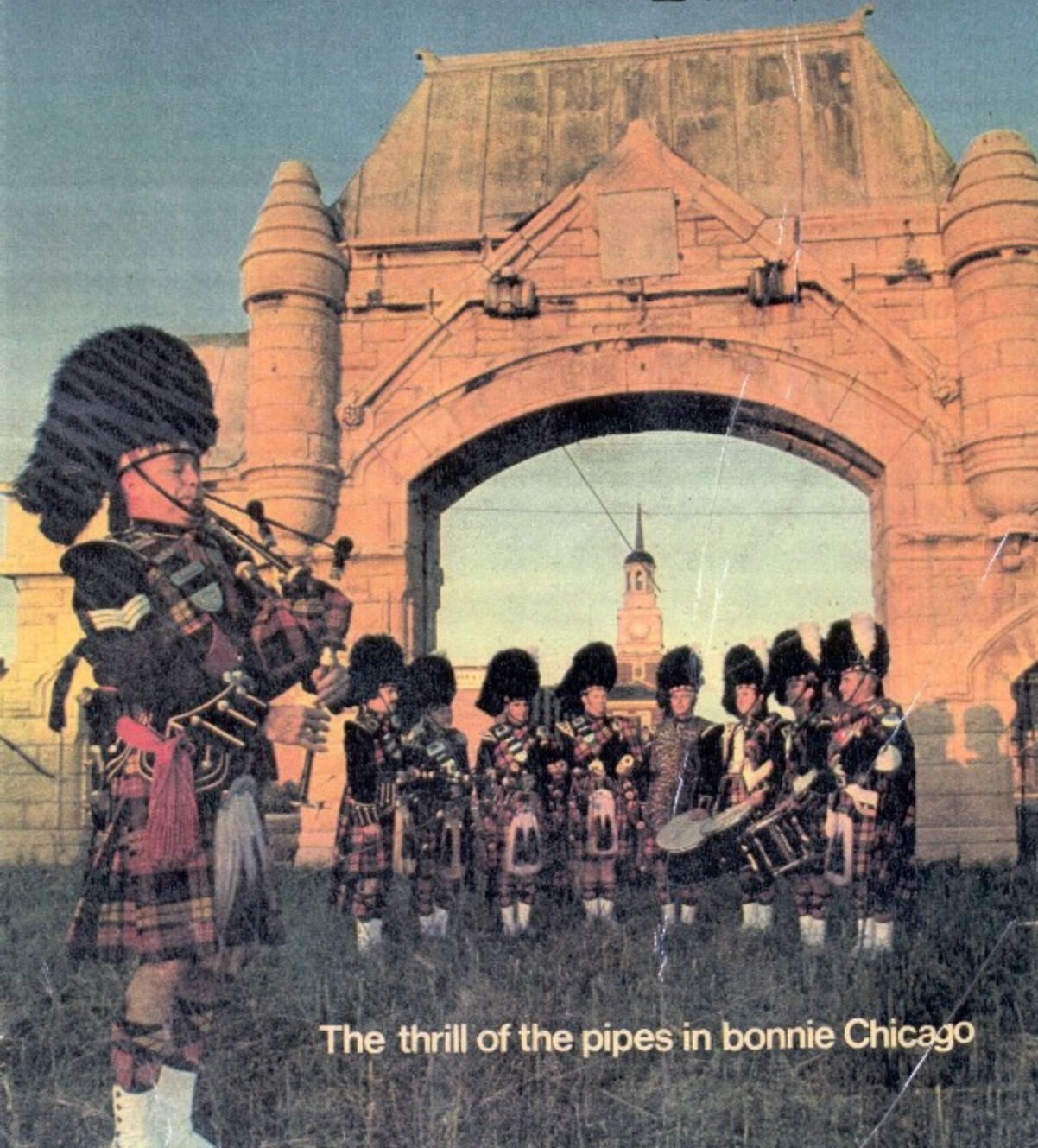


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The thrill of the pipes in Bonnie Chicago

The passionate piper

How do bagpipes work? According to a member of the Chicago Stock Yard Kilty Band, it goes something like this: you whoosh into the stick, squeeze the bag, and then lose your heart forever.

By William Currie

The strains of the Great Highland Bagpipes used to bring a tear to my eye. Now when the Chicago Stock Yard Kilty Band (SYKB) fills the streets with its tunes and splendor, *I've nae' mair time for weepin'*. I'm right in there with the lads, too busy blowing my brains out and cursing the world for all those years I wasn't.

For 30 years the mere sight of those bonnie lads strutting, daring me to laugh at their kilts, was enough to make my eyes sting.

It was those tartan-covered bags, swelling under bulging arms, forcing life into drones and pipes bursting with tunes of glory, that raised my tears.

It's a sound so basic that it goes straight to a man's spine. Each note fills its own vertebra: one that swells the chest, one that stiffens the back, one that pumps the tears, one that tugs the heart, and several that make a man want to go to war.

It was mostly that sound that made me join the SYKB. What else can you expect from a goy of Scottish heritage who grew up in the middle of Chicago's South Side Jewish community?

When my buddies stood up to chant those haunting Hebrew words proclaiming their manhood, one difference between us was clear.

They were inside that huge granite temple until

Chicago Stock Yard Kilty Band marching down State Street on St. Patrick's Day.

John Hanley/Tribune



4 p.m. every day, communing with the past, with something that was venerable and basic to their growing egos, while I was out in front, waiting for someone to play with. That's where I began looking for something to make me, too, immortal: a way to hold hands with my ancestors.

I have found it, as have hundreds of others with a drop of Scottish blood who have joined some 350 bagpipe bands from coast to coast.

Our past is colorful and exciting, and we can deck ourselves out in it and parade it down the middle of State Street. And when we fill our chests with it and blow it out, no one can help but hear us.

Not that I hadn't thought of taking up the pipes before I finally did at 30. I had lived for 26 years with my late grandfather, who was the picture of the Scottish Orthodox Pessimist. He knew some steps of the Highland Fling and he loved the pipes enough to stand up and scream a bloody war whoop at the proper time.

He was a man of temperance, tho, and he knew he couldn't take the din of the pipes in his house for very long. "You have to live on the moors to play the pipes," he said.

For all those years I had to be satisfied with playing Scottish tunes on my flute. That's something like beating a drum with a wet noodle.

My pleas for the pipes always seemed to end

with a quote that my grandfather attributed to Oscar Wilde:

"A gentleman is a man who can pipe, and doesn't."

I haven't been a gentleman for over a year and a half now, and I hope never to be one again. Not one day has passed that I haven't spent at least an hour on my pipes or practice chanter.

They said a man of 30 can't learn the pipes. Start as a wee lad or forget it, they said. And after that it's seven years' learning.

It's a bloody lie. Pipes come from the heart, says my pipe teacher, David McKee. "If you play them from there, you've won half the battle."

And a battle it is. Pipes are a disease. A man either commits himself or he doesn't pipe. And it takes physical stamina that taxes any man's body.

You can't fiddle around with pipes. Like most diseases, they consume you. They demand daily ritual attention to stay in playing condition. Soon that daily ministrations becomes a need your body craves. Your fingers march and dance on everything they touch.

I'll never be a competition piper nor play the classical piobaireachd well. But I can pipe now to

stir almost any man's heart who's so inclined.

It's not all roses among the heather, marching down those streets and among those highland wedding parties. There are times when I can wait for the end of the parade. My head is bursting and it used to be all I could do to keep the blood stick in my bleeding mouth. (I have a callus on my lip now.) It's not your lungs that give out. It's the face muscles you've never used before in your life.

On St. Paddy's day this year, before we could get across the State Street bridge, our fingers were icicles and, to our ears, the pipes were squealing like stuck pigs.

By the time we reached the reviewing stand on Madison Street, my blood was stirring, tho, and I knew what I was there for. Heads turned when the SYKB came strutting down the Great Street. My spine arched a little, my kilt swayed more, and kids popped up on their dads' shoulders. The pipes warmed to the touch of my dancing fingers. Even if we were playing "Wearing of the Green," my feet were marching to "Highland Laddie."

It was a euphoria that stayed with me all the day and night and lingered the next morning. I never saw more saloons, drank more free Scotch or was more popular in my life than last St. Paddy's Day. Too bad we can't have a day like

Two pipers and a Shorty

• That's Pipe Major Norman MacLeod on the right and Pipe Sergeant David McKee on the left with Harold "Shorty" Horstmann, who just put on his first band uniform after 30 years as major domo of the SYKB. "Shorty" is the remaining link between the band and the Stock Yard Legion Post 333, with which the band affiliated in the 1920s. He has been tending the band room bar and been the right arm of the band for all that time without ever wearing the kilt.

P/Sgt. McKee is my pipe teacher. He has been piping for 20 years. He's a native of Chicago's South Side, where he began his career as a Budweiser salesman, but you'd think he had walked right out of the Black Watch pipe band orderly room. "Play it from the heart, laddie," is Davy McKee's maxim for a piper.

P/M MacLeod is as real a Scotsman as you'll find in the city. Originally from Glasgow, he came here seven years ago from Winnipeg, Man., where he was pipe sergeant in the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada, reserve army branch of the mother unit in Scotland.

He's the image of the pipe major, a brooding perfectionist and a piper's piper. MacLeod is the Chicago head of Richardson Securities, a Canadian member of the Chicago Board of Trade. He brings that same frenetic pace of the "pit" in the commodities market to the band room, where he struts and barks and frets and

tunes the pipes to a perfect pitch that only he hears.

When he's not piping, he sings professionally. He can croon a song straight from his Glaswegian mother's heart that rivals the likes of Kenneth MacKellar or Andy Stewart.

That photo behind the trio hangs in the band room. On the right is John Burgess, who visited the band in 1952 with the late Pipe Major Willie Ross, the world's most famous piper, who's standing on the left.

Ross never played a note while touring the country that year. And Burgess, they say, wanted to talk about whisky and women. But when Ross came around, Burgess' fingers would start demonstrating, and in misadventure he would slip into piping talk.

That man in the middle is, and was, the life and spirit of the SYKB, Pipe Major Robert S. Sim. He founded the band in 1921 with his brother, Drum Sergeant James H. Sim.

P/M Sim's massive personality and charisma dominated the band for some 40 years before he died a decade ago. He had been a piper with the 4th Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders and was wounded at Cambrai, France.

Those were the days when pipers were still drawing straws to see who would lead the regiment over the top. They cut that out in the highland regiments when they lost too many pipers to sophisticated weapons.

Over Carter/Tibbons



The band is the

that in Chicago for the birthday of Robbie Burns.

The pipes are my Torah now, and I worship every Friday night in the house that William Wood-Prince built, the Stock Yard Inn, where the SYKB has its practice room and has filled the halls with its music for over half a century.

There are three established pipe and drum bands in Chicago. The SYKB is the granddaddy of them all. The Chicago Highlanders in Elmhurst split from the Stock Yard band in the 1930s just because there's no way to keep Scotsmen from arguing among themselves.

The Shannon Rovers, who follow Mayor Daley around, are an Irish pipe band playing the Great Highland pipes, tho they should be playing Irish warpipes.

Neither can match the lore, the glory, and the tradition of the SYKB. Its history is part of Chicago's, one so entrenched in the Union Stock Yard Co. that it is surviving while the Yards have crumbled around it. It's as if the band were holding the fort to play that last retreat thru the great stone gate that remains a landmark on Exchange Street.

For half a century the band has been the center of Chicago's Scottish community. The Scots who migrated to Chicago left their clanishness in the old country and spread to every community. But they still cling to their gatherings.

The one gathering that gets public attention is the annual Feast of the Haggis, sponsored by the Illinois St. Andrew's Society. The society has been around longer than Chicago. They are the old family Scots, men of position, many of whose ancestors probably helped build the Stock Yards with their Aberdeen Angus cattle.

Each year they come to the Conrad Hilton for



Over: Carter/Tribune

James, James, and James: pipe band drummers

As he was in most things, the late Drum Sergeant James S. Sim, co-founder of the band, is in the background of this picture. That's his son, Pipe Sergeant James H. Sim, on the right and his grandson, James H. Sim Jr., on the left.

It's the pipers that usually get all the glory in a pipe band. They get to wear the cock feather in their glengarreis. But drummers give life and discipline to a pipe band. It's no rat-a-tat-tat. It's drumming at its best—precision drumming that demands a man's time and tests his fiber.

Old Jim Sim had been a drummer boy with the Royal Engineer Pipe Band when he came to this country. If Bob Sim gave life to the band, it was old Jim Sim that gave it a future.

His son, young Jim, has been a drummer with the band since he was 7 years old, and his son, Jim Jr., 18, since he was 10.

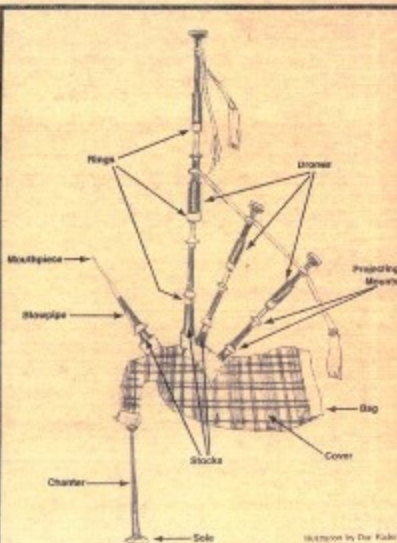
Young Jim, a mail carrier, has been a piper with the band too, and he has taught dozens of boys pipe drumming in the last two decades.

He's the picture of a Scotsman, gaunt, straight-faced, and temperate, whose deep, resonant voice begs to roll its Rrrrrs for you.

The band has been much of his life, and he knows as much about piping and drumming as anyone in this country. He has sworn to give up, tho, before he loses his touch and the kilt has a chance to make his legs look old and spindly.

He can leave the band with good conscience some day.

Jim Jr. is a leader in a group of young pipers and drummers bent on taking the band into competition. He may be one of the best young drummers in this country. This year he competed in the Highland games in Alma, Mich., and placed first in Class II.



Sketch by Dr. Fink

center of Chicago's Scottish community.

Where to see the SYKB.

Oct. 27—53rd Annual Chicago Stock Yard Kilt Band Fall Tartan Ball, Saddle & Sirloin Ballroom, Stock Yard Inn, Halsted and Exchange Streets.

Nov. 25—International Livestock Exposition, International Amphitheater.

Dec. 1—Illinois St. Andrew Society Feast of the Haggis, Conrad Hilton Hotel.

charity and to pay tribute to their Scottish heritage at the \$14-a-plate dinner with haggis for an appetizer.

My fellow pipers and drummers are those Scots and sons of Scots who came mostly after World War I. They were the sons of crofters and craftsmen and artisans, leaving hard times in the Highlands or poverty in Glasgow.

The SYKB switches bass drum heads at the Feast of the Haggis and becomes the Illinois St. Andrew's Society Band for the night.

While the society feeds in the great dining hall, the pipers and drummers eat their haggis in an anteroom, where a bottle of Scotch is left to sweeten the pipes.

Later, when they and the Highland dancers fill the hall with their tunes and yells, the society is on its feet, but there's little of the excitement and blood-curdling screaming that fills the air when the Scottish folk of Chicago get together at the

SYKB Tartan Ball.

Some say that half that excitement comes from the gathering place for the semi-annual event—the Saddle and Sirloin Club Ballroom of the Stock Yard Inn. From walnut-paneled walls the stern visages of mounted elks' heads and the portraits of old Scotsmen who ran the Yards stare down into the dim light that spreads like misty gold from great candelabras hanging from the high-beamed ceilings.

The laird himself, William Wood Prince, is said to slip unnoticed among the revelers for a few drams and a taste of old Scotland.

It's a night of whisky and meat pies, strathspeys and reels, country dancing and jiping, that makes lads or lassies raise a glass to their Scottish blood, be it only a wee bit.

The future of those baronial halls is dim, but the SYKB will survive because the pipes and drums and their color have won many a friend over the years. Mayor Daley, before his ascendancy, was a friend. He loves the pipes so much that he attached his image to the Shannon Rovers.

Maybe some day tunes of the SYKB will be heard in the political arena. There's a broth of a laddie with a name that shouts Scottish ancestry, U.S. District Attorney James R. Thompson, moving right now to the parapets to do battle with Mayor Daley in 1975.

Someday it could be the SYKB following a political entourage down State Street on Robbie Burns Day instead of the Shannon Rovers following the Mayor and his cronies on St. Paddy's.

But that's a political question that probably will never be resolved during those late Friday nights when the piping stops and the drinking and shouting start in the band room of the SYKB. ■

Piper Mooney

● That's Piper James Mooney, 63, who has been raising his glass on Friday nights in the band room for 30 years.

There used to be a lot of barnstorming after band practice when some of the pipers and drummers were unmarried and hard drinking Highland laddies.

The drinking and singing and shouting are confined now to the SYKB band room, which doesn't have a telephone to tempt lonely pipe widows.

It's usually Mooney, senior member of the band, who holds sway after a few rounds of Scotch. Mooney is a proud Irishman with a little Scottish blood in him who fell in love with the best pipe band in town 30 years ago and knows more about Scotland than most of the native-born members. He's a hard-drinking man with arms like ropes and if an argument doesn't get going, you can always goad him for a few choice words about the Queen.

He's a man with sage advice too. "When they're asking you about it," Mooney says, "tell 'em a gentleman never tells a lady what he wears beneath his kilt, laddie. And when they try to find out, keep your face straight. They're the ones to be embarrassed."

Later, when it gets late and drunk in the band room, Mooney will speak some of the Gaelic tongue and spout some history, and P/M MacLeod and P/Sgt. McKee will sing of "The Northern Lights of Aberdeen" or other songs with less sophisticated lyrics.

John Dunbar/Tribune

The bagpipes explained

● No one can say just where the pipes originated. That would be like saying where the wheel was discovered. Some say that Nero piped while Rome burned.

One thing is clear, tho: The pipes were developed to a fine art in Scotland.

Pumping on the bag alone doesn't sound the drones and chanter. The piper's lungs provide virtually all the pressure that sounds the four reeds. The bag acts as a manifold feeding the four pipes. (After all, how could one man get four pipes in his mouth?) When the piper breathes, he takes up the slack in the bag with his arm, maintaining pressure that his lungs otherwise provide.

Some people who don't know the pipes talk lovingly of the "skirl" of the pipes. "Skirl" is a bad note played usually by a poor piper.

The pipes, especially the reeds, are crude

and subject to all sorts of weather changes. Their care and repair take up half a piper's practice time.

It is rumored that once Pipe Major Donald MacLean of Scotland was asked why he never married.

"Married?" he said. "I've enough trouble with my reeds."

The pipes are a simple instrument only in that they have nine notes. The drones—two tenors and a bass—play one unvarying tone that blends with each of the nine notes, giving the pipes character. The sound of the pipe chanter alone would test anyone's nerves.

It's the grace notes and ritual embellishments on each note that make the pipes technically a difficult instrument. Those intricate variations on the notes make up for what the pipes lose with no chromatics and severely limited range.

