

## Piping Hot Highlanders

The Penn-York Highlander Pipe Band Exercises Its Scottish Pipes in PA and NY

By Roberta McCulloch-Dews

**G**eorge Whyte of Athens, Pennsylvania, recalls when he and a friend first signed on to join the Penn-York Highlander Pipe Band. “I remember an ad in the paper back in 1960. It was on a lark. We saw that they needed members, and I said, ‘Let’s go and join.’” And so Whyte entered the world of bagpipes, kilts, and tartan plaid, beginning a fifty-year involvement with one of the humanity’s more distinctive musical ensembles.

The two friends went up to the VFW in Sayre, he says. “We filled out an application and joined. All you had to do was sign, and you were in.”

Lucky for Whyte, who’s now the pipe major, the requirements weren’t stringent. “The joke

was the only thing I could play was the radio. But I started to play the tenor drum. My buddy played it, too. Then he dropped out, but I stayed in,” says Whyte, who also happens to be the mayor of Athens.

Since then, Whyte has been a part of the pipe band, also known as the Highlanders, and has loved every minute of the experience. The rules are a little different for members who join today. “Now you have to audition for the instrument that you want to play,” Whyte says. “And there is a commitment that is required when a person signs up.”

The band is comprised of about thirty members. “It’s like a big family. You’ll find that pipe band people are easygoing,” he says. “There’s a nucleus of about twelve to fifteen

players that make the parades in the summer.”

The group holds practices every Thursday night in the Athens Borough Hall. And with its big season kicking off this month—St. Patrick’s Day parades in Binghamton, Scranton, and Wilkes-Barre—the band intends to get in some practices on Sunday, as well.

“There’s a lot of competition in pipe band groups. I would say there are levels of playing ability,” Whyte says. “Grade 1 is the top, and they’re usually from Scotland. We play in Grade 5.”

While this is the rating that Whyte ascribes to the band, the group’s notoriety in the area and their presence at notable events cannot

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George Whyte (far left) and the Penn-York Highlanders on parade in Candor, New York.

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be understated. “We’ve been leading the St. Patrick’s parade in Scranton every year that they’ve had it. The year that Hillary Clinton was running for president, the crowd was about 300,000,” he said.

Whyte says that this year the band was booked far in advance for certain engagements—a result of the recession, as well as the band’s popularity. “We found that a lot of the committees wanted our commitment early due to the economy. We got requests way back in the fall because they only had a certain amount of money to put into their events,” he says.

Back in 1957 the Highlanders first came together as a group. But before it was a pipe band, some of those involved were once organized in bugle and drum corps. “Back after the Second World War, American Legions all had bugle corps. There was one in Athens that had sixty to seventy members,” says Whyte, of the corps that participated in parades and festivals. “It was an outlet for their social activities; some of the [legion] posts were huge and had become main social

aspects of the community.”

But as times changed, participation in the corps leveled off. “In the early ’60s it kind of dropped off,” he says.

That would have been the end of the band, but someone mentioned transitioning the group into a pipe band. “Other people got involved, and it grew into twenty or thirty people.”

The band then looked for outfits to match their new roles. “The band bought kilts and items that would best be described as from the play Brigadoon,” Whyte jokes. “They got uniforms from a play group in Binghamton, and then sent to Scotland for the bag pipes.”

In the early days of the pipe band, Whyte says the members had to be fast learners of their new instruments and did what they could to adjust. “They started to raise money for the group and as they progressed, they met individuals from other areas who had played for a while,” he says. “Between the ’70s and ’80s, the band finally got formal instruction from a guy in Ithaca.”

The Highlanders have been able to hone their playing skills and maintain the group due to the commitment of the members, and that includes a few young people, as well, Whyte

says. “We just took in a female drummer from Towanda, and she is in high school. The younger kids that do join have a good time.”

Dave Cook is one of those deeply committed members of the band. Cook, who now lives in Romulus, New York, just outside Geneva, isn’t able to make certain events, but he does his best to attend the rest of events.

“My original commute from Ithaca was about one hour, but now my trip is a little less than two hours, or about 100 miles,” says Cook, who joined the band nearly seven years ago. “This commute does preclude me from making some of the early departure bus trips. However, now that I am retired I hope to be able to get a hotel room in the Athens area the night before to make these longer trips.”

Plus, there’s one more benefit that Cook derives from the band that makes it worth his time. “There are other bands in Syracuse and Rochester, but they do not do as many events as the Penn-York Highlanders, and I would doubt they are as much fun, anyway.”

*Writer Roberta McCulloch-Dews is a resident of Horseheads, New York.*

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