

America's Golden Age of Brass Bands

"All at once the idea of a Brass Band shot forth, and from this prolific germ sprang up a multitude of its kind in every part of the land." – **John Sullivan Dwight** (1813-1893), Transcendentalist and America's first influential music critic

From the mid-1800s until after World War I, bands were a pervasive aspect of American life and were emblematic of the social evolution of enlightened communities. Known as the *Golden Age of Bands* at its peak, as many as 20,000 bands, representing every geographic, ethnic, occupational, social and age grouping were active in towns across America – the offspring of musical traditions carried to the U.S. by European immigrants. In fact, the birth of the era originated in the Midwest among incoming German communities, and it appears that almost any geographic region with a sizable German population automatically developed brass bands. Town bands also were said to be especially successful in attracting tradesmen and laborers.



During this period, Oswego's iron industry grew rapidly and large numbers of workers were needed. Although unskilled laborers were readily drawn from local farms, enlisting tradesmen skilled in mining, charcoal burning and iron making was another matter. As a result, tradesmen were recruited from charcoal iron production states such as Ohio where sizable communities of German immigrants lived, worked, and maintained their best-loved traditions and music.

In its heyday, brass band music was considered a requirement for any and all occasions whether large or small, somber or celebratory, even macabre – every collective human event you might imagine from cradle to grave. Temperance rallies, holiday parades, agricultural fairs, political gatherings, funeral processions, labor disputes, birthdays, picnics, on the battlefield and at military executions to name only a few. As the famed Wurlitzer Instrument Company advertised, *"There is nothing that rouses the Universal enthusiasm of everybody as does a spirited band."*

The Oswego Cornet Band

"Persons who practice wind instruments, are, in general, distinguished – and anybody can verify the statement – by a broad chest and shoulders, an unequivocal sign of vigor." – **Adolph Sax**, Dwight's Journal of Music, 1862

The April 29, 1892 issue of The Oregon City Enterprise reported the formation of the *Oswego Cornet Band* and listed its founding members as **D. H. Bussard, C. DeBarno, Ed. Wetzler, Achille Seghers, A. L. Vestch, Rolla Worthington, E. L. Davidson, C. H. Haines, W. W. Todd, J. C. Haines, Ed. Bullock, Geo. Bullock, C. L. Arthur** and **M.Aasve**. On Fourth of July of the following year the band sat for the above photo replete with stylish new uniforms – the acquisition of which was only slightly less important than the acquisition of their instruments – and was at the heart of organizing the celebration.

The Fourth of July will soon be here and Oswego will celebrate at Buckeye Grove about a mile from the railroad depot at this place. There will be plenty of music, dancing, racing, etc., for amusement. There will also be plenty of refreshments on the grounds. F.L. Mintie and other prominent men will speak. Miss Bessie Evans will read the *Declaration of Independence*. Every one is cordially invited to attend and have a good time. All communications should be addressed to C.W. Haines, president of *Oswego Cornet Band*, or E.L. Davidson, secretary, as the picnic will be given under the auspices of the *Oswego Cornet Band*.

The Oregon City Enterprise, June 30, 1893

Oswego Embraces the Band Craze

“. . . a town that cannot sound its own trumpet, but must send off and hire assistance from its neighbours on all public occasions, cannot lay claim to having reached a very high standard of advancement.” – **G.F. Patton**, *A Practical Guide to the Arrangement of Band Music*, 1875



Our vibrant industrial town of Oswego was no less enthusiastic in its embrace of the band craze than the rest of the country, and supported four performance groups – *The Oswego Band*, *Oswego's Real Band*, *Oswego Cornet Band*, and the *Bickner Orchestra*, a string and brass ensemble of five handsome brothers. Besides the aforementioned *Fourth of July* celebration, the Oswego bands frequently promoted their own entertainments in the local news, including a masked ball. Most probably, the bands functioned like clubs or other fraternal organizations of the day,



Oswego Band, October 4, 1896

alternately raising and spending funds for their own enjoyment as well as for the benefit of the larger community. All of the

Oswego bands overlapped to a degree and shared some of the same members, several of which were co-workers at *Oswego Pipe Works*. Images and names of at least 25 band members appear in the newsprint and photo archives of *Lake Oswego Public Library*, including those seen here. Seven of the bandsmen are interred in *Oswego Pioneer Cemetery*: **George S. Bullock**, **Daniel H. Bussard**, **Thomas R. Clinefelter**, **Edgar L. Davidson**, **Durward Fox**, **John C. Haines**, and most notably, **Walter William Todd**, superintendent at *Oswego Pipe Works* and the only musician to play in all three brass bands.

End of an Era

“Send for (the band) to come to your town and give us a rest.” *The Oregon City Enterprise*, April 29, 1892

Sadly, the brass band music era was fleeting. What had been the number one art and entertainment pastime of America's burgeoning middle class slowly disappeared, supplanted by a series of clever inventions such as the gramophone in 1877. In time, the electronic wonders of radio and motion pictures followed and provided new forms of amusement that replaced the Sunday afternoon band concert and led to the demise of *Golden Age* of the cornet and its ilk. Still, this was a time well worth remembering.

Oswego's Real Band, May 16, 1897



Bickner Orchestra, October 4, 1896