

That Michigan Band

A History of the University of Michigan Band

By Joseph Dobos '71

Chapter Three

“A Sincere Venture” 1896 - 1897

On the night of November 13, 1896, twenty-two musicians—most of whom were students at the University—met in Harris Hall, on the corner of Huron and State Streets, for the first rehearsal of what was hoped to be the start of a new band for the University of Michigan. This meeting was the result of the organizational and recruiting efforts for four people—Henri (Harry de Pont) and Dan Zimmerman, Ray P. Warren, and George Levin. Zimmerman and de Pont were seniors at Ann Arbor High School; Warren was a student at the Ann Arbor School of Music; Levin was a University student. At the rehearsal, the first order of business was to take up a collection for the purchase of music. An election was held to decide who should take charge of the band, and it was decided that Ray Warren would serve as conductor and that Harry de Pont would be the band’s manager.

The choice of Ray Warren and Harry de Pont was not unexpected; during the previous year, both, along with Dan Zimmerman, had organized a successful orchestra at Ann Arbor High School which was located on the street corner opposite Harris Hall. At the time, all three were still students at the high school. This high school orchestra was conducted by Warren, and de Pont served as its manager. Both were proven leaders who, one year later, would be able to enlist musicians to form a band at the University.

Although still a high school student during the fall of 1896, Harry de Pont had considerable “connections” with the University. His father, Professor Paul Rosseau Bellon

de Pont, was one of the most well-known and respected members of the University faculty. He came to the University in 1871 as an instructor of French and drama. Later, he was appointed Assistant Registrar of the University and was one of the founders of the University Choral Union. Professor de Pont was one of the closest associates and friends with the University's venerable president, James Burrill Angell. The de Pont family was a musical one— besides Harry, de Pont's other sons, Eduard and Donald, were also musicians. As an active member of the Episcopal Church, Professor de Pont was partially responsible for the building of Harris Hall— originally named Hobart Hall— in 1886.

Soon after the band's first rehearsal, the *Daily* noted that "since the days of the Chequamegon band, the University has been without an organization of this kind, but this lack will henceforth be filled." Warren and de Pont referred to the band as a "student organization" hoping that it would receive the "heartly support of the students." Because there were several "experienced" players in the band, it was announced that "the band will soon be ready for its first appearance."

In spite of this encouraging news, there were still difficulties to overcome. The band was in need of musicians who could play clarinet, trombone, alto horn, and bass drum. Also, Harris Hall was not available for further rehearsals; the time and place of the second meeting of the band would be "announced later."

During the first few months of the band's existence, there was a continual search for a suitable place to rehearse. Until a permanent home could be found, rehearsals were held in Ann Arbor High School, the upstairs room of Calkin's Drug Store on State Street, and rooms over several stores on Main Street. Years later, de Pont recalled that the band was "driven from place to place, not on account of the quality of the music, but by reason of other elements entering into the situation." Even though it did not have a home, the band declared itself to be a "permanent organization" in January 1897 and adopted a constitution.

A solution had to be found, and during the first week of February 1897, Harry de Pont decided to approach University president— an old family friend— James Angell for assistance. In his twenty-sixth year in office, President Angell was already a legendary figure on campus. As both a visionary educator and a brick and mortar administrator, he transformed the University into one of the most prominent— and one of the largest— learning centers in the country. The construction of new buildings barely kept pace with the ever rising student enrollment. In spite of his reputation as an innovator, he saw no need to incorporate music into the University curriculum as long as there were "private" musical organizations— the Ann Arbor School of Music and the University Choral Union— that could provide for the musical needs of the campus community.

Even though Harry de Pont was still a high school student when he met with President Angell, they were not strangers; President Angell was well acquainted with the de Pont family. When Harry boldly asked for use of a University room for the band's rehearsal site, Angell cautiously replied, "I shall be very glad to assist the band, but you

must show me that this is a sincere venture.ö From an older man to a young man in his teens, it was, at best, a polite answer. Harry de Pont quickly responded that the band was övery sincereö and öto prove this assertion, the band would furnish music for the Washingtonø Birthdayö observance which was held every year by the Law School on February 22 in University Hall. The Washingtonø Birthday observance was one of the premiere events of the school year, and over the years, many well known politicians, authors, and jurists had come to Ann Arbor to give the annual address.

Wasting little time, the band, as de Pont described it, ögot busy and loaded up on a lot of good marches, and then on the twenty-second of February 1897, the band made its first public appearance.ö The performance öcould not have come at a better timeö, commented the *Daily*, and öit is to be regretted that they were not given a more prominent part in the exercises.ö Because the band provided music at the close of the ceremony, ömany of those present did not hear any of the music.ö For the members of the band, the most memorable moment of this inaugural performance was afterwards, when the band marched through the ömud on State Street.ö

The bandø performance was in de Pontø opinion öa hitö, and President Angell gave permission for the band to rehearse in Room A in University Hallö the main building on campus which was located behind the present Angell Hall. Later, rehearsal was moved to Room E in the North Wing. These arrangements, however, proved unsatisfactory to the students and faculty who occupied the adjacent class rooms. The thin walls did little to muffle the loud sounds produced by the band. It was an intolerable situation, and despite de Pontø friendship with President Angell, the band, by the end of March, was forced to search for new quarters. Eventually, a room was found over Calkinø Drug Store on State Street where the band could practice.

In spite of this setback, a campus campaign, organized by Bill Day and Archie Cook of the Athletic Association, began seeking donations for the band. In return, the band agreed to provide music for some of the home track meets and baseball games. It was pointed out that Michigan spectators demonstrated a ölack of enthusiasm and supportö for athletic events, and that öwith a good band in attendance, there should be no difficulty in arousing any amount of enthusiasm.ö

On March 27, 1897, the band played at the indoor track meet where a University student, Louis Elbel, tied the then world record for the 40 yard dash. The *Daily* reported that the öunavoidable delays were enlivened with good music by the University Bandö, and that the performance was öenthusiastically applaudedö showing the öresult of careful and persistent training.ö

The Athletic Associationø campaign was a success, and it enabled the band to purchase much needed music. That spring, the University Band became a regular feature at outdoor athletic events öplaying all the latest songs and dances between acts of the baseball game.ö It was noted that the baseball team, öenlivenedö by the bandø presence, played öeven harder under its influence.ö

Another campus solicitation was made— this time to purchase uniforms for the band. Attired in their new “uniforms”— white duck trousers, dark coats, and blue caps with a yellow “M”, the band made its first appearance outside of Ann Arbor on May 29, 1897 when it traveled to Detroit to play for a track and field meet which was followed by a baseball game between the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago. After the game, the band led a procession up Jefferson and Woodward Avenues. The *Daily* noted that “the playing of the band was a surprise to those who had not heard it before and came in for numerous compliments all along the line of march.” The paper also reported that the band “was quite a feature of the day” and that “much praise” was due to its director, Ray Warren.

The band was also active at non-athletic campus events and provided music for several spring time dances. Recalling his participation at one of these events, John C. Watson, a clarinet player in the band, wrote of his experience— calling it a Michigan Band “first”: “For the Junior Prom in 1897, held in the then gymnasium, the waltzes were played by the orchestra on one side of the running track and the two-steps by the full band on the other side. As my clarinet was required both in the band and in the orchestra, I remembered that it required fast work to change over and that I had a busy night.”

On June 27, during Commencement Week, the band played for the Evening Promenade amidst decorations of Chinese lanterns that hung from the trees along the “diagonal”. The next day, under the “Tappan Oak”, the band played for the Class Day exercises of the Literary School seniors.

As the school year came to an end, the *Michigan Alumnus* magazine praised the University Band— which it called a “new organization this year”— and “hoped that this organization can be continued” at Commencement Week and “as on many other occasions, they gave great satisfaction, and it seems more patriotic to listen to their music than to that of men imported for the week.”

During its first year of existence, the membership of the band fluctuated— never exceeded two dozen players. All together, thirty-three musicians at one time or another played with the University Band that year.

The University of Michigan Band
Personnel 1896-97

Drum Major

Alva Fred Travers, 1900, *played piccolo in the 1900-02 bands*

A Sincere Venture

Piccolo

Eugene Saunders, Ø9 Lit

Clarinet

W. J. Gillett, E-flat, Ø9 Lit

Frank Wightman, 1st, School of Music, *later became instructor at Latter Day Saints College in Salt Lake City, Utah*

John C. Watson, 2nd, Ø00 Lit

S. B. Dudley, 1st, Ø7 Med

Henry Backhaus, 2nd

D. A. Mills, 2nd

L. O. Pring, Ø00 Pharmacy

Saxophone

Theodore Backhaus, Ann Arbor resident

Cornet

Ray P. Warren, Solo, Director of the Band, a vocal student at the School of Music in 1896 and again in 1900 and 1906. *He remained an Ann Arbor resident for several decades where he served as a cashier for the Ann Arbor Water Company, worked for his father's insurance agency, taught music as a private vocal instructor, and played cornet in the Majestic Theater Orchestra.*

Harry G. Schock, Solo, Ø7 Lit

Harry Martin, Solo, Ø8 Lit

N. D. Coons, Solo, Ø8 Med

Harry de Pont, Solo, a senior at Ann Arbor High School. *In 1897, he enrolled at the University and graduated in 1901 (Lit) with a degree in analytical chemistry. Upon graduation, he moved to Fruitport and eventually took up permanent residence in Chelsea, Michigan.*

Oren H. Fisher, 1st, Ø9 Lit

R. E. Springett, 2nd, Ø9 Lit

A. J. Kuykendall, Ø9 Lit

Alto Horn

George Le Vine [sic Levin?], Solo, 99 Lit

Daniel F. Zimmerman, 1st, a senior at Ann Arbor High School, *later graduated from the University in 1901*

Louis J. Fletcher, 2nd, Ø8 Lit

Trombone

Frank F. Monfort, 1st, Ø00 Med

A Sincere Venture

Bruce Shorts, 1st, 09 Lit
L. D. Bates, 2nd, Ann Arbor resident
C. H. Ballard, 00 Med

Baritone

Charles B. Porter, 09 Med
B. A. Sweet, 00 Pharmacy

Bass

Fred H. Harris, 08 Med

Drum

Edward P. de Pont, Ann Arbor resident
Donald M. de Pont, a freshman at Ann Arbor High School, later attended the School of Music
Frank Corbusier, Cymbal, student at Ann Arbor High School
D. A. Butten, 07 Eng
W. Meyer, Snare, Ann Arbor resident

While most of the band members were University students, the presence of non-students reflected the informal town and gown relationship that existed between the University and the resident population of the city of Ann Arbor.

Notes: Chapter Three

- 1 At the time, all three were still students: Ann Arbor High School *Omega*, 1897.
- 1 An election was held: *Daily*, Nov. 13, 1896.
- 1 Soon after the band's first rehearsal: *Daily*, Nov. 21, 1896.
- 1 receive the hearty support of the students: *Daily*, Jan. 11, 1897.
- 1 ready for its first appearance: *Daily*, Nov. 21, 1896.
- 2 a permanent organization: *Daily*, Jan. 16, 1897.
- 2 Even though Harry: *Michigan Alumnus*, (MA) Vol. 32, p. 748.
- 2 it is to be regretted: *Daily*, Feb. 24, 1897.
- 2 mud on State Street: MA, Vol. 32, p. 748.
- 3 with a good band in attendance: *Daily*, Mar. 23, 1897.
- 3 On March 27: *Daily*, Mar. 29, 1897.
- 3 The Athletic Association's campaign: *Daily*, Apr. 30, 1897.
- 3 enlivened by the band's presence: *Daily*, May 13, 1897.
- 3 After the game, the band led: *Daily*, June 1, 1897.
- 3 For the Junior Prom: Letter, John C. Watson to Fred Bradley, Oct. 14, 1966.
- 3 As the school year came to an end: MA, Vol. 3, p. 275.
- 4 During its first year: MA Vol. 32, p. 747. *Omega*, 1897. *Michiganensian*, 1897.