

**BEHIND THE
COPPER FENCE:**
A Lifetime On Timpani



BY THOMAS N. AKINS

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DEDICATION

This book is lovingly dedicated:

To Kacey and Liam, who never knew anything
about this part of Granddad's life

To Dan and Ken, wonderfully normal sons who
created parental pride 363 days each year

To Alice, whose love, support, understanding
and encouragement made it all possible

To Mom, who set the bar high in many ways
and provided the example of how to reach it.

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PRELUDE: PERFECTION IS A GOOD PLACE TO START

Someone once said that a major league baseball umpire had the only job where one was expected to start perfectly and improve from there. I beg to differ. Holding a chair in a major symphony orchestra, especially a principal chair and most especially the principal timpani chair, brings with it the same demands. Simply put: they don't pay us to miss!

The following pages describe my ascendency to the major leagues in the world of symphony orchestras and some of the adventures encountered along the way. There is much joy with a few disappointments sprinkled in, there are stories of some wonderful people who chose to help me, there are some humorous moments as well as some strange ones and there is some history that deserves to be recorded.

The symphonic musician is a different breed of cat. We have a clear understanding of the difference between “practice” (development of your skills in a room by yourself) and “rehearsal” (what happens when the orchestra comes together after practice has been completed). We are unlikely to listen to “background music” because we can't half-listen to anything. We understand, and our families get the message quickly, that we will be working when the rest of the world is playing and that “weekend off” is a phrase that will not be part of our personal lexicon. We know that rehearsals are far more pressure-packed than concerts because of the expectations of your colleagues and the conductor that you will be perfect on the first rehearsal and get better as the week progresses. We expect the clock to be respected in rehearsals and concerts, but we have unlimited time to give to practice, instrumental repair, exploration of innovations in equipment and performing techniques, study of recordings, counseling

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of private students and community outreach on behalf of the orchestra, thus obliterating any concept of a 40-hour work week. It annoys us, but we understand the idea that the public grasps the difference in skill set and demands on a professional athlete when compared to an amateur, but they don't recognize the same differences between a major league musician and someone who plays occasionally as an avocation.

For most of my professional life, I've had the best seat in the house – often in the center of the stage, frequently in the spotlight, always in the clear view of conductors and the audience and constantly amid the passions that come with making good music. It was a privilege to contribute my part to the whole; to help provide entertainment, education, enlightenment, emotion and an enhanced quality of life to those who heard us; to represent our city, state and nation as musical ambassadors every time we picked up our instruments; and to support my family in the most satisfying manner that I could possibly imagine. There was never a dull moment *Behind The Copper Fence*.

Photo Credit: Michael Vaughan



THOMAS N. AKINS, PRINCIPAL TIMPANIST, INDIANAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, 1965-1991.



BUT MOM, I WANT TO PLAY DRUMS!

As fall pushed into winter, I pushed closer to the door. The door of the band room, that is. I was an eighth-grader at William Fleming High School in Roanoke, Virginia, a school that educated students from grades eight through twelve. To accomplish this in a building that was designed for several hundred less bodies than the number that bumped into each other during each class change, the school adopted three schedules. They were quickly dubbed “early,” “regular” and “late.” The “early” schedule ran from 7:40 a.m. to 2:10 p.m., the “regular” group cracked the books from 8:30 a.m. to 3:10 p.m. and the “late” bunch appeared at 9:20 a.m. and stuck around until 4 p.m. The entire eighth grade was placed on the “late” schedule, thus killing off the idea of freedom of choice.

Since the first grade I had gone to school at 8:30 a.m., so arriving at 9:20 made me feel tardy before the day even began. My Mom went to work at the



PLAYING TIMPANI AT WILLIAM FLEMING HIGH SCHOOL, ROANOKE, VIRGINIA.

First National Exchange Bank® at 8 a.m. each day, and we lived only two blocks from Fleming, so I began to go over earlier than I had to. It wasn't long until the magnetism of the band room began to grab hold. Almost every morning week after week, I stood outside the door, caught up in the sounds. I didn't want to be in the hallway, listening. I wanted to be in the room, playing. However, I did have one small problem. I didn't know how to play anything.

Two years before, I had spoken to Mom about the possibility of joining the band. The thought of playing drums appealed to me. It didn't appeal to her. She suggested the trumpet, perhaps because one of my favorite childhood toys was The Golden Trumpet®, a plastic look-alike that could actually make some different sounds. I wasn't thrilled with the idea, but in the interest of keeping Mom happy, I agreed to go to the band director's house and try one. Mom arranged that appointment while assisting him with his banking one day. I came to understand that Mom knew everyone of importance on the north side of Roanoke because they came to her window at the branch bank.

I dutifully arrived at the home of Raymond Berwald at the appointed hour. He was a horn player and had led the Fleming Band for several years while also teaching instrumental music in the elementary schools that fed the high school. I gave it my best shot. I puckered, I attempted to buzz and I blew until I thought my skull would crack, but the end result was a sound that resembled a wounded duck. "Son," he said, "I just don't think you're going to be a trumpet player." In one of many Academy Award-worthy performances that I would give in my life, I looked properly chagrined and trudged homeward. Well, really I raced home, but I did slow down a little before I got to the door. "Sorry, Mom. He said I wasn't good enough. Now, how about the drums?"

My second attempt at bonding with a pair of drumsticks met with slightly better success. My best friend in the neighborhood was Larry Dickenson, who lived a few doors down the sidewalk. There were twelve duplexes in our L-shaped building. We lived in the fourth from the top of the L, and Larry and his parents lived in the 10th one, after the turn of the architecture. Larry was almost my age, but because his birthday fell late, he was a year behind me in school. A year or two before, he had joined the American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps as a bugler. He was the youngest member in the band. In the very early spring of 1956, he persuaded me to go with him. Actually, he didn't need to persuade me;

he did his best convincing on my Mom. Finally she agreed, and Larry and I went off to the Roanoke American Legion Hall, Post No. 3.

In those days the Legion Hall was the closest thing Roanoke had to a civic auditorium and featured a blend of wrestling matches, country music concerts and large scale church revivals. It was located right in the center of town, across the street in one direction from the famous Hotel Roanoke® and in another direction from the Norfolk and Western® Railway Station. The Drum Corps assembled right on the main floor if the regular practice night had not been usurped by a rental event. Instruments, uniforms, music and other necessary goods were stashed in a storage room in one corner of the building. Larry may have been the youngest in the band, but I was decidedly the smallest guy in the room, a condition that accompanied me for my entire pre-college life. The band leader was a man named Robert Thompson and the drum major was Jesse Wilson. I don't recall ever learning the name of anyone else. They took one look at me and said, "Do we have a drum that small?" After some searching in the depths of the closet, they found one that had been banished from regular use. "Here, kid. Strap this on and get over there."

I still had one lingering question. "How do I play it?" The answer: "Just watch the other guys, and do what they do." So much for in-depth instruction.

After a few weeks I began to get the hang of it. Marching wasn't difficult. Contrary to today's elaborate drills, the name of the game for this band was to attempt to get down the street in a straight line without running into something or injuring someone. Turning a corner was an adventure, and anything beyond that was not in the playbook. They issued me a uniform just in time for my big debut performance at the Corps' annual appearance in the Harrisonburg Memorial Day parade. I managed to get through the day without creating chaos, so it was quite a success. There was no summer schedule, so we shut it down for the year. See you next fall.

Not quite. Midway through the summer I awakened to the radio newscast that informed me that the Legion Hall had burned to the ground the previous night, and everything in it had been destroyed. Drums, bugles, uniforms, wrestling mats, popcorn machines – all of it was gone. The building that had housed everything from Gene Autry and an unknown Elvis Presley to Marian Anderson and *Messiah* performances was reduced to rubble. No attempt was ever made

to rebuild the structure of the Corps. Hotel Roanoke grabbed the property for expanded parking. My drumming career was back on the shelf.

That fall I entered the eighth grade at Fleming and, with the feel of drumsticks still fresh in my fingers, again tried to persuade Mom to let me try for the band. I had described my interest in listening to the band's morning practices, but she had a vision of a 40-foot bass drum sitting in our living room, and she wasn't yet convinced. This time she suggested the clarinet. Oh well, anything to keep Mom happy. One day after school, I asked Carol Hoffman, a classmate, to let me try her clarinet. She agreed, assembled it and handed it over. I received it with about the same amount of enthusiasm as if someone had handed me a snake. Fortunately for me, I was even worse on the clarinet than I had been on the trumpet. Whereas the trumpet had sounded like a wounded duck, the clarinet didn't sound at all. Nothing. Zilch. Nada. I couldn't make a sound on it, even when I actually tried. To this day, the relationship between that reed and that mouthpiece remains a mystery to me. "Gee, Mom. Looks like I'm not a woodwind player either."

Ray Berwald had suddenly resigned as Fleming's band director in August 1956. The system hired Otis Kitchen, a man straight out of the Army who had earned a degree from Bridgewater College and would later earn his Master's from Northwestern University. He was in the very early stages of remaking the group into a real musical unit. Unknown to me at the time, Mom had made his acquaintance, where else, at the bank. She spoke with him, and he agreed to start giving me lessons after the Christmas break. Otis was a keyboard and clarinet player, but he was fundamentally a brilliant musician, and the basics that he taught me proved to be right on target as I developed. He introduced me to a few concepts that had eluded me in the Legion Drum Corps – things like reading music, proper hand position and a sense of ensemble. I had always been a quick learner, and the relationship between mathematics and music seemed very logical to me, so learning to read rhythm was easy. He continually asked if I understood or had any questions. He seemed surprised when I kept saying no, but when I consistently played the right rhythms, he became convinced. Hand position was a little more difficult, but it came along. Doing single strokes seemed easy enough, but I couldn't seem to maintain control of the sticks when I tried to get them to bounce. As a teacher years later, I came to understand that all

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beginning drummers run into that wall, but it didn't soften the blow at the time. One afternoon while practicing on my drum pad, it finally came. It sounds corny to say that suddenly the light turned on, but that's exactly what happened. One minute the sticks were fighting back, and the next they were doing what I wanted them to do. "Hey, Mom. I got it!"

After a few weeks, Otis said it was time to come inside the room. He put me in the drum section to observe and finally started letting me play a few parts with the band. There were a lot of drummers (aren't there always?), but a few small parts began to come my way. The spring marching season arrived, and I was introduced to a new instrument – the tenor drum. Chuck Wosaba played oboe in the concert band, but since the oboe was useless outdoors, he commanded a tenor drum in the marching band. Playing the tenor drum is less about hitting it and more about twirling the sticks. Tenor drum sticks have a hole drilled through the back end of the stick so that rawhide thongs can be inserted to connect the sticks to the player's hands. Chuck showed me how to wrap the thong around my little finger, ring finger and middle finger, thus leaving the index finger and thumb free to control the beginning and end of the twirl. It's easier to twirl the stick toward yourself, rather than forward, but either direction requires practice. For a week I terrorized the neighborhood, and especially my house, with attempts to gain control of the twirling sticks. Wearing a football



TOM WITH HIS FIRST PERCUSSION TEACHER, OTIS D. KITCHEN, BAND DIRECTOR AT WILLIAM FLEMING HIGH SCHOOL. PHOTO TAKEN IN 1970S.

helmet while practicing might have been a good idea, but I wasn't going to be that uncool. At least I was smart enough to stay away from lamps and other breakable items while practicing indoors. Mom watched from a safe distance, undoubtedly wondering what happened to the idea of playing the trumpet or the clarinet. On parade and on the field, we had a simple twirl pattern: four steps played with the left hand hitting the drum once on each step and the right hand twirling the stick, followed by the reverse of that for the next four steps. When we got really brave, we did it in two-step alternations. Go ahead, try it; but check your homeowner's insurance first!

The marching season of fall 1957 began to make clear that the Fleming band under Otis Kitchen was not going to be like previous editions. While the football team did two-a-day practices on the field behind the school, the band did theirs on the lawn in front. A new marching style was introduced, based on a blend of military discipline and precision movement. The days of forming a moon and playing "Moon Over Miami" followed by a star for "Stars Fell On Alabama" were over. Straight lines, company fronts, diagonal awareness, spin steps and a very strict pace of 120 beats per minute became a way of life. To this day, I take my first step with my left foot, although I have stopped viewing the cracks in sidewalks as yard markers. The music became more concert-like, using more carefully crafted arrangements designed to bring the richness of the concert hall sound into the outdoors. Major shows were built around music that included "Victory At Sea," "Kammenoi Ostrow" and "Great Gate of Kiev." Marches by Sousa, King and Fillmore joined the school song, "Our Director," as staples of the parade repertoire.

More than marching and music, however, was the difference in discipline and work ethic. Fresh from military service, Otis Kitchen knew both very well and was determined that his band would show the benefits of each. Most of us didn't understand at the time the full value of what was being demanded of us, but age has clarified those gifts. The stories told by those who had been in Berwald's band indicated that discipline wasn't high on the priority list. Otis changed that immediately. The "Otis-eye" was everywhere and saw everything, and when it turned to you, it usually meant trouble. In his second year the rule book tightened considerably. The first football game of the year was at Covington, a small town about 40 miles away. The team won the game 15-6, the band looked good enough

and everyone was happy that the season had begun. A few were a little too happy. Five band members were caught drinking beer and smoking after the game, and their career in the Fleming band ended on the spot. This was to prove pivotal to me, because two of the dismissed musicians were drummers and one of them had been the band's timpanist the previous winter. The door was open.

I moved to fourth snare drum for the marching season behind seniors Dick Morey and Homer Bowles and junior Don Moses. Don became drum major the next year, so as a sophomore I became section leader on the field. We developed a sequence of ten street cadences which we played in order, but for the sake of variety and a little fun for us, we didn't always start with the first one. Toward the end of each march, I would signal the chosen cadence to the other drummers and off we went. It was a lot like calling audibles at the line of scrimmage, sort of a precursor to the Peyton Manning technique. I marched in the right guide position in our rank so Otis could communicate with me when needed during parades. During football shows and field contests he would watch from the press box or high in the stands. We received a very detailed critique soon after each performance. For fall 1958 three new drummers joined the Fleming band. Sophomores Deanna Martin, Frank Brown Jr. and Harry Greene came aboard and, along with freshman Denny Brown, helped form the core of the section for the next three years. Flutist Bill Suggs played rock-solid bass drum during marching season, during which time Deanna was a majorette. "Junior" succeeded Don Moses as drum major in our junior year and Harry took over the drum set chair in the jazz band. Harry and I quickly made a pact that the drum set chair belonged to him, the timpani chair was mine and we would share whatever else was left.

Lessons learned in the Fleming band became the foundation of my musical life. We accomplished much, on the field and on the stage, but we worked hard to get those awards. Consistent top ratings at concert band contests and lots of trophies from the Southeastern Band Festival in Bristol helped fill the band's award case at the school. The Bristol festival featured top bands from many states including those from Rossville, Georgia; Chattanooga and Kingsport, Tennessee; and Wytheville, Virginia. Schools were classed according to enrollment, and that put us head-to-head against Wytheville. Our first year at Bristol was my freshman year, and we did not do well. Not only did Wytheville blow us off the field, but

they gloated about it afterward. That was not a wise move, and it provided plenty of motivation for the future. Vengeance is sweet when accompanied by a pair of 2B snare drum sticks. I'm certain those second place trophies look good in their school case. For the parade portion of the competition, bands would march down the main street in Bristol, which was the state line between Tennessee and Virginia. As right guide on my rank, I'd be in Virginia while Harry, as left guide would be in Tennessee. Triumphs at Bristol led to two invitations to be the state band of Virginia at the National Cherry Blossom Festival Parade in Washington, D.C. which, in turn, led to an invitation to the Macy's Parade a year after I graduated.

All-state concert bands in Virginia at that time were done at the district level, and auditions included a prepared solo, scales and/or rudiments and some sight reading. As a sophomore I had become a pretty good timpanist, I thought, and had been earning superior ratings on timpani and snare drum solos at the Solo and Ensemble contest. I figured I was a lock for the district all-state timpani chair. Up to that point, I hadn't lost an audition for anything I pursued, so why not? I figured wrong. I was beaten by a girl from Martinsville named Vaughn Hodnett. She later went on to Converse College in South Carolina, but I don't know if she continued in music. Beaten? Tough to take. And by a girl? Really tough to take! Lesson learned – be better prepared. I made it in the next two years, with Al G. Wright of Purdue University as guest conductor in my junior year and John Paynter of Northwestern University in my senior year. Wright was something of a blur, but I had grown enough as a musician by then to really appreciate Paynter's skills.

Otis Kitchen left William Fleming High School in 1965 to take a position on the faculty of Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. His imprint on the Fleming band and the Roanoke community during his nine years of service was enormously positive. Literally hundreds of students directly benefited from his musicianship, his discipline and his immovable sense of integrity. I will be forever grateful to Otis Kitchen for opening the first door and letting me leave the hallway to come into the room.