

## **Blog 33 ~ The Blawenburg Band**

**By David Cochran**

*Note: This is a double-feature blog. In 1982, I wrote an article in Princeton Magazine about the Blawenburg Band. My source for that article was J. Percy Van Zandt, who was a highly regarded farmer and owner of the Van Zandt Company, a farm equipment dealership. Percy recalled his 55 years in the Blawenburg Band and gave insight from the point of view of a member of the band. My previous article is posted here as a PDF file for you to download and read.*

*[Click here to read: A Musical Gift from the Past to the Present](#)*

*For this blog, I looked at existing print materials related to the band, and I met with the current Blawenburg Band Director, Dr. Jerry Rife, to gain more information about this long-standing band that has brought so much joy to thousands of people.*



When Dr. Jerry Rife picks up the baton to conduct the Blawenburg Band at its Anniversary Concert on May 17, 2020, he will be marking his 35<sup>th</sup> year as Director and the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the band. The Blawenburg Band played its first performance in 1890.



*The Blawenburg Band in 1901*

Bands were a big deal in the late 1800s. There were no radios or other electronic music devices at that time. The only places you would hear music in the good ‘ole days was when you created it at home, listened to it in church, or went to a band concert. Bands were plentiful, and there were an estimated 20,000 bands throughout the nation. It seemed like everyone had bands – towns, churches, breweries, ladies’ groups, firemen, and even orphanages. But there was no band in the small village of Blawenburg.

David Hackler, in his book *Music for the People - - The Blawenburg Band Goes for Two*, notes that there were other active bands in the area before the Blawenburg Band began. There were two amateur bands in Princeton, the Jugtown Band and Farr’s Band. There was also a larger, well-funded, professional band known as Winkler’s Band in Trenton. None of these bands exist today.

Just how the Blawenburg Band began is somewhat of a mystery because in the early days either no records were kept or the records have been lost or destroyed. One story that seems to be a logical explanation stems from a Harvest Home event at Blawenburg Reformed Church. Harvest Home events took place in August or September, and they were big community gatherings with games, food, and sales of goods. They were fundraisers for the local churches that hosted them. Many community bands were paid to play at the Harvest Homes. In the 1920s and 30s, bands were paid \$40 - \$50 (for the whole band) plus a free meal for each musician.

Bands drew people to Harvest Home events, but several Blawenburg residents noted that there was no band at their Harvest Home. As a result, they didn’t make as much money as other churches. Realizing this, some residents decided to recruit some friends and form a band. Some could play instruments, and those who could not were willing to learn. In the early years there was a standing joke, “If you can open the music case, you can join the band.”



*The Blawenburg blacksmith shop*

The band initially practiced in the small room above the blacksmith shop in Blawenburg. It apparently was challenging with many people packed into a small room making loud music. Before long, the lecture room on the second floor of the Blawenburg School, which is now the

church's preschool, became the preferred location for rehearsals. Since those early days, larger facilities have been required, and today, the band often practices in a nearby gymnasium.

The late Edward Terhune, who had the informal moniker "Unofficial Mayor of Blawenburg", recalled in an interview for the Van Harlingen Historical Society how the band operated. "...we rehearsed every week and whenever we got a job. To keep ourselves in tune. Keep our lips in shape. And then, in the summertime, we'd go to these Harvest Homes and other places. Wherever they wanted a band, we'd go."

And the band was indeed on the go, with as many as 50 performances a year. In addition to Harvest Homes, the band has played at parades, community events, nursing homes, and even once at a Ku Klux Klan rally in Pluckemin, north of Somerville.

## **Many Directors**

Harry Farr was the first Blawenburg Band director. As was common, Farr also directed another band called Farr's Band in Princeton. There reportedly is a picture of Farr dressed in a Princeton band uniform conducting the Blawenburg Band. All the band directors knew each other, and it was common to have directors move to other bands.

The Blawenburg Band has had many directors over the years, but in the last 64 years there have been only three directors. In 1956, George Soete, a graduate of Princeton University, Class of '43, and engineer by profession, became the Director. He conducted the band until he passed away in November 1982. Wayne Hunter, who was an instrumental music teacher and Band Director at Montgomery High School, took over as Interim Director for three years. In 1985, Dr. Jerry Rife, a clarinet player in the band and professor at Rider University, began his tenure as the Director of the Blawenburg Band. Little did Rife know that this directorship would last for 35 years, with no sign of ending anytime soon.



*Dr. Jerry Rife at the 2019 Anniversary Concert*

Rife was a Professor of Music and Chair of the Fine Arts Department at Rider University prior to his retirement. He received a Bachelor of Music in Music Education and Master of Music in Clarinet Performance from Kansas State University and a Ph. D. in Musicology from Michigan State University. Among his many professional accomplishments, he has conducted over 1,000 concerts with the Blawenburg Band.

## **American March King**

Early bands loved to play the music of John Philip Sousa, who was often called the “American March King”. “I’ve heard it said that Sousa was like a rock star in the early years of the Blawenburg Band,” former Band Director Wayne Hunter reflected recently. Indeed, Sousa was extremely popular, having composed 137 marches including *Stars and Stripes Forever*, *The Washington Post March*, and *Semper Fidelis*.



*John Philip Sousa in 1922*

Sousa marches are still popular, but today most bands also include more modern pieces. Rife believes in offering a balance of music in his concerts. Today’s concerts are a blend of marches, patriotic music, entertainment music, solos, and rhapsodies. Rife generally follows a pattern in the placement of pieces in his concerts. He explained, “Each concert starts with a march followed by an overture, often from the operatic repertoire. The encore to the overture is a march and then a slow piece such as a ballad. Next there is often a solo composition with the band accompanying the soloist and then a popular tune from a film. The first half of the concert closes with a transcribed orchestral work or standard original band work and a march to round out the program. After the intermission the concert continues with a mix of marches, well-known pieces from musicals, band rarities, and ends with a rousing, patriotic piece. We usually close the concert with Sousa’s *The Stars and Stripes Forever* as was the practice of Sousa’s band.”

The encore is never in the program, but it is always well rehearsed so it can kick in quickly to continue the audience’s enthusiasm. Sousa marches are in every program, and stories are always

a part of a concert. “People like to know the background of pieces,” Rife said. He always has the audience in mind as he develops a program. “A program for the audience is a program for the band,” Rife said.

As many local bands have come and gone over the past century, the Blawenburg Band remains active, providing wonderful musical experiences to audiences in our area. At the conclusion of the 1982 article, I said, “There is some comfort to be taken in the thought that the Blawenburg Band at the turn of the next century (2000) will be very much as it is today: laid-back, low key, and thriving.” Perhaps that is the key to its success. The band has continuously grown under Rife’s leadership. Most of today’s band members are experienced, accomplished musicians. The band has members ranging from teens to seasoned musicians in their 90s. There are also a variety of occupations represented in the band. Students, teachers, homemakers, and doctors all find joy in being a part of this thriving band. In addition to outstanding leadership and direction by Rife, perhaps the thing that makes the Blawenburg Band special is expressed on the band’s website. “The members are alike in one way...; they enjoy making music together.”



The Blawenburg Band at Longwood Gardens in 2008

## Hear the Band Live or on YouTube

If you haven't heard the band recently, you should try to attend one of their upcoming concerts/events. These include:

- Anniversary Concert at Hopewell Valley Central High School on May 17, 2020 at 3:00pm.
- Hopewell Memorial Day Parade on May 24 at 1:00pm
- Annual Scout Troop 46 Strawberry Festival at Montgomery Lower Middle School on June 7 at 1:30pm.

You can also hear them on YouTube. Just search for: YouTube Blawenburg Band.

Be sure to visit the Blawenburg Band website for videos of the band and other information – [www.blawenburgband.org](http://www.blawenburgband.org).

## Learn More about Sousa

In 1992, Jerry Rife worked with Tom Spain, a local film producer, to make a film about John Philip Sousa for the PBS series, *American Experience*. Called *If You Knew Sousa*, it is available on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2094959370577171>. It may be available elsewhere on the Internet as well.

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## Blawenburg Band Facts

### 1. A Longtime Band Member

During World War I, the Blawenburg Band began a long tradition of playing for the Griggstown Reformed Church Harvest Home events. The poster below from one of those early concerts has a special meaning for the band and one of its members. The August 15, 1925 concert took place on the same day that Ray Auerbach, a longtime member of the band, was born. Ray and his wife Carolyn still play in the band today. Playing in the band must promote longevity!



## 2. Blawenburg Band members

Despite the fact that the Blawenburg Band started in Blawenburg 130 years ago and was originally made up of players from Blawenburg and the nearby villages such as Skillman and Harlingen, there are no members of the band today who reside in Blawenburg.

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## Sources

Blawenburg Band website: <http://blawenburgband.org/>

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Hunter, Wayne. Email interview in January 2020.

Nomination Package for Dr. Jerry Rife, Association of Concert Bands, 2013

Rife, Jerry. Interview in January 2020.

Wikipedia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Philip\\_Sousa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Philip_Sousa)

## Pictures

Band logo – Michael Green

Band postcard 1901 – <http://blawenburgband.org/>

Blawenburg blacksmith shop – D. Cochran

2019 Anniversary Concert – <http://blawenburgband.org/>

John Philip Sousa - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Philip\\_Sousa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Philip_Sousa)

Band at Longwood Gardens. Nomination Package for Dr. Jerry Rife, Association of Concert Bands, 2013.

Griggstown Harvest Home poster - Nomination Package for Dr. Jerry Rife, Association of Concert Bands, 2013.