

I Remember Chiefie

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April 2007

His name was Maurice Callahan. He came to our high school as band teacher from Akron, Ohio, where he had played euphonium under Frank Simon with the ARMCO (American Rolling Mill Corporation) band. He was a disciplinarian, and the kids began calling him Chief. Possibly due to his diminutive size, that soon changed to Chiefie.

I suspect Frank Simon was sorry to lose Chiefie, and I suspect that Chiefie missed Frank Simon, too. At times, he would sit in the otherwise empty band room and play his heart out on one of the sweetest instruments it has ever been my privilege to touch.

The horn was a silver-finish, double-bell, five-valve Conn, with the most amazing soft-touch valve action I have ever experienced. (Ordinary baritone and euphonium horns have one bell and three valves). Its pitch range is roughly the same as a standard trombone, but its bore is larger, so it has a more mellow tone. The middle (second) valve lowers the pitch one-half step, the first a full step, and the third a step and a half, the latter being almost the equivalent of valves one and two together. Valves one and three together lower the pitch the equivalent of two steps and a half. All this is modified by the tension of the player's lips, so that by tightening and loosening his lip tension the player has at his disposal a range from A above middle C (and with practice, a little higher than that) down to E-natural below the C that is an octave below middle C, or a little more than two and a half octaves.

The second bell on Chiefie's euphonium had a smaller bore than the other. Actually, it was a little smaller than an ordinary trombone, which gave it a tone sharper than a trombone, and much sharper than the euphonium's larger bell. The fourth valve switched the airflow from the large bell to the small one.

The fifth valve added about an octave to the lower range of the euphonium, roughly the equivalent of using the thumb valve on a bass trombone. Altogether, the five valves and two bells made Chiefie's instrument quite versatile.

Our high school was typical of many: nothing was too good for athletes, especially football players, and they spent as little as they could get by with for the music department. Our uniforms were old and ratty-looking, and the odd collection of instruments that the band department actually owned was a tarnished and dented lot which a skilled musician would have trouble with, much less a beginning student. Early on, Chiefie locked horns with the school administrators, including the school board.

I had just been elevated from second-year junior high band class to the high school band, due to the graduation of the baritone section leader. No doubt with a high degree of trepidation, Chiefie allowed me to use his Conn.

My formal music career had begun in 1934, in the summer after my fourth grade year. My mother, an aspiring soprano, was much impressed by Mademme Ernestine Schumann-Heink, a noted German soprano. When she married my dad, my mother's personal aspirations for a career in music were reduced to church choirs and a Sweet Adelines group, but she was determined that her four boys (I was number two) were going to have some musical education. Mom was a skilled seamstress, and she made a deal with a competent music teacher for us boys to receive music instruction in return for her dressmaking skills. So in the summer of 1934, I started violin lessons (I have written elsewhere of many of the factors involved in playing the violin). After fifteen lessons, the perceptive instructor recommended that I switch to piano.

So during fifth and sixth grades, I took piano lessons. When I began seventh grade (our junior high used the same campus as the high school and the junior college), I followed in the footsteps of my older brother by enrolling in band class. I wanted to play the trumpet, but the band instructor took a careful look at my teeth, correctly judged that a trumpet (and therefore also a French horn) mouthpiece would be too small for me. He started me on a rather decrepit *valve* trombone, the only instrument the school could offer since I was too small to try one of the banged-up Sousaphones, which we at times loosely called tubas. So I learned my fingering on the valve trombone. Due to a student personnel change, I was switched to a baritone horn, and its tone was much more attractive to me.

During the 1938 Christmas Parade in Wichita, our band director (who had played under John Philip Sousa) suddenly dropped dead. Our high school civics teacher had a red-haired nephew who was the band director in a Kansas City high school, and our high school hired him on the condition that he come immediately. He was our band director for the rest of that year, but Kansas City had suffered too much in recent years from teachers who jumped contract, and now had a regulation that anyone who did so in the future would automatically lose his teaching credentials. Before that school year was over, it was already clear that our replacement band director would not be allowed to stay.

Enter Chiefie.

Apparently he thrived on challenges.

He applied all the pressure he could to the high school principal, to the superintendent of schools, and to the Board of Education. All he wanted was a budget that would enable the band to have new uniforms and some new instruments. What he got was hardly noticeable.

Meanwhile, we were invited to play an evening concert at another town sixty miles away, so we needed to leave right after school to get there, have supper, and get set up and ready to play at the designated time. The clarinetist who was our ex officio band secretary made a lot of phone calls to line up drivers for all of us and our equipment. Just as Chiefie and two of the band members were about to board his late-model Mercury coupe, a messenger from the principal's office summoned him to an impromptu meeting. We never knew whether or not the timing was calculated to aggravate Chiefie. He didn't succeed in pleading out of the meeting, so while the rest of us were on the highway, Chiefie and his two passengers were quite delayed in getting started.

Chiefie was already known to us as an aggressive driver, and on this occasion he really poured on the coal. During that epoch, most Kansas highways were laid out along section lines, with sharp corners usually posted at fifteen miles per hours. Chiefie was apparently thinking about the meeting just past, or the concert just ahead, when he realized that the yellow sign that had just flashed past had a right-angled black arrow on it with the numerals 15 quite prominently displayed. He knew that he would not be able to slow down enough to make that turn, so he left the highway and drove through the back yard of the farmhouse at the highway corner. As he zipped through, he took out the clothesline, killed the dog, barely missed killing the farmer's wife, and kept going until he hit the highway beyond the sharp turn.

After our concert, the local high school band played. It featured a composition directed by its composer, Thurlow Lieurance. As I recall, the title was something like "Indian Love Call," and it was very nice.

For some reason, on the return trip Chiefie took a different route at a slower pace, and he finally began to relax a bit from his stressful afternoon and evening.

Chiefie began talking with Frank Simon, and this eventually brought Dr. Simon to town to direct us in a benefit concert in the town hall, which seated an audience of 1,500. Chiefie also began negotiations with the U. S. Navy band for the same purpose in the same location, and he began training us to be worthy of such attention.

Sometimes the drills were interesting. We vaunted a four-man trombone section that, individually or jointly, produced zilch, and we were working on a piece that had a beautiful passage for a trombone quartet. Each time we reached that spot, the silence was deafening, and no amount of coercion was effective. Finally, in exasperation, Chiefie yelled at them, "Play *something!* If it's wrong, we'll fix it, but *play something!*"

On another occasion, our lone percussionist simply could not both count time and crash the cymbals at the proper moment. If he counted time, the cymbal crash was slightly delayed; if he didn't, the crash was misplaced more markedly. Finally, Chiefie tried a different tactic. He explained that he would hold his baton aloft

while counting time with his left hand. When the cymbalist saw the baton wiggle, he must immediately crash the cymbal at the same moment that Chiefie brought the baton down. However, when that potentially cymbal-crash-producing downbeat came, the baton slipped from Chiefie's hand and followed a rapid horizontal trajectory directly to the bass drum. The cymbal player was sure that Chiefie had deliberately thrown it at him in anger.

Chiefie also had his ways as a disciplinarian. As usual, the band was to play during a high school football game, which included performing an intricate formation during half time. I do not remember why, but I had a very swollen and painful lip, and I knew I would not be able to play that night. I was foolish enough to go to the game, dressed in ordinary street clothes instead of my uniform, and I sat near the band, where Chiefie immediately spotted me and came over to investigate this unusual situation. He acknowledged my sore lip, but he also insisted that I march with the band at halftime, in uniform or not. It was quite embarrassing when people asked me later why I was the only one not in uniform during the halftime drill, and various of my acquaintances asked me afterward where my uniform and horn were. After that occasion, I was never tempted to skip being at the right place at the right time in the right uniform, and accompanied by my instrument.

Chiefie was quite innovative in other ways as well. For example, we had been practicing Tchaikovski's "1812 Overture," and Chiefie was convinced that one tympani player could not produce the desired effect for the cannon-firing parts. He found an old eight-blade electric fan and removed the blades, leaving the stubby arms with screw holes, to which he attached hefty leather thongs. During the cannon-firing passages, the tympani player would apply the rapidly whirling leather thongs to the most effective spot on the tympani head, which produced a very realistic cannon sound.

The Navy band concert paid off. The funds generated went into an account for the purchase of new uniforms. But there was a memorable incident during that concert. The band was playing a novelty number that included, as special effects, the sounds that might be heard during a leisurely Sunday afternoon drive along a country road circa 1928. At the instant when a distressed chicken could be heard squawking, someone in the loft above the stage threw a live chicken down onto the stage, which came to a noisy and uneasy rest next to the director's podium.

The concert directed by Frank Simon was also sold out, and we had the privilege of some practice sessions with him in preparation for it. Chiefie had drilled us well, and Dr. Simon praised us profusely. I will admit that we did not sound like a high school band typical of that day and age.

The time finally came when we were each measured carefully and assigned a number, so that when the new uniforms arrived, they were great-looking, perfectly fitted and quite impressive. The black trousers had a rich maroon stripe edged in white down the sides. The maroon jacket had lots of gold buttons in two rows down

the front, with gold braid epaulettes. The high-peaked maroon cap was trimmed in black and gold, and sported a black feather at its tip.

At some point after we got the new uniforms, the National Federation of Women's Clubs had their annual convention at, of all places, the town hall of our bustling town, population 12,000. The high school band was asked to play a half-hour concert following the opening banquet and preceding the evening kick-off session. It gave Chiefie an opportunity to demonstrate an onery streak that went beyond anything we had previously suspected.

One of the numbers on our program was "The U. S. Field Artillery March," otherwise known as "The Caissons Go Rolling Along." One of the percussionists was fitted out with two pistols, one a six shooter and the other an eight-shot, with a liberal supply of blanks. Instead of using the pistols within the enclosure of the band room during rehearsals, said percussionist merely struck the tympany aggressively three times, in synchrony with the words "Hi, hi, hee.". This happened twice the first time through, and twice more on the repeat. A total of twelve shots, no?

The time for the concert arrived, and we did a very creditable job until time for "The U. S. Field Artillery March." I don't know where Chiefie's suspicions originated, but he was pretty sure that the ladies of the full-house audience would be vigorously renewing acquaintances while the band played. At one point, in the middle of what would otherwise have been a medium-loud passage, he gave us the signal for *pianissimo* instead, and it was surprising to hear the volume of noise produced by those chattering ladies.

But back to the march. We played along at the volume indicated until the first "Hi, hi, hee." With perfect timing, the percussionist fired three shots into the air. As Chiefie expected, that whole auditorium full of ladies, as one, came out of their seats! But Chiefie made a nearly-disastrous mistake. As the time for the first shots approached, he turned to face the audience. As the shots rang out and he quickly flipped back around to face the band, his face was crimson with the effort to contain his laughter. Upon seeing his reaction, some of the band members broke up and the rest of us had some difficulty in continuing to play.

Soon came the second set of three shots. By the time the repeat strain came around, the ladies were pretty well prepared, but what they had not counted on was the stinger at the end of the march, when one final unexpected pistol shot brought them out of their seats again! At that point, neither Chiefie nor the band members made any attempt to restrain themselves. For some reason, we were never again asked to play a concert for that particular group of women.

Chiefie was by no means completely satisfied just by obtaining those new uniforms for us, but after two years, he apparently realized that whatever he might gain in addition was just not worth the hassle. He resigned and took a position with the Universty of Texas at San Marcos.

The last time I saw Chiefie was about twenty years later, as my family and I were on a return trip from Kansas to Guatemala where we served as linguists, translators and literacy specialists with an organization called Wycliffe Bible Translators. Our route took us through the city of San Marcos, where Chiefie had become a very successful designer of band drills of such repute that his marching band had been invited to play at a Presidential Inauguration in Washington. He had married, seemed as energetic as ever, and confessed that after many years of not having time to play his euphonium, he had sold it. My reaction surprised me—I hadn't realized the extent to which my self-concept was bound up in my ability to play that horn.

I still have warm and strong memories of Maurice Callahan and his Conn euphonium. Things that I learned and experienced in relation to both of them are still a part of my life.