

Making Music in Mount Holly

By Robert Black

Did you know that the Mount Holly High School Band marched in Miami at the Orange Bowl in 1957? Or that they marched in a parade in Chicago in 1953?

I came to Mount Holly in 1950 to teach band at the High School and I retired in 1985. Back then, Mount Holly had its own high school, which was located where the middle school now stands, and it had limited facilities. The school had what was called a gymatorium, a combination gym and part auditorium. We had to block off the front part of the stage, and then built an alcove to create an entrance to the new band room.

Thirty-five band students were in the first band, but we grew gradually. Students started learning their instruments in fourth and fifth grades. At that time, band was an extracurricular activity, but I had fantastic, loyal students. I was choir director for 32 years at the First United Methodist Church in Mount Holly. To supplement my salary, I played trombone professionally for the Barnum and Bailey Circus, the Ice Capades, and other musical shows in Charlotte for 30 years.

In 1972, Mount Holly High School closed and East Gaston High School opened. Four years later in 1976, I moved to the middle school. By then, the band had grown to 173 students in the tenth to twelfth grade band.

In the 1950's, Mount Holly held an annual Durene Festival, which included a parade through downtown. The band would lead the parade up Main Street and--after finishing the parade route--we would gather at the train tracks near the old Holland Drug Store. The band would play for the rest of the parade as the floats passed by. A photograph of the parade hangs in City Hall.

One year, Mount Holly had a severe drought. The sports field was located near the old Second Baptist Church past Rankin Street. I believe it was called Hutchison Field, after the C.E. Hutchison family that owned some of the local mills. We marched every day from the school up to the field. The band used a fast cadence and high steps much like the Duke University Band. The field was used for both football and baseball, so part of the football field was the baseball infield. Unfortunately for us, the drought dried the field! At halftime the band started the fast cadence and stormed the field. When the band got to the dry clay infield, a cloud of dust arose and no one could see the band past the first row of trombones. After the game, some of the football players stated the dust made for an interesting second half.

I recall how school administrators forced students to choose between football and band. I had a different philosophy. Many of the football players were reluctant to pursue music, although it was an important part of their education. So I welcomed the football players to march in band as well. We would have their instruments ready when we lined up before halftime. As they came off the field all muddy and dirty, they would grab their instruments and march out with the band. They were in step with the band, but looked slightly out of place in their football uniforms.

Each game, we would put on a different show. Sometimes, we would have a "lights out" show. One game, we marched to the tune of "Autumn Leaves." Everyone had to memorize the music. The band attached flashlights to their shoulders with two pieces of elastic. Colored cellophane covered the lenses. All the lights went out as the band took the field. The band formed three leaves. As the music started, a green leaf appeared on the field. As the music changed, a yellow leaf formed as the green one faded. Then, a lone red leaf replaced the yellow.

As the song ended, the majorettes twirled flaming batons. They used to say, “as long as Mr. Black was in town, show business would never die.”

As for the trips to Chicago and Miami, the Lions Club International invited us to play during their annual meeting, and they footed the bill. In Miami, they were inducting a North Carolinian as president, so they held a night at the Orange Bowl featuring North Carolina bands. We were given five minutes to do our presentation. It was a wonderful experience for my students and for me as well.