

***Chattanooga Central High School Band:
A History
1907-1970***

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INTRODUCTION

Chattanooga Central High School is one of Tennessee's oldest high schools and is an institution that enjoys a very long tradition of excellence in many facets of education. The school band is no exception. From its beginnings as an extension of the school's R.O.T.C. military training program in the 1920s to its current standings as a successful, independent musical organization, its history is rich with tradition, pride, and musicianship. The history of the Chattanooga Central High School Band parallels other exemplary and pioneering schools of its age and fits the pattern of other successful instrumental music education programs across the United States. In exploring the history of Central's band, generalizations can be made to many historically successful high schools that were begun in early foundational schools around the turn of the 20th century.

This researcher was fortunate to serve as the director of the Central High School Band for the first four years of her teaching career--an enjoyable, unforgettable experience that helped shape her positively as an educator and musician. During her time there, the unique sense of family, pride, and school spirit of both the students and faculty made a lasting impression on her and inspired her to pursue the rich heritage and history of this historic school.

ROOTS

Central High School was dedicated on January 3, 1908. The school had been organized at the beginning of that school year, but the new facility would not be ready until the beginning of

the second semester of the 1907-08 school year. P.P. Claxton¹, famous educator and U.S. Commissioner of Education, spoke at the dedication of the new building. January 6, 1908 marked the first day of classes in the new "state of the art" high school.²

Mrs. C.A. Garrett was the first music instructor at Central High. She taught both vocal and instrumental music according to the first published CHS yearbook, *The Sleepless Eye*³. There was a small orchestra that was organized under the management of Mr. Gunn during "the latter part of 1912, with only three or four members. It steadily grew in numbers and efficiency to . . . thirteen pieces" in 1913⁴. At the beginning of the second semester of the 1912-1913 school year, a Victor phonograph was installed, promoting music listening and literature, especially opera, to the students⁵. This was likely instrumental (pardon the pun) in the establishment the following year of an opera being presented annually by CHS students⁶. The school orchestra played for these operas and grew in number throughout the first two decades of the 20th century. Central High School was seemingly very well informed, as it was at the forefront of trends in music education throughout this early period.

During the early years, several musical clubs and ensembles were organized such as the Mandolin Club in 1914⁷ and the Hogan Band (harmonica band!) in 1916⁸. These were popular at the time, but did not seem to last very long. Other groups with a more prolonged existence such as the Euterpean Society and the Music Club were organized for students interested in learning about and supporting music, but not necessarily performing it. Then, along came something new.

¹"New Central High School is Dedicated," *Chattanooga Star*, 3 January 1908.—P.P. Claxton, "The Horace Mann of the South," was a native Tennessean who traveled around TN in an effort to convince citizens to pay taxes to be used for starting area high schools. He was a notable advocate for music in schools.

²"New Central High School is Dedicated," *Chattanooga Star*, 3 January 1908.

³ *The Sleepless Eye* (CHS Yearbook) [1911], p. 10.

⁴ *The Central* (CHS Yearbook) [1913], p. 57. —All yearbooks and issues of the Central Digest are located in the E.Y. Chapin Library at the current Central High School in Harrison, TN.

⁵ *The Central* [1913], p. 58.

⁶Helen Lemon, "Opera," *The Central Digest* (Central High School Newspaper), [November 1916], p. 5.

⁷ *The Champion* (CHS Yearbook) [1914], p. 52-53.

⁸ *The Champion* [1916], p. 69.

BAND IS BORN

The school band began not as much an extension of the orchestra, but as a part of the school's R.O.T.C. program. In 1922, only its second year of existence, the Central Battalion began sponsoring a small group of musicians who wished to become a band. Under the direction of Captain Dudley Hale (a senior student), the first band at Central High School was begun. The first band was composed of the following students: Sergeant How, Corporal Bragg, L. Ashby, B. Boss, N. Y. Collins, R. Cartwright, J. DeSabra, and H. McVeigh⁹.

Only one short year later, this small group of students grew to a thirty-piece band "which would do credit to any preparatory school"¹⁰. The band had its first drum major during the 1922-23 school year, named Robert Barker. Though it operated under the R.O.T.C. Department, the band incorporated primarily brass musicians from the orchestra. Some members of the band chose to play in the orchestra as well, but some left the orchestra to become solely band musicians. During the school year of 1923-24, a Drum and Bugle Corp[s] was formed and furnished by Captain W.V. Ochs in addition to the Military Band¹¹. The purpose of this group is unclear, as some of the members were in both the band and the Drum and Bugle Corp[s], but it may have served as somewhat of a training group for younger musicians. From the yearbook photographs, many of the students do appear younger in the Drum and Bugle Corp[s] than in the Military Band. By 1927, the band became a fully-functional part of the Central R.O.T.C. Battalion under the direction of Mr. Guy Rubright. According to Captain Ochs, Mr. Rubright

⁹ *The Champion* [1922], p. 105. This is the only CHS yearbook that mentions the band but does not include a picture.

¹⁰ *The Champion* [1923], p. 117.

¹¹ *The Champion* [1924], p. 132.

"transformed what was considered a fair band prior to his directorship into one of the best high school bands in the South¹²."

According to the 1929-30 Hamilton County Public School Report, a music supervisor would travel to several of the larger county high schools to have band twice per week. Bands meet and perform as a group a few times per year. Hixson High School and Soddy High School were a few of these schools that would join with Central in the large group performances¹³.

NO LONGER BOYS' CLUB

The school year 1931-32 brought a big change in the band program. Since its inception, the orchestra had included both male and female members. The band, however, was only for young men. In 1931, two girls were added to the band roster. Mary Bowen and Helen (Ruth) Pease were two clarinet players who wished to join the band¹⁴. The attitude of the other band members is unknown, but Mary Bowen is listed as the Honorary Captain for the following school year¹⁵. It seems that if not welcomed with open arms, the girls were definitely treated with respect. They marched right along with everyone else and donned military issue skirts with their uniforms. 1932-33 brought a new club to Central, though, that may have been a way to keep the "no girls allowed" spirit going. The Band Club was formed the very next year after the first girls were admitted to the military band; it was only for boys, sponsored by the band director, and made up of only male members of the band. The club existed for a few years, but eventually was joined by all band members. Other band clubs through the years include the Girls' Band Club

¹² *The Champion* [1927], p. 100.

¹³ J.E. Walker, *53rd Annual Report of the Hamilton County (Tennessee) Public Schools* (Hamilton County: Tennessee Department of Education, 1930), p. 74.

¹⁴ "Two Girls Admitted to Central Band," *The Central Digest*, 16, no. 2, [16 October 1931], p. 1.

¹⁵ *The Champion* [1933], p. 51.

which existed 1942-1948, the Band Officers' Club that existed in yearbooks from 1944-1950, and a club called the Band Boosters was pictured in 1951 only¹⁶.

THE BAND EXPANDS

Though it is possible that the band played at halftime before the picture was taken, the earliest photo of the band marching on the football field was taken in 1936. Students were dressed in their military uniforms and entertaining the large home crowd of football fans at the University of Chattanooga's Chamberlain Field¹⁷. Football games were very well attended for decades in Central's history, as the team was extremely successful. Multiple state championships in the 50s helped to create even more popularity for the football team and, in turn, the band.

During this time in the band's history, there were two separate bands, though they were not mutually exclusive in membership. From 1945-1949, the school band was referred to as the "Purple and Gold Band," and the Military Band was a separate entity¹⁸. The Military Band performed for R.O.T.C. events and were physically, though not musically, trained through the R.O.T.C. Department. The Purple and Gold Band, later just called the band, played in both marching and concert settings and was taught by a musically trained band director. The exact scheduling of all of this is unknown to this researcher, but today's block scheduling fad would not have allowed these successful programs to co-exist if it had been implemented back then.

In 1940, two new groups were added as part of the marching band: the Majorettes and the Girls' Battalion. The Majorettes were baton twirlers that performed at half-time with the band as the visual ensemble of the group. The group became more popular during the mid-50s,

¹⁶ *The Champion* [various years: 1942-51], various pages.

¹⁷ *The Champion* [1936], p. 85.

¹⁸ *The Champion* [1945], p. 41.

with as many as 25-30 members. The Girls' Battalion was the forerunner of the color guard and performed with the band for many years¹⁹. At some points in the 50s and 60s, the group had as many as 100 members marching in formation with the band. Strangely, they existed not as a part of the band, but as a part of the Girls' P.E. Department²⁰.

The Swing Band was another important part of the band program at CHS and was begun in 1948. It existed in many forms: Swing Band, Band Ensemble, Jazz Band, etc., but all had basically standard jazz band instrumentation²¹.

By 1965, the Band Company of the R.O.T.C. was dwindling, the Orchestra had become the String Ensemble, and the Marching Band (under the direction of Morris Bales) had become the dominant musical organization at Central High School. Including the visual groups that joined the musicians on the football field for the half-time show (the Majorettes and the Girls' Battalion), the Marching Band could boast membership of 175 students! This by far outnumbered any other organization in the school²².

CHANGING TIMES

The 1960s and 70s brought about huge changes at Central High School. The original school building that had been dedicated in 1908 had become run-down and unsafe, so a new building became a necessary priority. A study of Central High School was done by the Visiting Committee from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in 1964. This study reported that the band program was of good size, with 97 students in the high school band. However, the study also stated that, "the physical facilities are totally inadequate: the band room is one of the most inadequate in the State of Tennessee. The size and dimensions are impossible for

¹⁹ *The Champion* [1940], p. 72-3.

²⁰ *The Champion* [1960], p. 106-7.

²¹ *The Champion* [1948], p. 82.

²² *The Champion* [1965], p. 156-7.

rehearsing a band. . . and the room is not acoustically treated²³." When the new school building was designed, this study and the included recommendations were taken into consideration. The plans for the new school included a large auditorium with acoustically treated band and choral rooms underneath the stage. Ample office and storage spaces were also included. However, when the \$2.5 million school building²⁴ was under construction, the fine arts wing was never even begun. Funding did not allow for this last priority to come to fruition. The band has been housed ever since in the facilities that were originally intended as part of the dressing room and laundry areas for the attached gymnasium²⁵. Unfortunately, the band room is still too small, does not have adequate storage space, and is still not acoustically treated.

The dedication of the new school building took place on November 9, 1969, though students had been having classes in the new building since the beginning of the 1969-70 school year. The band, under the direction of new band director and CHS alumni Bobby Dugan, performed at the ceremony²⁶.

When Central moved into the new school building in the suburbs, several features of the school and the music department were changed. The orchestra was no longer a part of the musical offerings at Central, and has not been offered there ever since. The Girls' Battalion was no longer part of the half-time show, but the new group of "flag girls" became the first color guard at CHS beginning in 1969²⁷. The R.O.T.C. department no longer sponsored a separate band for military purposes when the new school opened. Lastly, a new name was adopted for the band: "The Central Sound of Chattanooga"²⁸. All of these changes and many others through the

²³ Leonard Crawford, Coordinator, *Evaluation of Central High School Chattanooga, TN*, p. 52.—This work is bound but not published, and is located at the University of TN at Chattanooga library in Chattanooga, TN.

²⁴ Paula Wilkinson, "New Central High School Dedicated," *Chattanooga Times*, 10 November 1969.

²⁵ John W. Gilliland, *Proposed Design for Central High School* (Selmon T. Franklin Associates, Architects, Inc. 8 December 1966), p. 11-12.

²⁶ Paula Wilkinson, "New Central High School Dedicated," *Chattanooga Times*, 10 November 1969.

²⁷ *The Champion* [1970], p. 105.

²⁸ *The Champion* [1970], p. 104.

more recent years of Central's history have impacted the band a great deal. Seven band directors have served there since 1970, and all of them have put their own signature on the program in turn.

Most importantly, through all of the changes that over 100 years has brought to Central High School, the band has always been an organization with devoted musicians, good music teaching, and proud traditions. CHS enjoys this very long, rich heritage, and looks with optimism into the future with a continued dedication to teaching young people through instrumental music.

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