

# The Community Band: A Community Asset, a Musical Jewel, a Family



by Colonel (United States Army, Retired) Bryan Shelburne

Community Bands come in almost as many flavors as there are communities that support them and cherish them. They each have relevance to their communities and an impact on local culture. Tim Lautzenheiser once said of music teachers, “We’re like cockroaches. They will never get rid of us!” At the time he was speaking of the latest attack upon the arts in schools, but it could apply equally well to *most of us* as musicians and directors.

Many of our community bands are remarkable in terms of the differences in how they came into being. Some were formed because members of other local groups wanted a different kind of musical outlet. Some began because directors wanted to conduct. At least one (and no doubt more) was formed because students wanted to play some different and more challenging literature. And, the origins of some of our oldest ensembles are cloaked in mystery and shrouded in the mists of the mid 1800s.

But of all of them it can be said, “*if we didn’t love it we wouldn’t do it!*” Perhaps it can be said another way: if it did not serve a need in our communities and in our lives we probably would not do it. The past has made it clear that NBA members believe in the importance of music in our lives, our schools, and our communities.

Recently I was reminded of the importance of *community bands* as *band communities*. I received an e-mail notifying all members and friends that a long time member of a certain band had died. Community bands are “families” in a very real sense. Because I know that band, I also know that the e-mail set off a chain of events involving phone calls, sympathy cards, offers of help, deliveries of food, and reminders to the family that the band

members would help in any way possible.

For community bands, and especially for those with aging populations, there seems to be a need for “**musical excellence**” as a goal to be maintained in balance with the need for “**community**.” The reality is that individuals instinctively “parse out” the relative value of these qualities according to their own needs. It is equally true that most people, regardless of age, want both **the pleasure of achieving excellence** in their ensemble, as well as the pleasure of **being part of an extended family**. Fortunately this is not an “either/or” issue. **Musically healthy community bands tend to be healthy social groups as well.**

In the article that follows I would like to give you five short and quite different profiles. You will know some, if not all of these bands. I have chosen these, in part, because they span over 100 years from the youngest to the oldest. Their members come from every walk of life. Memberships are comprised of doctors, farmers, teachers, business men and women, construction workers, stay-at-home parents, and yes, professional musicians. With rare exceptions, they are unpaid volunteers who simply love what they do.

Because this was first presented (in abbreviated form) as an oral report to the NBA Board at the 2011 Midwest Clinic, I have primarily focused upon bands with strong Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic ties (with one exception). These bands are listed chronologically, starting with the youngest of the five.



Alfred Watkins



Above: The Cobb Wind Symphony (Georgia) — Alfred Watkins, founder and principal conductor  
Note: Photo courtesy of The Midwest Clinic.

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*Rapid Accomplishments at an Early Stage*

**The Cobb Wind Symphony** (Cobb County, Georgia) is 12 years old. Formed in 1999 with about 70 original musicians, it now numbers over 100. By its third year it had already performed for the CBDNA Southern Division. As recently as January of this year they performed for the Georgia Music Educators In-Service Conference in Savannah, where they were presented the **Sousa Foundation Silver Scroll Award** for excellence. Mentioning them is timely, since under the baton of their leader—a very highly decorated **Alfred Watkins**—they were chosen to perform (for the second time) in Chicago during the 2011 Midwest Clinic. The Cobb County Wind Symphony has steadily grown in both numbers and excellence. [Note: Another Georgia group, the Tara Winds has also been a frequent guest of the Midwest Clinic. You are already well acquainted with their fine work, and perhaps also aware that our outgoing NBA President, Dr. John Culvahouse, is currently the Associate Conductor with that fine group.] ([www.cobbwindsymphony.org](http://www.cobbwindsymphony.org))

Centennial Professor of Music at the University of Texas at Austin, and holds the title of University Distinguished Teaching Professor.) Frederick Fennell became the Dallas Wind Symphony's Principal Guest Conductor from the mid-1990s until his death in 2004.

The Dallas Wind Symphony is somewhat unique in that it boasts a successful subscription series, a significant budget, and paid musicians. Its growth is impressive considering its modest beginnings. It has grown to become one of the few successful professional wind ensembles in the country. ([www.dws.org](http://www.dws.org))

*31 Years-old and Still Picking Up Steam*

Formed in 1981, it soon was designated the official band of Austin, Texas. **The Austin Symphonic Band**, was originally called the **New River City Wind Ensemble**, and was founded by a group of Austin Civic Orchestra musicians who wanted an outlet for a different form of musical expression. It was first directed by the notable **Frank Simon**, and is currently led by **Richard Floyd**, who possesses a passion for raising standards among bands and ensembles on a national scale. Floyd took charge in 1986 and continues to set high standards with this group.

The band has performed for the governor of Texas, for the Midwest, for American Bandmasters Association conferences, for Texas Music Educators, as well as for the National Band Association in conjunction with Texas Bandmasters Association in 1998. Richard Floyd was recently awarded the highest honor the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic can award: the **Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic Medal of Honor**. Floyd was presented this award during a concert at the 2011 Clinic in Chicago. Floyd is also Director of Music Activities with the University Interscholastic League of Texas at the University of Texas in Austin. ([www.austinsymphonicband.org](http://www.austinsymphonicband.org))



Jerry Junkin

**At 27 Years-old, it is the Students' Band, and the Professionals' Band**

**The Dallas Wind Symphony** (Texas) was created in 1985 when student Kim Campbell and a group of other wind and percussion students asked Southern Methodist University Music Professor, **Howard Dunn**, to direct a reading band for them. He consented and the idea took wings, becoming a permanent fixture on the SMU campus. Howard Dunn remained the founding director until his death in 1991. My personal recollection is that, after the death of Howard Dunn the band was sometimes led by interim "resident" director, Robert Floyd. Meanwhile, a nationwide search was conducted for a permanent conductor. Jerry Junkin, who by then had become a frequent guest conductor, was chosen to be Artistic Director and Conductor. (Junkin is also the Frank C. Erwin, Jr.



Richard Floyd



*Above: The Austin Symphonic Band (Texas) — Richard Floyd, principal conductor*

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### *Quite Distinguished at 56 Years of Age*

A band with longstanding ties to the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, the nearby **Northshore Concert Band** (Illinois) was formed in 1956 and led for 40 years by the late **John Paynter**. Paynter was the widely admired and beloved director of Bands at Northwestern University. Paynter was also a pillar of the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic organization for decades.

In 2003, **Dr. Mallory Thompson**, who was already the principal guest conductor of the Northshore Band, became its Artistic Director, and continues to serve in that capacity. She is, as was Paynter, the Director of Bands at Northwestern University, where she also serves as Professor of Music and Coordinator of the Conducting program.

The Northshore Concert Band is known for its rich history of support to its community, stellar performances at the Midwest, for the number of outstanding soloists with whom it has partnered, and for its consistent record of exemplary performances. It is a recipient of the **John Philip Sousa Foundation Silver Scroll** award. (Learn more at: [www.northshoreband.org](http://www.northshoreband.org))

### *153 Years-Old and Aging Gracefully*

**The Brazil Concert Band**, Brazil, Indiana, was created in 1858, making it the oldest continuously serving community band in Indiana, and one of the oldest in the nation. It was originally known as the **Brazil Cornet Band**. [I will not ignore the remarkable records of the *Allentown Band*, the *Repasz Band* and others of historic significance. I hope to profile more of our most historic bands later.] In this election year, you may find it interesting to know that The Brazil Concert Band was tasked to perform for the Lincoln-Douglass debates, held in Charleston, Illinois in 1858. This was a precursor to Lincoln's eventual election (first to Congress; later to the Presidency) and his historic Presidency. Many members of this historic band served as musicians during the Civil War. The band's relationship with composer, **Fred Jewell**, eventually led to its becoming the repository for the entire Fred Jewell collection of compositions. It maintains this archive at its



*Mallory Thompson*

rehearsal hall, which is, interestingly, a “lake house.” Its director is **Matt Huber**. The Brazil Concert Band can be numbered among North America's oldest and most historic community bands.



*Above: Director Matt Huber, and the Brazil Concert Band perform on the west side of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.*

([www.brazilconcertband.org](http://www.brazilconcertband.org))

In summary it might be said that there are many ways to “spell success.” As you noted, the stories of each of these remarkable ensembles are quite different as regards origin and longevity. However, they each serve the cause of preserving and expanding the availability of good wind music in their communities.

Each was created by very different driving forces and each has prevailed, survived, and succeeded. In addition to all the other compellingly good qualities our community bands possess, they also offer members a continuing opportunity to embrace the making and enjoyment of music throughout their lives. The importance of this is underscored by the vast legions of former school, university, and retired professional musicians who are hungry for an ongoing opportunity to perform.

And we haven't even begun to discuss the **New Horizons** movement, which is a great topic for a later time! ■



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*Above: The Northshore Concert Band (Illinois) — Mallory Thompson, principal conductor*