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THE LOST BANDSMAN AND HIS BAND



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THE PURDUE “All-American” Marching Band. That is what “the best damn band in the land” is known as today. It is a band whose halftime performances celebrate everything from the veterans who have fought for our country to the pride of Purdue, but with a cinematic flair. This is what any student interested in auditioning to be a part of the “All-American” Marching Band in the twenty-first century can expect. But what about when the band first started? How has it changed since its founding in 1886?¹ What was it like in the early years of the twentieth century? These are exactly the kinds of questions that only a student

from 1904 could answer. More specifically, these are questions that a bass drum player known as Frederic “Happy” Henry Miller could answer.

Unfortunately, not much was recorded during Frederic and his friends’ time in the band. But it is time for this “lost” bandsman and his band to come out of the shadows. Perhaps by looking at the overall Purdue experience of that era, one can indirectly gain insight into the band.

Frederic was born around 1883 in Waynetown, Indiana. The son of Purdue alumnus J. N. Miller, he came to Purdue to study electrical engineering.² His friends called him by two nicknames: “The Prince” and “Happy.”³ While no description could be found about “The Prince,” “Happy” Miller is described often. He had a smile that never left his face. One of the authors of the 1904 *Debris*, the student yearbook, recalled that he had “been able to partake of all the vices and virtues ordinarily allotted to the student without suffering in the least from either.”⁴ Students can suffer from dependence upon many different vices, such as pride or envy, but for each vice there is a virtue that can act as a counterforce. Virtues must be learned and nurtured. Living a virtuous life can be demanding, but it can be rewarding when reinforced.⁵ That Frederic was able to partake in both and not suffer from either could

mean that while he made a few poor choices, he was able to learn from them by practicing virtuous behavior more often than not. And while vices and virtues may have presented challenges, he emerged with rewarding results.

For his freshman, sophomore, and senior year, he played on the varsity football team. From his sophomore to senior year, he was a member of the Purdue Band. His senior year, he played the bass drum and was elected by his fellow bandsmen to the position of manager.⁶

In 1903, the band was entirely student-run, as it had been since its founding. There were no adult staff members; even the director was a student. At the turn



FIGURE 1. FREDERIC IS SEATED IN THE SECOND ROW WITH HIS HAND ON THE BASS DRUM (*DEBRIS* 1904, 180).

of the twentieth century, the band had grown from its original five volunteer members to thirty-five. Over time, new administrative positions were added to the organization, including president, secretary-treasurer, and manager.⁷ A bandsman who was elected by the other members of the band filled each position. This meant that reorganization was frequent during the band's early years. The band did not have an official director until 1905.⁸ Having student officers is not an uncommon tradition in bands today, but the idea of an entirely student-run college band is extraordinary.

The late 1800s to the turn of the twentieth century was an era when many individuals could not travel to concert halls for band performances. Given the natural human need and love for music, people entertained themselves by making music. As was common during this time, the formation of Purdue's band was inevitable. When the band began, it was known as the cadet drum corps.⁹ The drum corps would play for the Purdue Student Army Training Corps during weekly drills.

As sports were introduced to the campus in the late 1800s, the band started to play at new events. By 1903, the group had officially become the "Purdue Band," performing at football and baseball games. The musical selections ranged from standard overtures to

marches. In the late 1800s, John Philip Sousa was becoming famous all over the world for his marches.¹⁰ It is plausible that a few of his pieces may have been included in the band's repertoire. The members of the band played at the games "without compensation for their services."¹¹ The research trails that were taken to gain some insight into what game days were like for the band and its involvement in the day have, more often than not, turned into dead ends.¹² The idea of what the members of the Purdue Band experienced on game days can only be imagined.

We do know, however, that as the band continued to grow and become a more prominent presence on campus, other members of Purdue University noticed. In 1900, the *Exponent*, a student-organized newspaper, praised the band, describing those who liked what they were seeing and hearing from these students: "Nothing tends more to develop in the students that keen sense of loyalty to Purdue than the band. Good college bands are such a rarity that the students in enumerating the many good things of Purdue are pleased to give this organization a prominent place on the list."¹³

The fact that playing in the band was entirely voluntary added to its charm, an aspect of the band that continues to this day. Every student who joined the band had his own instrument, and most of the

musicians received musical education from friends and family. In those days, students did not have private lessons or band rehearsal during school. They would learn from their mothers and fathers, or they would walk to a neighbor down the street. Each student who joined the band at Purdue came because each wanted to continue with his love of music. All were independent musicians, but there existed “that unison and harmony which is necessary to the success of any musical organization.”¹⁴

From the time Purdue first admitted students in 1874 until 1965, all male students were required to have two years of military training. Playing in the band would fulfill this requirement for students, as it was considered a military band.¹⁵ The Purdue “All-American” Marching Band today still holds some traditions of being a military band in the way operations are conducted. Two examples are the inspection of uniforms before a performance and the receipt of rank titles as one logs more hours in the various offices. But while these traditions remain, there is no longer a military requirement of the students.

Fans and historians of the Purdue football program may be familiar with the fateful day of October 31, 1903, which has also become known as the day of the “Purdue Wreck.” What might be forgotten, however,

was that the band was there too. Frederic and his teammates had boarded a train that was to take them to face Indiana University in a football game the morning of October 31. The football team and a few special guests rode as passengers in the first car, followed by the band, a few professors, and other guests in the second car.¹⁶ The rest of the cars were filled with people attending the game. Spectators, who were to board a later train, came to cheer the team on as the first train pulled out of the station.



FIGURE 2. THE PURDUE WRECK (*DEBRIS* 1904, 22).

At 9:45 a.m., the train was nearing Indianapolis. The train followed the curve of the tracks, just as a ten-section group of coal cars approached from the opposite direction. The two trains collided, and the wooden car carrying the football team was crushed.

The second car containing the band came off the tracks and slid down into a gravel pit. Although the seats came loose and the passengers fell to the back of the car, no one in the band was seriously injured or killed. All of those who were able worked to get everyone out of the car. One of Frederic's fellow bandsmen gave an account of what went on to the *Lafayette Courier*: "We had to pass seats out of the windows so that we could get out. . . . I don't know just how we got out, but we climbed through the windows, I remember, because the door couldn't be reached. . . . Not one of the band members were injured, but some of us lost our coats and instruments. . . . We got them [the girls who were passengers] away from there as fast as we could."¹⁷

The total number of deaths from this tragic accident was seventeen. More than forty were seriously injured. Thirteen of the losses were members of the football team, with twenty-nine other members hospitalized.¹⁸ Frederic received an injury to his head, and like his other teammates who weren't severely injured, he went home to recover.¹⁹ He returned to campus one week later.²⁰ By then, discussion was taking place regarding a way to memorialize and honor those who had lost their lives. This resulted in the decision to build the Memorial Gymnasium, which still stands on campus today under the name Hass Hall. Ground was broken

four years after Frederic's graduation, and the dedication took place on May 19, 1909.²¹ It was said that the Purdue Wreck was the only time "the smile was wiped from" "Happy" Miller's face.²²

Frederic graduated with his class in the spring of 1904. After graduation, he went to Crawfordsville, Indiana, where he was in charge of an electrical plant for about six months. He then went to Versailles, Ohio, and after that to Arcanum, Ohio. In both cities, Frederic was in charge of a light and heat plant. In 1905, he married a woman named Gertrude Melvina Beare.²³ They had two children: a daughter named Martha and a son named Frederic, Jr., who followed his father's footsteps by studying at Purdue.

By 1914, Frederic had returned to Indiana. He was appointed as superintendent of the Crawfordsville Municipal Electric Light Plant.²⁴ He retained his ties with Purdue by becoming the secretary of the 1904 class.²⁵ While he personally didn't have any entries in the Purdue *Alumnus* after 1914, he was included in an article about his son in 1943.²⁶ From that point on, his archival trail runs dry. Frederic did not live what some may consider an exciting life, but that does not make his time at Purdue any less important. He was one of the survivors of the 1903 tragedy, and he contributed to the early years of the Purdue Band.

Everyone who has participated in the program over the years has impacted the organization. This continues to be the case with the Purdue bands. Students devote their time and energy purely for the love of music, resulting in an extraordinary program even without a formal college of music, carrying on a tradition from the earliest days of the band.

There has not been much written about what being in the band would have been like for Frederic and his fellow bandsmen; however, hopefully an outsider looking in to this time from Frederic's perspective could glimpse what it might have been like, helping one to better understand how the Purdue "All-American" Marching Band became what it is today.

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Notes

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3. *Debris*, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries, 98.
4. *Ibid.*

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9. Norberg, 2011.

10. *Ibid.*, 4.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. While there are a few articles that have been written about other bands in the early twentieth century, such as *The Pride of the Buckeyes: The Ohio State University Marching Band*, there is very little to be found about the Purdue Band. For further information about Big Ten school football teams and marching bands, see Danille Christensen Lindquist, "Locating' the Nation: Football Game Day and American Dreams in Central Ohio," *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 474 (Fall 2006).

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26. Ibid. For further information about Frederic Henry Miller, Jr., see “Boilermaker Assumes Key Role.”

