

# Panhandle Band History: A Reflection

**Cody Myers**

---

The Texas Panhandle. This is a land of rich history, bountiful resources, and the finest people to be found anywhere. Palo Duro Canyon is the signature feature of the Panhandle region, plunging deep into the otherwise rolling plains and grassland. Many remember the Panhandle as home to cattleman Charles Goodnight, the Adobe Walls Indian Battles, or the Wild West town of Old Tascosa at the site of present day Boys Ranch.

Upon entering the present era, school life became paramount in rural Panhandle communities. School bands emerged as an enduring source of pride for many, if not most, of these communities. These band programs have created a historical record of their own.

The Texas Panhandle comprises the top 26 counties in Texas, some 25,600 square miles. That's 10% of Texas' land mass...over twice as large as Rhode Island. 38 high school bands participated in Region 1 UIL Contests during school year 2011-2012, a reflection of the relatively sparse population density of the Panhandle area. Nine of those were from the immediate Amarillo area.

## Marching Band

The Panhandle likely mirrors most of the state regarding marching band development. George "Red"

Bird, band director for Massillon High School in Ohio, was the first to use yard lines for a measured step. The concept found its way to the Panhandle.

6 to 5 became the accepted gait unless, of course, the field only had lines every ten yards! Using the yard lines made it possible to have straight lines moving across the field. Not probable, just possible!!

As contests developed, bands were faced with required maneuvers. Inspection scores were included in the overall rating. "Band Contest" during much of the early period was all held on a single day. That included Marching Band, Concert Band, Sightreading...with and without student conductors. Now that's a full day!!

A review of Panhandle and Hereford videos from 1959 through 1969 is quite interesting. The 1959 Panhandle High School Band video reveals an 8 to 5 marching style we might expect. Field cover from end zone to end zone, however, is rather limited. Many of the

maneuvers remain quite compact from side to side. By 1964, the same band program was using the same maneuvers to greater

**School bands emerged as an enduring source of pride for many, if not most, of these communities. These band programs have created a historical record of their own.**

**The Panhandle represents about 1.6% of the state population ... it is also home to 33 Texas Bandmaster Hall of Fame members!**

effect by covering much more field, up to 40 yards at once. Those early Panhandle Bands, directed by the legendary Gerald Smith, demonstrate very solid marching and maneuvering skills. Additionally, they play quite well. One interesting thing about both the Panhandle bands: once they begin playing and

marching, they don't stop until the completion of the show!!

The 1965 Hereford High School Band video is a solid display of technique and overall playing skill as the band follows the opening fanfare with "Eagle Squadron" at a pretty good clip. The marching style is an extension of the earlier traditional marching style seen in the Panhandle videos. In addition to the 8 to 5 step, Hereford sports a flashy high knee lift. The 1969 Hereford video reveals a sideline entrance and a Spanish show theme.

## Panhandle Band History: A Reflection

The overall marching style remained as before, with a less pronounced knee lift. Much of the movement was sideline to sideline, complimenting the north and south movement.

I must say that straight-line formations and diagonals in these early films were pretty darned good!!

During the late 70s the WTSU Band began utilizing the new corps style techniques. My recollection is that as those of us at WT graduated and went on to teach in the Panhandle schools, corps style techniques were introduced into the region's high school marching bands. Of course, for a time the techniques were an end unto themselves rather than a means to creating desired effect. Stock arrangement shows of the 80s gave way to arranged music for each band. And director-designed drills largely gave way to drills by specialized writers during the mid 90s.

One huge factor in Panhandle marching band is the travel distance required to attend football games and marching contest. Bands have routinely traveled 100 miles or more to attend district football games. Even now, Tascosa High School travels in excess of 300 miles to compete in district football games in San Angelo and Abilene. (Tascosa's closest district game is in Lubbock, about 130 miles). A number of bands exceed 100 miles to Amarillo for UIL Marching Contest. Booker tops that list at about 138 miles.



### Honor Bands

The Texas Panhandle has been home to over 30 finalists for TMEA Honor Band through the years. Those of us from the Panhandle point to these quality programs with pride, as bands and directors which stood alongside those setting the bar high for all Texas Bands during their era.

Honor Bands from the Texas Panhandle  
Memphis High School Ronnie Wells 1A 1966  
Hereford High School Ben Gollehon 3A 1968  
Canyon High School Gary Zook 3A 1970  
Canyon High School Mike Sheffield 3A 2005  
Canadian High School Will Brewer 1A 2011

It is an interesting fact that Amarillo High School was named the very first TMEA Honor Band for Texas in 1959. Director Wayne Muller moved to the newly-opened Tascosa High School that summer, however. Due to his move the Amarillo High School band forfeited the "Honor Band" title. Edinburg High School was named the TMEA Honor Band in their absence and went on to perform for the upcoming TMEA convention.

Reflecting upon the early bands among this collection presents the reality of achievement directors and students realized with skeletal staffs, compared with more recent honor bands. Ben Gollehon remembers events leading to the Hereford High School Band's designation as the 1968 TMEA Honor Band.

Ben Gollehon began teaching in Hereford as the lone director in 1960. By 1966 he had added two directors to assist with the high school and direct the two junior highs in Hereford. Then, In 1967, according to Gollehon, "We decided to bite the bullet. We played the *Hindemith Symphony*,

## Panhandle Band History: A Reflection

*Elsa's Procession*, and Sousa's *Pride of the Wolverines*. We were real successful....and won the outstanding band at Buccaneer."

Hereford was selected the TMEA Honor Band during the summer of 1967.

Gollehon says, "We hit the ground running" to prepare for the upcoming February concert. "There was lots of help from Dr. Gary Garner at West Texas State, the woodwind quintet at Amarillo College, and the faculty at West Texas State University.

"We gave a pretty good performance, we thought. We were proud of it."

Gollehon continues, "The community in Hereford at that time was a great place to be. We had lots of outstanding doctors, lawyers, CEOs, and successful farmers. I got to teach their children.

"It was a unique time in Hereford. A unique time for me. It was very enjoyable. I shall never forget it."

Gary Garner recalls the 1968 TMEA Convention as a notable year for the then WTSU Music Department. Concerts during that TMEA included the Hereford Honor Band, the West Texas State University Band, and the Springlake-Earth High School Honor Band, Dean Foshee, Director. Both those honor bands were directed by WT products.

Gary Zook recently recalled his time as director of the 1970 Canyon High School Band:

"Forty-three years is a long time, and my memory isn't what it once was, but I can remember the 1970 Honor Band Concert and the school year leading up to it as if it were yesterday. What a year!

"I didn't have a brilliant, well-organized teaching program in Canyon. What I did have was a bunch of great (and smart) kids who were willing to work hard and put up with my idiosyncrasies, plus a community that thought band was important. I also had unbelievable support from Dr. John Green at West Texas State along with support and untiring help from

Dr. Gary Garner, Don Baird, and others from WT. And oh yes, my wife Virginia, who has remained my biggest fan and supporter for fifty-five years.

"My assistant and Jr. High director at the time was Gary Laramore, who worked long hours helping to prepare the band for the concert and offering me some much-needed advice.

"One other small thing that might have helped me along the way was the sense of competition I had with my old friend Ben Gollehon from Hereford.

"As I look back on it all now, winning the honor band was perhaps the greatest experience of my band-directing career. If I have one regret, it is that I never showed enough appreciation to all those who helped me achieve the honor, especially the kids!"

### **West Texas State University/West Texas A&M University**

No doubt, the presence of "WT" has had a tremendous impact on the development of Panhandle bands. In 1963, the wind faculty was expanded to three. More faculty was added over the years, creating a full stable of very capable specialists. Most of the faculty was involved in teaching privately to area band students which, of course, was a great benefit to the students' home band programs.

The WT Band Camp has been a long time source of excellent instruction and incredible musical experiences for students far and wide. A review of guest conductors over the years reads as a "Who's Who" in the band world. Included are William Revelli, Frederick Fennell, Harry Began, Don McGinnis, Frank Wickes, Clarence Sawhill, Ralph Laycock, H. Robert Reynolds, Fred Ebbs, and James Matthews. Dr. Gary Garner has been a mainstay, conducting the camp Honor Band for one of the weeks of camp. Current WT Director Don Lefevre currently conducts the Honor Band for a week of camp as well.

## Panhandle Band History: A Reflection

Numerous other WT events have positively impacted Panhandle and Texas bands. The WT Spring Clinic has occurred for over 20 years, with invited bands and conductors working with faculty and invited guests on the WT campus. The clinic concludes with a performance by each of the guest ensembles and finally, the WT Band.

In my view the WT Band era falls into two categories: WT Bands with conductors through the tenure of Dr. Ted Crager, and WT Bands with conductors beginning with Dr. Gary Garner and continuing through today. There is no question that the impact of Dr. Gary Garner on Panhandle bands, Texas bands, and the American band movement as a whole is beyond significant. Dr. Garner has been a master educator, motivator, and mentor for hundreds of successful bandmasters throughout Texas and beyond. Many of his protégés have collectively influenced the positive direction of the Texas band movement, an influence which will be realized for decades to come.



Sam Watson

### Phi Beta Mu Bandmasters Hall of Fame

It is apparent that Panhandle bandmasters were among the “movers and shakers” of the early-day band movement in Texas. In fact, when one considers that the Panhandle represents about 1.6% of the state population, it is amazing that it is also home to thirty-three Texas Bandmaster Hall of Fame members! Wow! Find them listed here. Not indicated were offices held for TBA or TMEA by these Hall of Fame members. The individuals listed are Bandmaster Hall of Fame members who spent a portion, or all, of their teaching career in the Panhandle.

### Inducted

- 1975 Jack Mahan: Borger 1941. Co-founder of Phi Beta Mu.
- 1977 Robert (Chief) Davidson: McLean Municipal Band and McLean High School Band 1927-1935.
- 1991 Bill Bradley: Memphis 1961-1964.
- 1991 Jo DiCosimo: Pampa 1955-1986.
- 1991 Robert Fielder: Phillips 1936-1941.
- 1991 J.W. King: Canyon 1970-1979.
- 1991 Ray Robbins: Clarendon 6 yrs; Pampa 6 yrs; Phillips 21 yrs.
- 1991 Ralph G. Smith: Childress 1949-1952; Dimmitt 1952-1983.
- 1991 Sam Watson: Wildorado 1949-1950; Spearman 1951-1967; Phillips 1968-1973; Pampa 1973-1986.
- 1991 Oscar Wise: Organized first Amarillo High School Band 1922.
- 1992 D.W. (Dub) Crain Jr.: Sunray 1972-1973; Dumas 1973-1983.
- 1992 Gerald Smith: Dalhart 1950-1951; McLean 1952-1955; Panhandle 1955-1985.
- 1992 J. Ralph Smith: Organized Hereford Community Band 1902; Hereford 1921-1928; Plainview 1929-1930; Hereford 1930-1945.
- 1993 Robert Gans: Borger 1965-1973.
- 1996 Ada Creel: Phillips 1948-1963. Founded “Music Makers” stage band.
- 1996 Wayne Muller: Tascosa 1958-1962; Amarillo High 1963-1965.
- 1997 Clyde H. Rowe: Borger 1939-1940; Amarillo High 1943-1950.
- 1998 Bill Tregoe: Pampa 1953-1962.
- 2001 Lee Boyd Montgomery: Canyon 1962-1964.
- 2001 Don Baird: WTSU 1965-1979.
- 2001 Fred Stockdale: Pampa 1962-1966.
- 2001 Gary Zook: Canyon 1964-1979.
- 2002 Willis Giddens: Shamrock 1957-1963; Friona 1963-1970.
- 2002 Ben Gollehon: Pampa Jr. High 1958-1960; Hereford 1960-1973.
- 2003 Dr. Gary Garner: WTSU (WTAMU) 1963-2002. Director Emeritus.

## Panhandle Band History: A Reflection

- 2003 Joe Mack Hill: Stratford 1958-1966; Dumas Jr. High 1966-1975.
- 2004 Harris Brinson: Pampa Jr. High 1964-1966; Pampa High School 1966-1973; Phi Beta Mu International Past President.
- 2005 Tom Neugent: White Deer 1966-1967.
- 2006 Phil Anthony: Clarendon 1964-1967.
- 2007 Don Hanna: Amarillo High 1992-1994.
- 2007 Dr. Charles Trayler: Sunray 1966; Dalhart 1983-1995; Dumas 1996-2005.
- 2007 Clyde Wilson: Hereford 1962-1966; Tulia 1966-1968.
- 2008 Randy Vaughn: Claude 1967-1968; Hereford Jr. High 1968-1970; Hereford High School 1970-1982.

Examination of the information contained in the aforementioned list is quite interesting. Note that Chief Davidson taught both the McLean Municipal Band and the McLean High School Band simultaneously beginning in the 1920's. Such an arrangement was a common practice during that era. Another notable name is that of Clyde Rowe, who was the high school band director of Dr. Gary Garner at Amarillo High School and Roger Edwards at Kress High School. Incidentally, Dr. Garner was a cheerleader for the Amarillo Sandies!

There are also significant family ties within this esteemed collection of names. J. Ralph Smith was the long-time director in Hereford. His sons followed in their father's Hall of Fame footsteps. Ralph G. Smith, known to many as Glenn, was a career director in Dimmitt, just 22 miles down the road from Hereford. Gerald Smith spent the majority of his career in Panhandle, just east of Amarillo.

Robert Fielder and Sam Watson were directors in Phillips. Stories still circulate about great bands there under the direction of Mr. Watson. Interestingly, Phillips was a "company town" for Phillips Petroleum. Their petroleum-plant employees lived in their own small homes on company property. The Phillips school was quite wealthy. The arrangement was fine until Phillips closed the plant and required all residents to vacate company property! Folks moved away, taking their small homes. All that remains is a vacant school and a grid of home slabs.

The "elder statesmen" of the listed Hall of Fame Members who remain in the Panhandle are Dr. Charles Trayler of Dalhart and Dr. Gary Garner from Amarillo. Between them they possess 94 years of band experience in the Texas Panhandle, as both students and directors. Both continue to mentor young and not-so-young directors in the area, as well as conduct countless band clinics.

Each of these bandmasters has left his mark of success among Panhandle bands. Tales of their methods, idiosyncrasies, and escapades could fill volumes. One thing is sure, Panhandle bands are richer for their having been here.

The Texas Panhandle. Home to a bountiful and rich band history. The rich Panhandle past is certain to give way to an equally rich future. Names like Oscar Wise, J.W. King, Joe DiCosimo, Fred Pankratz, Bill Tregoe, Charlie Trayler, and Roger Edwards pass the baton to current bandmasters Bruce Collins, Mike Sheffield, Jeff Witcher, Mike Ellis, John Zalman, and Don Lefevre, to name only a few. To these, and others, we entrust the musical future of children all across the Panhandle through the wonderful world of band.

*Cody Myers is the Director of Fine Arts in Amarillo ISD. He has 31 years experience in Panhandle band participation as a WT student in the 1970s and with band directing stops in Tulia, Dimmitt, Dumas, and Amarillo ISD. Myers completed this article with input from Dr. Charles Trayler of Dalhart, and Dr. Gary Garner of Amarillo. Cody served as TBA President in 2008.*