



Dunstable cornet band

Lined up for inspection at the 1878 muster of the Massachusetts Volunteer

Militia at Framingham camp grounds is the Dunstable Cornet Band, first mounted unit in the Commonwealth.

Dunstable Cornet Band paraded on horseback

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

DUNSTABLE — With plans gathering momentum everywhere for the Bi-Centennial celebration, many community parades will be staged during the coming months.

And with a parade there are invariably marching musical units at the head of each division.

Were we celebrating the 100th year of our country's founding instead of the approaching bi-centennial, one of the featured musical organizations taking part, no doubt, would be the Dunstable Cornet Band.

It was not only a prize-winning musical group but they gave the viewers the spectacle of playing while mounted on horseback, a rarity today as it was a century ago.

The band was a small group, usually 18 in number, but they were resplendent in long, navy blue coats generously splashed with gold trim on red broadcloth in the front. There was a profusion of gilt braid on the cuffs and gold epaulettes on the shoulders. Topping all this was a visor cap (with much ornamentation) and a red and white fountain plume. Shades of the Czars!

The beat of drums, the crashing symbols, the heavy notes of the basses or the trumpeting of the cornets had no noticeable effect on the horses. With most of the musicians coming from the farm, they rode their own steeds. This made good understanding between man and beast.

The horses plodded along with the guidance of a stout cord from bridle to each stirrup, leaving the rider free to clutch his instrument and play freely as the parade swung down Main Street past the reviewing stand.

Matching Equipment

Uniformly equipped with matching saddles (at a cost of \$5.50 each), the horses' bridles and saddle cloths also matched. Some say that this group was so well-trained that the horses stepped with the beat of the bass drum.

In those days, long before record players, radio and TV, it was quite common for towns and even villages to organize a local band, in which they took great pride. The Dunstable Cornet Band was formed in 1861 from a small orchestral group and was one of the best. Its

services were always in great demand everywhere.

Soon after formation, the band participated in an inter-state band competition, held in Nashua in 1868. The country boys, most of whom were self-taught, came off with second prize.

While they called themselves a cornet band (a common term), perhaps the definition "brass band" might have been more appropriate. There were five cornet players, nine who played tubas of various sizes, and a single trombonist — but he was one of the best. His name was Ellis Brooks who later played with John Philip Sousa and the United States Marine Band. He also conducted two other bands as well as his own.

With Other Bands

Players often "moonlighted" with other bands in the vicinity, such as the American Waltham Watch, the United Shoe Machinery and Nashua Military bands. On all important occasions, such as Memorial Day and the 4th of July, the Dunstable ensemble was engaged at an early date.

Not only did the Dunstable band appear in local functions but for nearly forty years during its existence it was featured throughout the state and beyond. They played concerts at fairs, celebrations, fraternal gatherings. They marched or rode in military funerals, political torchlight parades and acted as a military escort for dignitaries, including presidents of the United States. In 1875, they escorted the official Carlisle delegation to the centennial celebration at Concord at which President U.S. Grant attended.

Their favorite assignment was to attend, along with members of Troop F Cavalry First Brigade, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, the annual musters and other special military occasions. Members of Troop F principally came from adjoining Chelmsford and Westford, but Dunstable was also represented. Both organizations were mounted and this association continued for 31 years.

Hiram Spaulding, a local farmer who played cornet, was the leader and manager of the band for three decades. His small-town (population then, 560; now, 1,400) musical family is still remembered by old-timers.

Bright Uniforms

In the earlier days, the uniforms were plain and the equipment for the horses ran from cowboy to English model saddles. The blankets, bridles and other equipment was what the members found on the farm.

As their reputation increased, so did the splash of their equipment. They had various uniforms, including a set of bright red coats (trimmed with black braid) with blue striped trousers. Most dashing of all, perhaps, was the outfit using yellow coats trimmed with black braid, and white trousers.

Brooks' father built a bandwagon to use on special occasions. When the band broke up in 1897, the wagon was purchased by one of the tuba players, John Upton. Later it was purchased by a Fallon family in North Chelmsford and its whereabouts, at present, is not known.

The people of this small and still rural town of Dunstable can look back with pride that there were among them men with foresight, persistency and ingenuity, combined with showmanship and musical ability, which rightfully earned an honored position in the entertainment field.

First in Commonwealth

It could be said that the Dunstable Cornet band was the first in the state who tooted their own horns while parading on horseback!

Other members of the band, all from long-known Dunstable families, included Franklin N. Towles, Leroy C. Woodward, Addison Woodward, Henry J. Towles, Gilman Barrows, Everett M. Cheney, Thomas O'Brien, Luther G. Robbins, Bowman A. Gale, Ernest Palmer, Elfred B. Swallow, Daniel Swallow, George Gay, Albert Hartwell, Thomas P. Woodward, William L. French, Clarence Spaulding and Nathaniel A. Kendall.

Were the Dunstable Cornet Band in existence today, we might see the TV, still and motion cameras zooming in on the group as this musical unit, outfitted in bright reds, blues and gold, on April 19th leading the parade of parades!

It may be safe to say that old scenes will be re-enacted the next two years in observance of two centuries of American history, but there will never be anything like the old Dunstable Cornet Band.

Sound off, boys, and let's start the parade!