

An Anniversary Memoir: The Founding of The Chatham Community Band

During the planning of The Fishawack Festival in 1984, at a meeting of committee chairs, Chatham High School Band Director, Charles (Chic) Hansen, suddenly announced that as part of the music and entertainment (of which he was in charge), he would like to debut a town band. (He had been thinking of this project for a while and had previously enjoyed a discussion of ideas--specifically the development of a Sousa Band--with several musically inclined residents.) The Fishawack Committee Chairs immediately encouraged him, and with that, he turned to Kathy Rex, representing the Library, and requested that she initiate all the publicity and organization. Active in Chic's High School Band Aides, she had worked with him on band camps, musicals, and competitions, so he knew she had that kind of experience. Immediately, Fran Drew, then owner of Cafe Beethoven and in charge of Festival food vendors, volunteered her services, with the stipulation that Chic would allow her to play the bass drum! Kathy chimed in and said she'd take his requested assignment, but wanted to be the bells player! They really gave him no choice! Chic had his first two official band members!

As word went out, others quickly signed up, all excited to be able to play the instruments most had abandoned after high school or college. Jay Hazen (clarinet), Clark Hontz (tuba), Ken Hetrick, Township Administrator (French horn), and Art Ebeling, CHS Principal (baritone horn), all supporters of the earlier "Sousa Band" conversations, were on board first, along with Hazen's sons Drew and John (clarinet and trumpet); and Hontz' son, Clark, Jr., and stepsons, John and Alan Thomas (all on trumpet).

Other parents and siblings of Chic's students also showed up at the first rehearsals: Mary Druding (flute) with daughter Jean on oboe and son Peter on baritone; Don and Dave Haberstroh (both clarinet); Bill Dale and daughter Kristin (trombone and clarinet); brothers Ed and Drew Leithead, both on trombone; and brothers Jeff and Robert Zitofsky (trombone and timpani). Fran's sister, Rosanne Maraziti, came to play, as well as

long-time residents, alumni, teachers, and students: Robin Holder, Kathie Baklarz, Terry Pariso, Christine Eknoian and Linda Ziegler (clarinets); Eloise Canfield, Lisa Thompson, and Cathy McMahon (flutes); Jim Finn, Jaycee leader Jim Welch, Stan Bess, and Chris Glover (saxophones); Pete Zimmerman, tuba; Dave Morrow, drums; Rich Behling, Sky Bergen, Dave Pike, Trip Costner, Bob Senior, and David Weinert (trumpets); Methodist Church minister Dale Forsman (baritone); and Margaret Koelliker (French horn).

The big concert was the prime feature and a huge hit at the Fishawack Festival in June, 1984, with a repertoire that included Sousa marches, excerpts from "The Sound of Music," and the Barry Manilow song, "Even Now." Of course, the Band, as now, started with the National Anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner." A rousing rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever" completed the program. All Band members were sporting straw hats, and most remembered to wear white shirts!

After the initial success at Fishawack, no one wanted to quit, so the group contrived to be invited to play in the July 4th Parade, supplying our own truck. The student members did double duty--they walked with the High School Marching Band and then ran back and climbed aboard with the Community Band.

Soon, Chic had another idea. The word was put out for chorus members to join the group, and an early fall joint vocal and instrumental concert was presented in Cafe Beethoven's parking lot, featuring a stirring rendition of "The Battle Hymn of Republic." The Band's first winter appearance was in March, 1985, as part of "Music in the Schools" month, which that year had a theme of "Music For All Ages" (and our Band members are living proof--over the years, members have ranged in age from 14 to over 70 at any given time!).



By this time, the group had become official. We rehearsed regularly and for free at Chatham High School (on Main Street at the time) since both the Band Director and Principal were very involved. It had incorporated as "The Chatham Community Band," had officers (Jay Hazen, President; Kathy Rex, Secretary/Treasurer) and trustees (such as Clark Hontz, Sr., well-known for his insistence on musical integrity, Sky Bergen for his "Fishawack Jass Band," Mary Druding, Dave Pike, Bill Dale, Rich Behling, and Ellen Roberts), a budget (and of course, dues), and was accumulating a music library. The Band was in demand--at nursing homes and community events.

President Hazen conceived and spent a great deal of time on a wonderful idea--the Band became affiliated with The Adult School of The Chathams, Madison, and Florham Park. This provided a constant avenue for new members, and the security of regular rehearsal space and insurance coverage, all essential to continue and flourish. For example, when Chic retired as Director, and his replacement, Stan West, was not on the Chatham staff, school facilities were still available through the Adult School contracts. Also, many concert locations insisted the Band be insured, and that was now guaranteed. Band members "join" the Adult School through annual dues, and so the Band is a benefit to it, too.

Eventually, another committee, headed by Art Ebeling, worked hard and succeeded in qualifying the Band as a 501(c)3 Federal Tax Exempt organization, paving the way for it to receive grants from such illustrious groups as The Dodge Foundation and The Arts Council of the Morris Area, as well as matching corporate funds.

Fran Drew spearheaded a community fundraising project to build The Chatham Community Gazebo in Reasoner Park, primarily to provide a spot for outdoor Community Band concerts, which was dedicated at a later Fishawack concert. We all "bought" railing posts to contribute to the structure.

The first annual and formal March concerts were presented in the meeting room of The Library of The Chathams, with a limited number of tickets available, and also began the tradition of featuring a successful alumnus (John Leister, for example), or local celebrities (once the Library Director

and Mayor played the vacuum cleaner and blender, respectively), or another arts group (The Chatham Community Players). Ensembles made up of our more practiced performers and area professional soloists have also been highlights. The performances were so popular, the Band had to move to other larger venues, such as the Community Room (gym) in the Township Hall complex and the Chatham Fish & Game Club. Currently, these concerts are performed in the auditoriums of our local schools. We began recording our concerts and selling cassette tapes, and in 2003, we put out our first concert CD (sorry, we're sold out)!

Over the 20 years, as membership ebbed and flowed, and through the next two Directors, Laurie DeBiase and the current Brian Conti, the Chatham Community Band has played in almost every July 4th Parade; parades in Madison, Mendham, and New Providence; in Frelinghuysen Arboretum, Scotch Plains, and New Providence summer concert series; in the Malls of Short Hills and Livingston; at dedications of local fields and parks and playgrounds and gazebos and buildings; at memorials and centennials; at Runnells and King James and Morris View and VA facilities; at fundraisers and Christmas events; and even for one President! Special concerts have been geared to children, and we have sponsored a battle of the (community) bands. The officers and board schedule and arrange an annual summer concert series of The Band's own in Chatham Borough and Township, supported financially by the Boards of Recreation of both towns. We have happily been the recipients of donations from local service clubs (Jaycees, Kiwanis, and Rotary Club) and several commercial organizations.

The Band practices every Tuesday night of the year, with the exception of the month of August. It's fun, difficult, exciting, relaxing, and terrific therapy! One official social event for members and families is sponsored each year, which started out as a pot luck dinner and is now catered. Other spontaneous gatherings are enjoyed as they happen. If you ever played an instrument and want to try again, come join The Chatham Community Band. Be there for the next 20 years!