

Historical Ramblings

Making History at 180 Beats Per Minute

Forty-four years ago, the inaugural parade of John F. Kennedy was held in Washington D.C. amidst snow storms, icy streets and chilling 20 degree temperatures. That day, the entire town of Lompoc was glued to TV sets, eager to get a glimpse of a proud group of local youngsters, chosen to be one of three groups to represent the state of California. That group was the Lompoc High School marching band, under the direction of director Cliff Vidger, assistant director John Porter and Drum Major Glen Newcomb.

On December 2, 1960, prior to performing in Lompoc's annual Christmas parade, the band was read the invitation to the inaugural parade. The band had been chosen from more than 900 applicants for the honor of appearing in the parade on January 20, 1961.

In order to make the trip, \$18,000 had to be raised in one month. A band fund was immediately established along with a fundraising strategy that reached throughout Santa Barbara County. Local merchants placed donation jars in their businesses, while the rest of the community rallied around the fundraising effort. Santa Barbara County Supervisors approved a \$1,500 contribution. Groups of volunteers solicited donations in downtown Santa Barbara and donations rolled in from Orcutt, Johns-Manville and the City of Lompoc sweetened the pot with \$2,500 and \$1,000, respectively. A special demonstration by the band was provided on South H Street, with spectators crowding the curb, opening purses and wallets to make their contributions to the travel fund. Band members also invaded local tomato fields of the Alpha Seed Company for a full day of tomato harvesting. Charles Wilson and Bob Dennett, co-owners of the company, offered the band a heavy percentage of the day's profit as a contribution to the fundraising effort. Lompoc's Moose Lodge held a community dance, donating the proceeds to the band fund, sending it over the \$18,000 goal.

Many locals contended that the band had been selected as a result of JFK's visit to Lompoc in 1959, while he was still a Senator. While that may have had some bearing on the invitation, the fact is that the band was just plain good, as evidenced by their award winning performances throughout the state. The group was recognized for its unique style of marching, adopting steps from the Universities of Denver and Utah as well as innovations introduced by director Vidger. Their unique marching style involved dancing, shifting marching styles and the use of jump, pony, quick and sprint steps. While other marching bands adhered to the more traditional 120 beat per minute cadence, the LHS band flew by spectators at 180 beats per minute in what was called a "goose step" by some observers. The marching style could better be compared to the "cakewalk," of the 1890's - only performed at a more frantic pace.

On January 18, 1961, fifty-five band members boarded a bus for Vandenberg AFB, where a chartered DC-7 aircraft awaited them. Once in Washington D.C. the group was greeted by blizzard conditions. They had

prepared for the cold by rehearsing three days a week at 7:30 a.m., but nothing could prepare them for the bitter cold that greeted them in Washington.

Despite the cold and the icy streets, the band proceeded down the parade route, transitioning into their quick step marching style as they passed President Kennedy in the reviewing stand. Newsman David Brinkley, providing commentary for the parade exclaimed, "They're going fast!" According to a newspaper account, the only casualty was the bass drum player who slipped on the ice. He never missed a beat, keeping up the cadence while lying on his back in the street. He managed to rejoin the group to the cheers of spectators.

During their three day stay, band members toured national monuments, watched currency being printed at the Federal Bureau of Engraving and Printing and invaded the private office of the Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons to get out of the weather.

Laden with souvenirs, the excited but tired musicians made their way back to Lompoc, arriving home on January 21, having marched through a piece of national history at 180 beats per minute.