringing two keen musicians from our local school band. Would it be able for them to continue their education and performances also here? We had heard about “marching bands” and seen some samples on TV and YouTube. Well, reality struck us before we knew it. The setup was familiar with rehearsals, events, administration and fundraising. It was just so much more of everything! Having survived the initial shock, we learned that Texas has its own style, and it turned out to be a gold mine of experiences, contacts and new skills sets.

Our 9th grader was about to enter High School and was faced with the steepest learning curve. The band was excited to have yet another member in time for the annual summer camp. He boldly accepted the challenge,

and appeared with all senses ready for the first practice at 7AM, two weeks before ordinary school start. The changes from what we was used to do were just lining up. From being one of only two saxophone players out of a total of about 30 kids back home, they were now 30 on the sax among 300. Instead of being pinned to chairs in the sports hall, the whole band was now located in a parking lot all morning, while the temperature was rising from 75 to a 100F in the middle of the day. This is necessary in order to

teach everybody to march correctly. The usual square formation where everybody keeps aligned by stepping to the tune on the left foot was replaced with severely more complex patterns where every single student has their own path, meticulously calculated by a computer program. When combined, this displays some gorgeously elegant movements, but everything must be spot on if it is to make sense.

The formations are similar to the tattoo programs that we know best from His Majesty the King's parade troop. The music must be learned by heart, in addition to all the steps. A lot to think about for a

newly arrived 14 year boy! At the same time, this was a wonderful way to get to know the group. From day one he was invited to events outside the practices and starting to make friends. The saxophone group was large enough alone to have their own parties and get-together's. He could just throw himself into it!

His 12 year old brother was about to enter Junior High School, but had already been playing baritone for some years. This proved to be a big plus. Here, the kids normally don't pick up instruments before 6th grade, so most of the other students at his level had to start from scratch. He could however skip this and go straight for more

experienced levels. There was also no summer camp nor a marching program, and not quite as many events. Junior High mostly plays internal concerts at their own school, only broken up by some occasional external performances.





From the universities, the band culture trickled down to local high schools. It was early recognized that music was a part of a proper education. The compositions were traditional, but many new pieces were added by pioneers like John Philip Sousa (1854 – 1932). The bands were also marching like before, in rows and columns like a military procession. The only variation was the establishment of concert bands, with basically meant that the same bands moved indoors and was placed on chairs instead of wandering around the streets.

At the High School, preparations were however advancing at high speed up to the most busy time of the year, including the other strong Texas tradition, the football season! Texas has more than 2500 private or public high schools with 1.5 million students in total. Many of these schools present teams to the UIL – University Interscholastic League, where matches are played weekly during the fall. Every team consists of 60 – 70 players, and every school also brings a band with up to 300 musicians. In addition, there are dance troops, chaperones and other staff. The students often brings mum and dad and a couple of other relatives. All in all, maybe a million people visit some stadium every weekend.

Chris Baily, former main director of the James E. Taylor High School in Katy explains the background for this massive movement. Both the music and the sport have long traditions in the USA and not at least here in the south. As in Europe, the bands origin from military music. The various armies had their own musicians whose task it was to play and march and keep discipline and fighting spirits aloft. Luckily the need for this service gradually declined, as wars were no longer were fought directly man to man. After the Civil War ending in 1865, more and more youth rather turned to college education. The weapon could rest at home, but the instrument was brought along. It soon became popular also for the schools to keep house bands that could promote the new institutions that appeared everywhere around the turn of the century.

In the 1950's, after WW II, the sound literally changed.

We already had jazz, and rock was rolling just around the corner. In the band circles, new forces like the well known Frederick Fennell (1914 – 2004) in cooperation with Eastman School of Music in New York (whose first head master actually was the Norwegian pianist Alfred Klingenberg) tried to make music



playing more interesting and attractive for the individual student. Fennell was a percussionist himself, and worked hard to distribute what is called wind ensemble in English, or better known as 'janitsjar' in Norwegian. This means that in addition to drum sections and brass instrument also woodwind instruments are included. This expanded the choice of instruments and music. The bands were also split into smaller groups, enabling more focus on individual skills. Marches and military music was still performed, but other styles became available. This opened a huge demand for new and dedicated music, and new

generations of composers suddenly could try to make a living out of a significant marked of band music all across the States.



A couple of weeks after school has started, the first football game is on. Every school district has their own stadiums where all the games are played. Anyone can come, the ticket is a few dollars. This is local culture as much as rodeo and hamburgers are! There a tons of things to study. The match is waving from one side to the other. On each stand, adjacent to each other, the opponent bands keep up the moods by continuously playing their chosen melodies, attempting to lift the effort of the team and their followers. Here is a good mix of anthems, rock, samba and percussion. The rows behind are filled with parents and other spectators, and the talk is lively. The concessions offer food and drinks in the hot night. The game itself consists of 4 x 12 minutes of play, but unlike football as we know it (soccer), the time is stopped for every little fault, in addition to regular breaks and changes of players. The whole

performance typically lasts a couple of hours. For the musicians, the night is even longer. They first have to show up at school, change to uniforms, drive by school bus to the stadium, and then repeat everything in the opposite order after the game. Everything is very secure and organized. To manage this, one needs a little army of volunteers. Luckily, these persons can easily be found among the parents. In addition to 3 full time directors and some on part time, thousands of volunteer hours are offered every year. Many of the ladies, and some of the gentlemen, virtually have this as an unpaid job, at least part time. Many Norwegian parents will also recognize this, but one can say the same about other occupancies like soccer or swimming. Still – could the band do without the parents, or the parents without the band? Yes, it would work says Bailey, but he is very happy to have the luxury with the keen boosters. We could still offer a program, but it would have been marginal, with much less activities. The budget has contributions both from federal, state and community sources, but they are heavily dependent on fundraising and sponsors.

Fall season is also competition season. The performance becomes more and more complete, and the band performs the show during the main break of the game. In addition, they also travel to specific competitions around the school district or to other cities in Texas. This is always exciting, but does take a toll of time and effort. We have ourselves seen our saxophonist return home late on Friday night, just to get up again at 4 AM the next morning to go by bus to Dallas. But everybody joins the tour, and rather hope to recover the sleep after Christmas.

Spring time is more quiet. That is, they still work hard, with daily practice as part of the schedule. It is however concert season then, and the band is split up in smaller groups according to skills and interests. At a large school like these in Katy, there can be 5 levels of wind ensembles, and also a separate jazz band (what we would call 'storband' (big band) in Norway). They rehearse more or less well known pieces across a wide range of music, and by very high standards, and also participate in a variety of competitions and festivals. The best musicians try to aspire to the All State Band which gathers the most prominent students from the whole of Texas. Out of 55 000

candidates that fight for 200 positions, our Taylor High School can brag about securing 5 seats. This is a very respectful feat, showing that the local level of education is sky high.

Here in the USA one emphasizes individual achievements much more than what we do in Norway, but the students still keep strongly together. They of course spend a whole lot of time together with the band, and don't say no to even more activities outside the normal tasks. Once in a while they march in more classical mode for fundraising or performances. We in the Seamen's Church have been lucky enough to borrow students from various schools for our May 17th Constitution Day celebration. Some travelling is also done around the USA, every second year in or out of Texas (but only seldom outside the country, as we more easily can do in Europe). They however also often take part in smaller private groups for church congregations or house bands.

The joy of all the music easily make up for all the practicing! But does the band students otherwise dissimilate from the rest of the school? Band director Chris Bailey bravely states that "the smartest kids are in the band!". But he immediately nuances this by saying that it works both ways. The kids are lifted by all the hard work. Grade statistics prove the fact. Apart from this, they don't differ from other kids. The ethnic and social composition reflects whatever is dominant at each school. Oftentimes, the band students have parents or elder siblings that also have played in a band, but it is not a prerequisite. They anyhow practice every day, as part of the education. This is at least how it is in Texas, which supports fine arts and demands these subjects as part of the curriculum. In Norway, band activities are voluntary programs outside school, but the kids normally start more gradually when they are ready for it around 2nd or 3rd grade.

Even in particular the fall season is tough, the band is also a very important social arena for the adults. There is sewing and painting and carpenting from morning to evening. The uniforms are still bought from professional vendors, and replaced about every 10th year. The fall program is however done with a lot of props that need to be hand made. This gives much room for creativity and to get to know other families at school. In addition there is a lot of administrative positions and more simple tasks like chaperoning at events, manning concessions or placing tables and chairs. If you have a student that is a band member then don't hesitate to volunteer as far as your capacity goes! And if you think you already have enough to do with organizing your new life in Texas, at least pop in for a game or two! You don't even need a student as an excuse. The program is available at the school's home page. If a full night is too long then come early enough to be in time for the national anthem and the march into the stadium, and stay till after the main break. The program for each night can vary. In particular the "home coming" early in October is filled with even more glitter, and a queen and king is voted among the senior students. Don't be afraid to ask the locals about what is happening on or outside the field. Just as us, the Texans are proud and happy to present their greatest love – their joyful and playful youth!

