



Above: This is a photo of the Athens Orchestra in 1914. (Front L-R) Miss L. Ney, Mrs. George E. Judson, and Miss E. Bottomley. (Back L-R) Fred Hollingsworth, Wesley Morris, Roscoe DeWolfe, who enlisted in WWI to play in the military band and is named on the Vimy monument, and Crawford Slack.



***All photos courtesy of Township of Athens and Area Heritage Society.**

Left: An Athens mural, painted by John Hood in 1987, depicted the uniformed band in the park bandstand on a summer evening.



Above: This bugle was owned by the Taylors, who were part of the Athens band. Could this have been the instrument that summoned residents to listen to outside performances?
Right: This vintage drum is on display at the Joshua Bates Centre to honour the history of Athens' musical past.

ATHENS BANDS A Special Part of Local Culture & History

By Sally Smid

Many citizens of “Farmersville”, now Athens, were once very well known for their musical talents. It was about 160 years ago, in 1879 that the first village band was organized. The group had eighteen members and was led by Prof. J. W. Davey with R. R. Alguire as drum major. The members practiced faithfully in the old town hall, now Athens Library on Central St., and later in a room provided by Fred Pierce in his Hotel. It was said that “their first concert was on Main St. and consisted of just one tune”. In 1885, it was recorded, that a bugle-call beckoned villagers to come and listen to an outside performance.

“We are pleased to say that the band has lost none of its old-time vigor and rendered selections in first class style,” noted the Athens Reporter, “showing that during the cold winter evenings the boys had not been idle”. The group was referred to as the Citizens’ Band when it performed for a Dominion Day concert in 1895. It was later referred to as the Farmersville Brass Band.

Funded by donations from village residents, the band matured and eventually gave annual concerts and minstrel shows which often included vocalists. There were also instrumental soloists, recitations and humour. Some original musical compositions were also included. Artist Crawford Slack was one of those composers who often read his poetry as well.

In the fall the band would travel to country fairs in the area, including the large one in Unionville, now Forthton. They often welcomed special visitors at the train station. Their navy-blue uniforms trimmed in red and silver were quite elaborate. Members included prominent citizens, such as J. P. Lamb, Fred Pierce, (MP) A. E. Donovan and more. Crawford Slack, provided instrumental instruction and was a later band leader along with A. W. Kincaid and G. L. Taylor.

The band was reorganized at various times. One account mentions that their band hats had light fixtures attached for nighttime performances. The group also performed as a marching band which involved a lot of practice, coordination and precision. The band often played in the bandstand in Athens Park and there are stories of couples spontaneously dancing to their lilting music.

Because of their remarkable music ability, the band was invited to perform in Lanark and Brockville. The Reporter announced in

1914 that a “fine orchestra was open for engagements or will perform at charitable or sacred functions”. The Athens Women’s Institute helped to reorganize the band in 1924 and had a bandstand built in the park where the new band would give concerts. Some older folks still recall those special occasions and how folks would spontaneously start to dance to the band’s music.

In 1933, it was reported that Fred Hollingsworth and his orchestra could be heard on CFLC Radio in Prescott and “17 telephone calls were received during the two-hour performance”.

In a display case in the Athens’ Joshua Bates Centre, a drum which was acquired by Lois Schroeder Stanford pays tribute to the history of the village’s bands. Crawford Slack wrote a poem which he dedicated to colleague A.W. Kincaid which effectively captures the spirit of those early bands as he relates his excitement about playing his cornet in the village band:

“...marching gaily down the street in regimentals grand,
 As proud as any brigadier, a playing in the band...
 When we lads met with spirits gay and horns all new and bright,
 And started in to practice at the town hall every night.
 Of course, the neighbours grumbled, for we blew both night and day,
 And my joy it reached its zenith when a tune we learned to play.”