

The First New Mexico Fife and Drum Corps

I first became interested in fife and drum music when I found an album in NYC sometime in the 70s. I copied it to a cassette and listened to it. It was exciting. I used to like bagpipe music too but now I prefer fife and drum any day. One day, in 1990, I went to a local reenactment and became interested in reenacting. I was a rifleman in the first year but it didn't feel right, so during that year I started thinking about field music. The problem was that I didn't know where to buy instruments or instruction manuals at the time.

I called every music shop in Albuquerque and Santa Fe and asked them if they had any fifes for sale. I only found one place where a guy knew what a fife was but he thought I was talking about a \$600 classical concert instrument. Scratch music shops! So I called every pawn shop in both cities and asked for fifes again. I only found one man who knew what a fife was – he had just sold one. He hadn't known what it was at the time, but the customer told him what it was. Scratch pawn shops!

I thought I must be living in a place where fife and drum were never heard, but I found out later that that wasn't true. They had field music with the Coronado's conquistadores in the 1540s, at least a drummer, then again with Onate's settlers in the early 1600's, a trumpeter. When the Presidio de Santa Fe was formed they would have had a trumpeter or possibly a fifer and a drummer, and with the reconquest of 1692-3. De Vargas had a drummer named Sebastian. When Americans finally started coming down the Santa Fe Trail in 1821 many of them mentioned Mexican field music. One described that a fifer and drummer used to march around the plaza in Santa Fe three times every night playing tattoo; and another said that when he heard the drums rolling in the Presidio, that the soldiers would be there soon to stop the fight. When the Americans invaded New Mexico they brought fife and drum – and they continued playing through the end of the American Civil War. But sometime after that every memory of fife and drum died out.

Where could I find a fife? I didn't have internet access at the time. So I called every antique store in Albuquerque and I found a lady who said she had a fife for sale. I ran right over to get it. It was an antique that had belonged to a Civil War veteran along with an army cot and some discharge papers. She thought he was from a Pennsylvania regiment but she wasn't sure. She had already sold the cot and the papers but not the fife (go figure). I asked her how much it was - \$40.00. That sounded a lot better than \$600 and it was an antique too, so I got it.

Now, the problem was how to play it. I had never even heard a live fife played (or rudimental side drum either for that matter). The lower registers were easy but the higher octave was a problem. Then a friend gave me a finger chart he had copied from the Bruce and Emmett book and a cassette recording of Reveille and Tattoo. I learned to play Reveille from the recording and then I learned some of the songs on the Fife and Drum music from NY. Unfortunately I hadn't copied down the album jacket so I didn't know the names of the songs. Then Andrew Garcia, who had watched me struggle with this for a long time, suddenly announced that he had a fife instruction book. I struggled between being upset for waiting so long to tell me and elation that I had finally found some music. Better yet, he had the name and address of Cooperman Fife and Drum Company so I ordered my own book and a new reproduction fife. It was a whole new

world. The Book was “The Old Fort Snelling Fife Instructor,” so a lot of my present tune versions come from that book.

I got my son Bennett a drum from Lark in the Morning and found a rudimental drum teacher. That was a complete stroke of luck (no pun intended). The Instructor, Ken Battat had grown up in Los Alamos and learned drumming from a ‘Rudimental Drum Nazi,’ so he would teach it, but he was not keen to play it since he had such difficult memories of learning the drum from this ‘Nazi.’ Benny also played drums with the Middle School Band. The Band leader had a drumming background but it was not rudimental, so when Benny played Bidy Oats it really wowed the audience, they had never heard that kind of drumming, especially from a nine year old kid. One time Benny was in an all-school drum judging contest and he played ‘Peas on a Trencher.’ An older man named Luchetti, who owned a local drum shop was the judge. He was supposed to read the music and judge Benny on how well he played it. Benny started playing. After about ten seconds, Luchetti closed the book and watched Benny with a far-away look in his eyes. I didn’t understand what was happening. When Ben finished, he said, “I haven’t heard that kind of drumming since I was a kid. I didn’t know anyone played that style anymore.” Benny got the highest grade of course. He said, “I got a ‘One.’” My wife and I were upset, “A One!” ‘Ya, he said, that’s the highest mark.” “Oh.”

Soon, Benny and I were joined by Carl Reed Jr. who played a bass beat on his drum. Then Jason Schmitt joined and he took drum lessons also, so it was me and the three boys for a while. Then one day at an event at Fort Craig, a beat up VW wagon drove up and two boys with drums got out, John and Joey Christian. I was even more surprised when I found out they had taken drum lessons from George Carroll and they had drums made by him. From Mr. Carroll I was able to get a couple of drums, a bunch of F&D books, and an earful of history, background, and advice. Lets see, and then Porter Swentzell joined as a fifer, and Mr. Christian started learning fife too. It was Mr. Christian and myself and all those boys - WHO COULD PLAY! It was difficult for us to practice together because the Christians lived at White Sands, and Porter lived at Santa Clara. So we coordinated what we would learn over the phone and played when we got together at events. It was a thrill to think that we were the first fifes and drums to be heard at historic locations in possibly 130 years – places like Santa Fe plaza and Forts Union, Craig, Selden, and Garland.

But we had problems getting started. The boys could play quite a few beats but they couldn’t play and walk too. Every time we tried to march to a beat we lost it. The most they could play was a basic, ‘one, one, one-two-one beat. We kept trying, though. One day in the spring of 1993 we were at the Picacho Pass reenactment in Arizona. There was a skirmish and everyone formed up to march back to camp. At this time I tried to keep myself and the boys behind the infantry. But this time they did an abrupt about face and we were suddenly in front of the infantry column. Oh, oh! I didn’t know what to do so we stayed there. We got the command to forward march and John Christian started playing Bruce and Emmett’s Quickstep #3. For a few seconds, it was pretty rough, then it smoothed out. The boys were playing and marching! They were playing kind of slow and taking baby steps, but they were marching. The infantry behind was hard pressed to march at that slow rate, but they did it. No one complained – they were listening. Then I heard one of the Arizona guys behind us say, “Hey, we’ve got drummers!” And I realized it was true, we did have drummers. What a feeling. I let

them continue that beat all the way back to camp, all the while, they were gathering confidence and sounding better. A photographer from a Phoenix newspaper took a picture of us just at the moment the boys started to play. The Arizona guys gave me a copy of it the next time they came to New Mexico. What a triumphant moment. In terms of what junior F&D corps back east were doing, our success was extremely modest. Yet I couldn't help feeling that it was quite authentic. It was so thrilling to have a corps made up of young boys 9-12 who looked, acted, and played like authentic Civil War boys.

Our emphasis was reenacting, so we only played what and when the fife and drums would have played. We did not jam in camp. However, when we began playing at Civil War reenactments I was faced with the problem of "what do we do now?" Just playing the music was not enough. I felt that we had to do what the field music did WHEN and HOW they did it. I tried to find sources that would provide historical context. I read the US 1861 Regulations from cover to cover (well, OK I skimmed through some of it - well OK, I skimmed through most of it) and jotted down all the references to the duties of field music. I also went through the Customs of Service and all the period fife and drum books that I could get my hands on. I read other books that had snippets of information and I tried to put it all down in one place. Another source of information was George Carroll, the man who first re-published the Bruce and Emmett book. I learned a lot through long telephone conversations with him.

I wrote everything down in two separate articles. The first one, the "First New Mexico Field Music Tactics Manual" is meant to provide 'how to' guidance to members of the First New Mexico Field Music. It is also meant as a presentation of suggestions for other field music reenactors if they're interested. It is based on as much historical evidence as I could find and is therefore an historical interpretation of how a Civil War Volunteer Field Music operated in the field. I got the idea from "Dodworth's Band Tactics" which is an 1850s publication for military bands. I believe it was written for National Guard units. I wish there was one for field music too, but as far as I know, there isn't. The accompanying article "Field Music in the Civil War" provides more historical background and all the sources I used are listed in that article, the main source being the U.S. 1861 Revised Army Regulations.

In 1995, the Christians moved away to become missionaries in China and we struggled for members, but it wasn't too bad. We were joined by William Cooley from Colorado (drummer) and Andrea "Andy" and Alex Cynecki from Arizona. William was the only kid I knew who learned rudimental drumming without an instructor. It was amazing. He didn't always stick with the correct handing, but he sure played the rudiments. Actually there were a lot more kids who came and went. Then my other son Davin started playing fife too. I started playing bass drum and we had a pretty good sound. We went to Shiloh in 1997, and of the eight approved field music for the Frontier Brigade, five of us were from the First NM. It was there I first heard an actual fife and drum corps. They sounded very good and I didn't think we could ever sound that good. Then for various reasons, in the next few years the kids drifted away one by one and then it was just me and Bennett again. That's what I call the 'old corps.'

Finally, in 1999, Wayne Gustafson, who played bass, joined and shortly after Hal Meyers, who learned drum, also joined and we began what I call the 'new corps.' It was a totally new phenomenon for me. First of all, they were adults, which was great, and second, Wayne was from Deep River Conn. So we now had a Connecticut connection.

Then Charles Eberly joined and learned the fife (rather quickly, too), then Kathy Palmer who was also a veteran of the 'Connecticut connection.' Hal arranged for us to have weekly practices at a local school and made a fine book of our music. Our music selections began to change and we began to progress in skill beyond what was possible before. Now, the emphasis was not just on reenacting but on playing and having fun at it. So we made quite a few changes. At reenactments we didn't do guard duty or just play authentic calls (beats) and tunes, we stood around and played as much as we wanted to. We also started doing events which did not involve historical places or themes. Everyone was doing their best to play as good as possible. Then Wendell and Ginger joined and our fifeing jumped a notch. They are superior musicians and brought a whole new level to our fifeing, Wendell having a strong and vibrant tone (he's a flautist) and Ginger (who plays several instruments) adding harmonies to our melodies. Wendell and Ginger also brought a few other fifiers. We also picked up Ron Sanders a drummer who is a band instructor for a High School, and Porter came back, too. By this time the sound was becoming very good, though a few of us thought we were becoming a 'flute chorus' with all the melodies. I was never big on melodies myself since most historical books contain very few of them. But the sound was nice.

I have enjoyed the 'reenacting' style of F&D as equally as the newer 'fun' style. I like them both. We even went to a Deep River muster and there were more F&D'ers than I have ever seen in my life. I came to realize that it was the Connecticut Valley that kept American fifeing and drumming alive in the years between the Civil War to today. But one of my best moments was when Art Pope another Connecticut Yankee who now lives in Arizona said in an email that it was nice to play with people who got along and just put the music first. I thought that was good - 'music first.' It's not easy as it sounds, but I guess that's what we have been doing.

Dave.