

History of the Chatham Band

AT THE ATWOOD

By Spencer Grey

In the fall of 1930, some members of the Chatham American Legion went to Boston for a Legion Convention. While there, they watched a parade that included several bands from Legion Posts throughout the state. They decided that the Chatham Post should also have a band, and Alexander Griffin, Arthur Wholly, Howard James, and Dick Farrenkopf volunteered to find members who could play instruments and to appoint a director. They discovered that several members were playing with dance bands and that others were interested in learning how to play an instrument.

Thomas Nassi, an Albanian who was the instructor of instrumental music in the Chatham School, had played in an army band in his native country, and he agreed to teach legion members how to play an instrument and to direct the band once it was formed. During the winter of 1931, the fledgling band of 45 members began rehearsing, and by the following summer they were ready to play for lawn parties and other occasions. Mrs. Herbert Winslow, a sponsor of one such party raised money to buy uniforms, as well as a bass drum and bass horn.

During the summer of 1933, they played concerts for the town on several occasions. At the end of the concert season, they held a banquet at the American Legion Hall where they had been practicing. Fifty-two people attended the banquet at a total cost of \$56. The band originally was known as the American Legion Band, but as time went on, fewer band members belonged to the Legion and the town was paying them to give summer concerts. They therefore changed their name to the "Chatham Band," as it is still known.

In January of 1934, members of the band decided to hold a dance at the Chatham Manor, the local dance hall and basketball court. The theme was "Old Timers Night," and prizes were given for the best costume and the best waltz couple. With three hundred people attending, the event produced a profit of \$16. Encouraged by this success, the group decided to hold a barn dance in the same location, with added prizes for the person who could drink cider from a nursing bottle, peeling the most potatoes in a minute, and the best square dancing group. These dances were attended by as many as 550 people from all over Cape Cod and were held every year until 1942, when the group was disbanded for the duration of World War II.

At the end of the war in 1946 the band was reorganized with Whitney Tileston as director. The Friday night band concerts were resumed. The band's participation in the Memorial Day and Armistice Day parades also resumed. Those parades started at 9 a.m. and ended at 10. The band members then went in cars to Harwich, where they marched from Harwich Center to Harwichport. At the end of that parade, they went on to Dennisport to march there from 1 to 2 p.m.

About 1979, Juliet Bernstein wrote to the State House to report that the Chatham Band received financial support from the town and was therefore required to accept women, even though its bylaws specified that members must be 18 years old and male. The bylaws were changed so that "male" was deleted. Over the next 10 years, no women asked to join, but in 2016 there were about 15 women in the band.

The Friday night Chatham concerts started in 1932 and were played in the bandstand that stood across the street from the Epicure on the edge of what is now the town parking lot. In 1946, the bandstand was moved to Kate Gould Park where the concerts continue to be held. When the concerts were being held in the original location, attendance averaged 300 to 400, but after the location was moved to Kate Gould Park attendance increased to as many as 4,000 in the 1960s and even more today.

In 1978, *National Geographic* ran an article, complete with photographs, about the band, and over the years it has been featured periodically on television. In 1988, Channel 5 interviewed longtime director Whitney Tileston, as well as several members of the band. Because he was such a colorful director, Tileston was responsible for much of the increase in attendance at the concerts that he conducted until his death in 1995. At that point, assistant concertmaster Ken Eldredge took over the baton. Succeeding Ken was Tom Janke, who is the current Director.

Information about Chatham Band, Inc. is available at www.chathamband.com, and for more information about Chatham's History, see www.chathamhistoricalsociety.org.