



The pipes are calling

helps to develop lip muscles and build more stamina. “You’ve got to blow hard and steady,” McAteer said.

The carrier’s bagpipes instructor asked students to memorize five tunes on the chanter before they could graduate to the actual bagpipes.

His interest didn’t end after the lessons.

“After we were all on our pipes and playing, we were integrated into the band,” the carrier said.

McAteer bought his own bagpipes, and the group provided kilts as uniforms. He’s now been with the Leatherstocking District fife and drum band for about eight years. Though the size of the band fluctuates, it currently has eight pipers and four drummers.

They have an organized practice every Tuesday at 7 p.m.; the sessions usually last between an hour and 90 minutes. In the summer, they hold them in parking lots, standing in a circle. “People stop and take pictures

and clap,” the carrier said. “It’s pretty neat.”

In the colder months, they practice inside a church, and also perform for the congregation to repay them for the use of space.

As for performance venues, “we have our staples,” McAteer said. Those include Memorial Day parades, veterans’ events, St. Patrick’s Day parades and bar crawls, and college graduations.

The Leatherstocking District Pipe Band also enters three to four competitions a year in New York, through the Eastern United States Pipe Band Association. They generally don’t travel more than two to three hours for the competitions.

There are grade levels of competition that go from least to most experienced; usually the beginning stage is Grade 5, and they go up to Grade 1 for an almost professional level. McAteer says they’ve done quite well at their current

Attending Irish festivals with his parents growing up, **Ed McAteer** says he was drawn to the steady “tone and drone” and liked the music of the bagpipes.

He told himself, “I’ve got to do that someday.”

So, in 2011, when the Leatherstocking District Pipe Band advertised bagpiping lessons in the newspaper, the Oneonta, NY Branch 97 member rushed to sign up.

“A running joke is, ‘It’s only nine notes—how hard could it be?’” the 21-year letter carrier said with a laugh, adding, “It was more difficult than I thought it would be.”

Though the carrier played bass guitar as part of a bar band in the ‘90s, he couldn’t read sheet music back then.

McAteer explained that he had learned how to play bagpipes on a plastic instrument called a chanter, which is similar to a recorder. You learn how to play grace notes (“the blips between notes”) first, then how to play tunes, he said.

Practicing with both instruments



Right: Ed McAteer plays in the Adirondack Mountains.

Opposite: McAteer in competition (top) and in a parade as part of the Leatherstocking District Pipe Band (below)

level of Grade 5, most recently earning second place.

The carrier also has competed individually a few times. The events typically have solo competitions in the morning, with bands then performing in the afternoon.

For the solos, musicians are expected to march back and forth while playing in front of judges; with the band, McAteer explains, you play in a circle while four judges walk around.

"It's pretty intense and nerve-wracking," he said of competing. "Everybody has to be perfect and play in unison." They also have to walk and step in sync.

A favorite memory was when "one of the judges said we played above our grade level," McAteer said.

Another point of pride for the carrier was placing second out of 18 bagpipers in his first solo competition.

McAteer has slowed down on entering individually, since most competitions are on Saturdays and he can't always take time off of work outside of band competitions. There also are other obstacles, such as needing memberships in various organizations in order to compete as an individual.

The carrier says he may consider doing more solo competitions in the future, and would like to make it to Grade 3 in that endeavor. His main objective, though, is to "play with the band and [not] mess up."

He added that events such as parades are more "comfortable" venues in which to perform.

McAteer, an Army veteran, began carrying mail in 1999 and currently serves as the vice president of his branch. A few co-workers have seen him play in parades and other events. They'll say, "I didn't know [you

played]!" he said. "They're pretty upbeat."

The carrier takes about a week of annual leave each year for band activities, though he says that the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown their schedule for a loop "big time."

The band hasn't gotten together since the U.S. shutdowns started in March, he said, adding that it was sad that it happened just as the Leatherstocking crew was gearing up for a full week of St. Patrick's Day events.

They normally perform at parades and at various eating establishments during bar crawls for the holiday. "The crowd loves it—they go nuts," he said, adding that out of concern for the virus, "everything started getting closed down."

Throughout the spring and summer, parades and graduation ceremonies also were canceled.

"I kind of slacked off on my practicing," McAteer said, but now "I try to practice four to five times a week to keep up my stamina."

To do so, he'll head outside with his bagpipes. "They're pretty loud. There's no volume control," he said of his instrument. (Bagpipes can produce around 100 decibels, he says—almost the same sound output as a chainsaw if played indoors.)



Fortunately, "I haven't gotten any complaints yet" from neighbors, he said.

McAteer recalled an earlier time before the pandemic, when he was at home practicing and someone at a neighboring home came up his driveway. They were at a 90th birthday party and asked McAteer if he would come and play for them. The carrier was delighted, and performed "Amazing Grace" as well as some other numbers.

His biggest joy in playing the bagpipes is the reaction he receives from people—whether at a parade, while practicing with the group or even on a mountaintop.

McAteer loves to bring his bagpipes to campgrounds, as well as on hikes with his wife in the Adirondack Mountains in northeastern New York. "Fortunately, the case that I have has some shoulder straps," he said, adding that his bagpipes weigh only about 10 pounds.

The carrier sometimes will begin playing his bagpipes on a flat area of the mountaintop and turn around to notice five or six people behind him watching, perhaps taking their phones out to take photos or record a video.

"People don't expect to see that," McAteer said. "Everybody lights up." **PR**