

This Is Not Your Grandfather's High School Marching Band

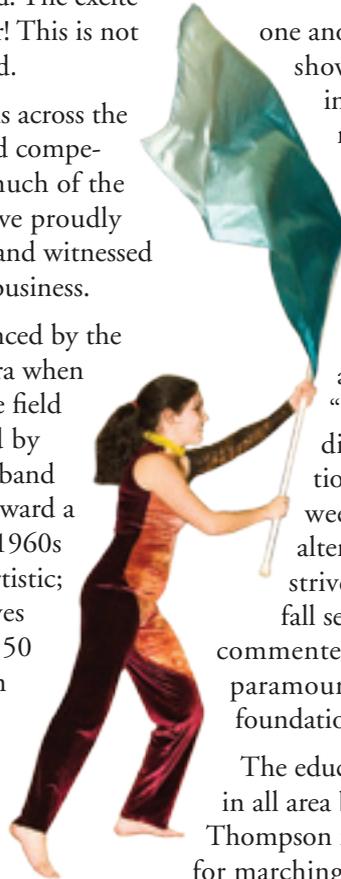
Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

Lights, music, cheering fans! Polished instruments sparkle as colors explode onto the athletic field! The excitement of competition hangs in the autumn air! This is not your grandfather's high school marching band.

Each year thousands of high school bands across the country compete for local bragging rights and competitive awards in a season that encompasses much of the fall academic semester. Area high schools have proudly offered marching band activities for decades and witnessed significant changes in the old ways of doing business.

Grandfather's marching band was influenced by the military tradition of the post World War II era when high school bands typically marched onto the field to form a letter. The "call to attention" used by drum majors comes from this era. Marching band members moved primarily in straight lines toward a limited number of fixed points. By the early 1960s band activities became more animated and artistic; who can forget the puffing steam locomotives with revolving wheels that rolled across the 50 yard line. Rudimentary outlines of common sights and themes were typical and proved to be crowd pleasers.

Drum and bugle corps activities during the 1970s and 1980s provided the next major influence on marching bands by increasing the level of activity. According to Larry Jackson, Band Director at Allegany High School, "The drum and bugle corps were more artistic with refined activities. The outlines were more interwoven, members passed between



one another, and there was more motion built into shows." High school band directors integrated increasing complex high energy activities, which required more practice time prior to weekend performances. While band activities were once created on a weekly basis as entertainment during the half time of football games, the new level of artistic demands and the introduction of band competitions meant that members practiced earlier in the summer and later in the fall. According to Jackson, "The more complex programs required band directors and members to evaluate the educational value of their shows. Instead of different weekly shows intended for football games, an alternative decision was to choose one show and strive toward perfecting it over the course of the fall season." Assistant band director Brian White commented, "The educational aspect of the season is paramount in obtaining deeper musical and artistic foundation in a student's life."

The educational value of musical programs is stressed in all area band programs. Fort Hill Band Director Joey Thompson noted, "There has been a major shift in values for marching bands from one of primarily entertaining to one more musically education based. The entertainment value is still important, however, the focus is on music education." Thompson's conclusions were similar to those of Josh Elmlinger, Southern High School: "The biggest



Allegany High School
Marching Band, Cumberland, MD.



Fort Hill High School Marching Band, Cumberland, MD.

difference between bands of years past and more recent ones is the degree of precision that judges and band directors look for in performances. Marching bands are interested in communicating an artistic thought. At Southern, we are telling a story with our field show. Dave Kauffman, Mountain Ridge Band Director, commented, “The activity has allowed for the development of a greater number of skills and increased demands on performers that wouldn’t have been imagined 50 years ago.” Duane Salisbury, Band Director at Northern High School, has a unique perspective on the development of scholastic band programs. “I was in my grandfather’s band. Back then we were expected to participate but over the years the intensity has changed. Today’s shows are far more intense and the focus is on intensification of educational programs. We talk a lot about the mathematics of shows—angles, shapes and geometry. So much more work goes into the contemporary shows.”

The trend toward band competitions was embraced by several area bands in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including Southern Garrett, Frankfort, and Allegany High Schools. Schools typically belong to a circuit, which could be compared to a league culminating in a championship event. The Tournament of Bands is the major mid-Atlantic circuit and includes area high schools in its competitive events. More than 400 bands belong to the tournament that annually offers a number of competitions that are inclusive not only of the traditional marching band musicians but also of drumline, “pit,” and guard.

Contributing to the constant motion and artistic flair of the show is the color guard, now referred to as the silk squad. Color guard units were initially steeped in military tradition and used in an auxiliary role for band shows.

Allegany High School Drumline.



Today, the guard activity is blended into the shows and provides visual effects not dreamed of in an earlier era. Grandfather's band preferred straight line marches, abrupt stops and turns, and a stationary color guard, while today's bands exhibit fluid, drifting motions, swirls of abstract designs, and an integrated guard unit.

Area bands have been in the forefront of maintaining tradition as they enter competitive events that increased the length of the season and demands on staff and performers. While the transition required an increasing focus on the educational aspects of bands and the judging criteria employed in competitions, the new venues also allowed bands to enjoy rewards and successes based on a variety of criteria, including ones not measured by judges' opinions. "Fort Hill Band is proud that it is able to balance activities to perform at all home and away football games, participate in parades, and still perform in band competitions. We are really well rounded that way," commented Joey Thompson. Dave Kauffman believes, "The value of what students are putting into musical development will carry them into whatever job they are taking. Students play an equal part in our musical program; each player is essential to the success of our entire group. In marching band, everybody plays; we do not have "benchwarmer" trombone players. We believe that each student is an essential contributor to the program." Brian White noted, "Allegany Band is about excellence of performing. It doesn't matter whether it is a parade or exhibition, artistic merit and education have been expanded and refined by the band program. Allegany's band has ridden waves of success from decade to decade." According to Elmlinger, "At Southern High we do not define success solely by judges' numbers but by our own standards. Building character is important to us, and we stress that trait whenever traveling and stopping at restaurants; we remind our kids to be polite, well mannered, and to tip well. As a staff we measure students' successes over a period of time and are proud to have a small part in that development." Duane Salisbury notes that, "At Northern High, we look at students as they graduate from the program and what they have accomplished because of what we taught them. We have many successful students using that standard."

High school marching band programs have provided thousands of area students with educational and musical opportunities. Those opportunities have increased in recent years, as band programs expanded educational and musical programming beyond what grandfather experienced marching in parades and football games. Today's scholastic bands define success on their own terms and in musical venues of their choosing. Tradition has not been replaced, but it certainly has been expanded. Grandfather is proud!

Editors note: Dan Whetzel is not only a gifted writer and historian but until recently a high school teacher at Allegany High School. He is now in administration with the Allegany Board of Education. He knows first hand the lasting effect this program has had on students. — Lance Bell



Top to Bottom: Southern Garrett High School, Allegany Indoor Percussion, Southern Garrett, Northern Garrett High School, Mountain Ridge High School, & Allegany Indoor Guard.