

HISTORY

County brass bands' tradition venerable

Gold may have been king in the late 19th century, but the Nevada County area had plenty of room for brass.

Just about every town during that time had at least one brass band with members playing such instruments as the trumpet, cornet, trombone, baritone, French horn, tuba, clarinet and drums.

A 1995 article from *Sierra Heritage* magazine declared:

"It seems we can't imagine a time without brass bands in our Sierra communities. And certainly enough, brass bands played an important role in the history of California's gold mining towns. They provided entertainment, musical education and a focus for civic pride."

For example, in 1861, the Grass Valley Brass Band performed during Nevada City's Fourth of July celebration.

The director was a Mr. Schmidtschneider who, according to the next day's *Nevada City Morning*, was "in the full uniform of a Major de Trambour (drum major), the duties of which office he execut-

Doug Mattson

Historical Footnotes

ed with consummate ability and presented a most soldierly appearance."

The band reorganized five years later under Cornish miner John Coad.

Nevada City's own band performed at similar functions but received less press coverage — perhaps, *Sierra Heritage* reported, because it was referred to as a "colored" band.

The hit makers of the 1890s were folks like Patrick Gilmore, Arthur Pryor and John Philip Sousa and small-town bands were everywhere, which led to band contests.

In 1914, the Grass Valley Concert Band won both a first- and a second-place award at the California State Fair, according to *Sierra Heritage*, "besting arch rival Nevada City."

Other mining-town bands of that era included the Grass Valley Brass and Reed Band, Grass Valley's Star and Crescent Band, Nevada City Boys Band, Forest City Brass Band, Eureka Brass Band, Quincy Brass Band, Sierra City Brass Band and Sierra Buttes Brass Band.

It's fair to say Sierra City had a bubbly past. On Sundays in the summer and early fall, bands would march through town and stop in front of the store fronts, including the pubs, and play.

Afterward, the barkeeps would serve free beer, and by the time the band reached the lower end of town, according to *Sierra Heritage*, "bubbles of excess carbon dioxide from beer consumed issued from the horns, and ... there were noticeable slurings of the notes."



Courtesy: Searls Historical Library

The high-steppin', crowd-pleasin' Green's Band typified 19th-century Nevada County bands with its shiny brass instruments and snappy uniforms.

Nevada County's town of Washington had a band, too. A caption under an 1866 photo of the group said the town "was always proud of its mountain culture in spite of a rough and tough mining background."

Boca, a town east of Truckee that's now under-

water, had a 10-piece band.

By the 1920s and '30s, music tastes changed, and the entertainment dollar was stretched thin by the Depression. Bands continued to perform at civic events, but music education and band programs were increasingly taken on by local schools.