

## **The Early Years of Piping and Drumming in North America: Interview with Ozzie Reid**

*Ozzie Reid was one of the founders of what is now the Western U.S. Pipe Band Association, a long-time pipe major of Dunvegan Pipe Band, and leader of a number of workshops for the Intermountain Branch when the Branch was in its infancy.*

*Ozzie was interviewed Sept. 23 and Sept. 25, 2020, by Susan Thornton of the Intermountain Branch, former president of the WUSPBA, Chair of the WUSPBA's Presidents' Council, and piper with Denver & District Pipe Band.*

### **The Status of Piping and Drumming in the Northwestern U.S. in the 1950s**

Asked about the status of piping and drumming in the northwestern U.S. in the early 1950s -- prior to the establishment of any association in the area -- Ozzie stated that many players and teachers at the time were formerly from Scottish military regiments, many teachers dating as far back as World War 1, 1914-1918.

Many bands, he stated, were made up of Scottish clans, and mostly were playing old folk songs. Most bands didn't take competition seriously, he said; instead, "they put on the kilt and they were done."

Ozzie noted that the WUSPBA was preceded by the Pacific Coast Pipe Band Association, which began around 1963 when 60 pipers, drummers and drum majors began meeting in the Town Hall Hotel in Santa Rosa. *[The PCPBA was incorporated In 1964.]*

Ozzie explained that formation of the PCPBA was driven by several factors.

First, players felt that the games organizers were hiring poorly qualified judges. Many of those judges, he said, favored certain bands, and came out just to have a good time. As a result, Ozzie stated, "Bands were not getting the results they deserved."

Second, there were issues with players being stolen or coming from outside the area to compete with local bands. For example, he explained, half the pipers in one Los Angeles band came from Chicago. There were "brawls" about bands stealing players. "We were killing ourselves," he stated. "We could see disaster [for piping and drumming] ahead."

Thinking ahead, he said, "We had to establish basic rules, or otherwise contests would just be drunken brawls."

Even the PCPBA meetings were "famous for their brawls," Ozzie said, as participants held a variety of strong opinions about the future of pipe band competitions.

One problem with infighting was that many of the pipers and drummers were what Ozzie called "shifters." They were not highly educated. Instead, they did shift work -- union work as

carpenters, etc. "Piping came down through the trades from Scotland. There was unionized rivalry between the trades," he stated.

People he remembers as those who could think clearly about the future of pipe band competitions were Glen Smith, Drum Major from San Francisco, who Ozzie described as "a stalwart" in the discussions; Trevor Adkinson, piper from Napa; and Charlie Capperald. Ozzie said that he and the others were considered "rabble-rousers" at the time.

Some women were involved in the PCPBA discussions, including Cathy Cameron from the Cameron Highlands.

Ozzie also spoke of Jimmy McColl, who came from a tiny village in Scotland called Schotts, where he worked as a blacksmith and played with Schotts and Dykehead Caledonian Pipe Band, which still exists today.

Ozzie and Jimmy had a great friendship. Ozzie described Jimmy as a "fine player." Jimmy never sought glory, Ozzie said; he was very shy.

Participants in the earliest meetings set up an advisory committee to establish rules, Ozzie said, and that was the beginning of order. The PCPBA did a lot of good, he noted, giving judges a base for scoring, and requiring that band members be registered.

The San Francisco games were the first to use the PCPBA's new judging rules, he stated, with others quickly following.

Games were receptive to proposed changes, he said, because they realized that pipe band competitions are what bring people to the games. The biggest games at the time were in Santa Monica, followed by Santa Rosa. Santa Rosa was very hospitable to bands and judges, he noted.

The Los Angeles Scots and John McAllister broke the barrier musically, he said, improving playing, undertaking more difficult sets, and "showing what pipe bands could do."

Ozzie noted that the PCPBA lasted until the Western U.S. Pipe Band Association was organized in 1986.

"I'm very proud that what we accomplished [in the PCPBA] is still here today," he stated.

### **Ozzie's Piping History**

Ozzie's piping teacher was his father, who was self-taught but who Ozzie described as a "very good piper." He was a baker, working night shifts in a small town in Northern Ireland. His father led a small local pipe band, in which Ozzie played as a youngster.

When Ozzie was 16, he had an aunt living in California. Times were tough economically in Northern Ireland, so when his aunt described life in America as "everything being roses," Ozzie emigrated to join her and went to high school in California.

Ozzie played in the late-1950 with the Sixth Army Pipe Band, which was originally formed in Germany by General Mark Clark after WW II. The band was headquartered at the Presidio in San Francisco. To play with the band, you had to enlist in the Army for a three-year hitch and also be auditioned. When once asked if he had any history about the band, Ozzie replied, "We never wrote a history, we *were* it! He said they were "on the road 28 days a month."

Ozzie also played with the Lockheed Employees Recreation Association Band, with Calvin Biggar as Pipe Major. Ozzie remembers that Lockheed gave the band practice space but never any equipment or financial support. "We did the work and they got the publicity," Ozzie said.

Eventually members got fed up, and left the Lockheed practice site and changed the band's name to the Dunvegan Pipe Band, which Ozzie led as Pipe Major for many years.

Ozzie was playing a pigskin bag at the time, which he described as "not at all air-tight." He said he had to frequently season it with treacle (blackstrap molasses). *[I know personally that this is true because once, at his request, my husband and I brought him a tin of treacle from Scotland – and it opened in our suitcase. What a mess!]*

When he was interviewed, Ozzie's pipes – still with a pigskin bag – sat in the corner of his room.

### **The Dr. Dan Reid Memorial Challenge**

With financial support from the St. Andrew Society of San Francisco, Ozzie founded the Dr. Dan Reid Memorial Challenge in 1992. Dr. Reid was a well-liked local piper and member of the Society who was killed in a climbing accident in 1991.

Ozzie wanted Society members to learn about and hear the finest piobaireachd players in the world, so he established the prestigious black-tie event that invited top-level piobaireachd players for a day of competition in one of the best hotels in San Francisco. That was followed by an evening of fine dining, a display of hot piping, and the awarding of prizes.

Noted competitors who attended the invitational event included Bill Livingston, Willi3 McCallum, Jack Lee, Michael Rogers, Bruce Gandy, Roddy MacLeod, Andrew Hays and Stuart Liddell.

### **Conclusion**

Reviewing his piping career and his contributions to piping, drumming and pipe band competitions, Ozzie said, "It has been an honor to play the pipes. Who could have imagined such a future for a boy from a small town in Northern Ireland?"

"I have tried to give back as much as I could. It has truly been a pleasure."