

Meet the Masters of East Texas

Jim Hagood

Alto Tatum and Roy Swicegood were unlikely friends. Both early successful East Texas band directors, business associates, and later business competitors; their personalities differed dramatically. One a charismatic and dynamic promoter, the other analytical and meticulous in his approach to his professional endeavors—both seemed to recognize and admire the strengths and abilities of their friend.

Last spring, when 2009 TBA President Gary Robbins approached us (Pete Kunkel, Waymon Bullock, Val Rose and me) about presenting an initial Meet the Masters Series clinic about the development of East Texas' bands, we enthusiastically accepted the assignment. Then at our first meeting in downtown Chireno, the challenge of how to cover the seventy-five year history of our bands in just sixty minutes became clear. What to include, and much more difficult, what to leave out? Two men that must be mentioned, however, were Alto Tatum and Roy Swicegood.

The Gladewater and White Oak Bands were outstanding pioneer programs in East Texas. Alto Tatum's band directing career began in 1934, when he organized one of the first bands in East Texas at East Mountain High School in Upshur County. In 1937, he moved to the nearby oil-field boomtown

Gladewater where he developed one of the best band programs in the state. In 1947 Mr. Tatum served as TMEA State Band Chairman. At that time, directors considered the Band Division of TMEA as a continuation of the original TBA.

Roy Swicegood served as the band director at White Oak from 1945 to 1950. White Oak was also an oil-field school district and was adjacent to Gladewater. The band reportedly soon grew from thirteen members to over five hundred students in the total program. The band became very active in both local and out-of-state competitions. The White Oak Roughneck Band performed twice at the Cotton Bowl; "won every event entered" for two years at the Tri-State Band Festival in Enid, Oklahoma; toured West Texas, New Mexico, Canada and Mexico; and appeared at Madison Square Garden and at Yankee Stadium in New York City.

During the summer of 1948, both the White Oak and Gladewater Bands went to the Lions Club International Convention in New

York City (including White Oak band student, John "Piccolo-Pete" Kunkel). The Lions Club Parade, was one of the major national contests for high school bands.

Mr. Tatum's Gladewater Band won the parade, and Swicegood's White Oak Band came in second.

East Texas—being a rather remote area—was made up of mostly smaller schools. Many directors taught alone and often was the only band director in their district. They quickly learned that neighboring directors could be their most dependable resource. This created a complex relationship of a tough colleague/competitor versus helpful supporter and friend. Alto and Roy's relationship began as competitors, became associates and partners, and once again returned to being competitors—but throughout, they were friends. This friendship established a model for future directors to emulate.

Another factor that contributed to the excellent school band programs in East Texas was the development of local music stores which offered a level of support unavailable from

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distant or satellite stores. Again, Mr. Tatum and Mr. Swicegood led the way. After the 1948 Lions Club convention, Mr. Tatum resigned at Gladewater, and with the help of Mr. Clint Hackney (H&H Music, Houston), he opened Tatum Music Company in Longview. His store focused on helping local band programs. Prior to this, directors had depended on music stores in Dallas and a Shreveport branch of a store out of New Orleans. This was not a practical option especially for supplies and instrument repair. To assist students joining band to obtain instruments, directors drove to Dallas or Shreveport, picked-up a load of horns, and then drove back home to make band instruments available to their parents. While this arrangement would not work in today's environment, it existed then as a product of necessity and was a sign of the trust parents had in their local teachers.

Working out of his car, Mr. Tatum not only brought the music store to the band hall, but because he was such a respected director and a leader in the field, he was also available to clinic bands and advise directors. Mr. Swicegood joined Tatum Music Company as a

“road-man” after serving as the Band Director at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College in Nacogdoches for one year. After only one year in Longview, Mr. Tatum helped Roy open Swicegood Music Company in Beaumont. (Mr. Tatum was passing-on the help that he had received from Mr. Hackney a few years earlier.) Mr. Tatum and Mr. Swicegood were partners in the Beaumont store for a while, but Swicegood soon bought Mr. Tatum's share and they became “friendly” competitors. These local committed full-service band instrument retailers in the area opened up new and wonderful possibilities for the programs in East Texas.

Marching bands were an important component of East Texas bands' growth. Entertainment at Friday night football games was an important role for these new band programs. Which school won half-time became an important topic of conversation on Saturday mornings in many communities. Whether the director could come into town for a cup of coffee or needed to hideout for the weekend depended on how the band had performed at the game the preceding night. In



East Mountain School Band, Alto Tatum 1935-36

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fact, a director's employment the next year could be decided during football season. The local school band was a source of pride—not just for band students and their parents—but also for the entire community.

Marching contests were typically scheduled after all district football games. (Back then, only the district champion went to the play-offs.) Directors selected the best routines and music used that season and, from this material, put together a contest drill. Contest became a “final exam” for marching bands, with a professional assessment of the year's work. The largest audience the band had for the year would be at Friday night games, and successful directors understood both the educational and public relations importance of marching season.

The East Texas oil fields also played a pivotal role in the growth and success of East Texas' bands. With the oil fields came good jobs in an area where previously, most families had to work daylight to dark just to survive. With children no longer required to work in the fields, parents wanted to provide a better life for them with more opportunities than they had growing up. As a result, public education and activities like band found strong support.

With the state funding provided by the 1948 Gilmer-Akin Act, the minimum-foundation provided eighty per cent of the funds for most schools with the local district raising the other twenty per cent from local property taxes. Before the “Robin Hood Plan” (with less than 50% state funding for public schools), rich districts like the oil-field schools raised (and kept!)

so much money locally that they were designated as “budget-balance” schools, and they received little or no state funding. These included schools like Gladewater and White Oak which bought the best bands money could buy. With hard work, determination and community pride, many minimum-foundation schools kept up and even exceeded richer schools' band programs.

State colleges in East Texas had been established primarily to supply teachers for the region and they became a major factor in the development of the band movement. Many of the pioneer school band directors had not majored in music and had little formal training. These colleges recognized the need to provide professional preparation for public school music teachers.

D. O. Wiley started to change the status of the profession in West Texas. In our part of the



Roy Swicegood, Director

State, East Texas State Teachers College, Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, Sam Houston State Teachers College, and Lamar Tech soon developed programs for certified music teachers. After WW II, an influx of veterans entered college, many majoring in Music Education. After graduation, they arrived at the school band halls where a period of rapid growth in both quality and enrollment of the area programs had begun. The next generations of college directors such as at Ray Luke at ET, Jimmie Hudgins at SFA, Clint Hackney and Dr. Ralph Mills at Sam Houston and Dr. Charles (Pete) Wiley at Lamar raised the standards of band director preparation.

The legacies of college directors like Dr. Gary Garner at WT and Mel Montgomery at SFA were enhanced by

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their students' successes in the public schools as well as the quality of their outstanding college bands. These colleges, and others, flourished.

Fast-forward to the 2009 UIL State Marching Contest in San Antonio. (The contest program, by the way, featured a picture of the 1949 White Oak Marching Band.) Three bands from East Texas (Region IV) were competing in the same class. In the warm-up area for the prelims, the East Texas band that would again eventually win the State Championship, discovered that a set of their sousaphone bits were broken. A quick call to a Longview music dealer that was in the stands did not immediately solve the problem, but the dealer called the other two East Texas directors on their cell phones. Within minutes, two sets of bits were delivered to the band on the sideline. Ironically these two bands ended up in a virtual tie for 8th/9th place, one position short of making the finals.

The seventy-five year legacy of East Texas directors' understanding the true value of competition and the essential importance of friendship was intact. Alto and Roy would have been proud...

The 2009 TBA Board of Directors envisioned a series of clinics entitled "Meet the Masters..." that would trace the development and evolution of bands across the

state. President Gary Robbins invited retired directors Pete Kunkel (Longview), Waymon Bullock (Lufkin), Val Rose (Nederland) and Jim Hagood (Nacogdoches) to conduct the first of these clinics at the summer TBA Convention/Clinic. The panel met several times during the summer and decided to produce a handout

that would divide the history into decades. Waymon discussed the early history of East Texas and the formation of industrial and civic bands. Pete covered the pioneer school bands and their directors during the 1930s and 40s. The post war period and the rapid growth of schools that offered band as an academic subject was written by Val. The many changes in society, the public schools, and the effect on school band programs were discussed by Jim. Copies of the handout are available on the TBA web site: www.texasbandmasters.org.

The clinic was well attended. The presentation was basically a "bull session" with many "tall tales" from over two hundred years of combined East Texas band experiences. Being bonafied East Texans (Well, Jim was born and raised in Austin... but he got to East Texas as soon as he could!), the panel was unencumbered by inconvenient "facts" or persnickety accuracy. Fun was had by all... especially the panelists!



Alto Tatum, Director

In 1965-66, during his senior year at Stephen F. Austin University, Jim Hagood completed his student-teaching with Neil Grant at Nacogdoches High School/Junior High. The next year, Jim and his wife Mary Beth moved to White Oak where he was Neil's assistant. Jim taught most of his thirty-nine year career in Nacogdoches County including Troup, Smiley HS (NE Houston), and Humble HS. Jim retired in 2000 as the Nacogdoches High School Band Director, a post he held for twenty years. Although officially retired, Jim filled-in as the band director at Center for three years, and one year at Timpson.

Jim has both his bachelor's and masters degrees from Stephen F. Austin University. He served as TMEA Region Chair and Region 21 Band Chairman and has been the Region 21 UIL Executive Secretary since 2003. In 1995 he served as President of TBA. He is a member of Phi Beta Mu, TMEA, TMAA and the TBA.

Mel Montgomery, Director of Bands at SFA, asked a group of alumni to organize a Lumberjack Band Alumni Association. Jim did so and served as the first president of that group which still exists to support the band and sponsor scholarships for deserving students. Jim is a recipient of the SFA Lumberjack Band Hall of Fame. In 2000, he received the honor of NISD and Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce Teacher of the Year.