



The Seattle Branch 79 Letter Carrier Band, then and now



THE LETTER CARRIER BAND PLAYS ON

Before there was streaming music, before there were CDs or records or tapes, there were letter carrier bands. Live music still thrills listeners—and letter carrier bands like the Seattle, WA Branch 79 Letter Carrier Band have carried on the tradition.

Letter carriers have been picking up instruments to entertain other carriers and their communities almost as long as NALC has existed. One of the first was formed in Cleveland, OH, in 1890, a year after NALC was formed, and at least 26 more were formed afterward. Though their numbers have dwindled to less than a dozen today, they are still a treasured tradition.

“One need but read the branch items [in *The Postal Record*] ... to note how the finished and altogether admirable work of these bands feature in many demonstrations held under the auspices of this Association,” NALC Secretary Edward J. Cantwell wrote in the magazine in 1922. “They grace banquets, entertainments and social sessions. They enliven a smoker.... And on the occasion of our great national conventions where, happily, many

Letter Carriers’ Bands invariably lend their presence, they give zest and color to the gathering....”

Letter carrier bands once performed in parades at state and national conventions, but today, most play concerts, often in their local communities. In the early days, letter carrier bands would show up to celebrate the opening of a post office, entertain at letter carrier picnics, march in local parades, or even lead guests from a letter carrier’s wedding to a reception.

For a time, a band composed of members from several branch bands performed as a national letter carrier band.

Until 2016, funding for bands was provided by NALC to bands that attended and played at NALC’s biennial conventions. At that time, there were eight remaining bands in the country. However, several of the bands featured few or no playing active or retired letter carriers as members, only outside community members, and the delegates to the 70th Biennial National Convention ended the funding.

Seattle’s band, which plays at state-wide events as the Washington State Letter Carrier Band, formed in 1892. The heyday of letter carrier bands may have passed, but bands like the Seattle group continue the tradition with the help of other postal employees or members of the community pitching in—and they still put on a show at letter carrier rallies, parades, meetings, conventions and concerts.

Ken Eline has directed the Seattle band for decades. The retired Branch 79 member joined the band in 1973 and took the helm around 1975.

“It’s the oldest concert band in the state,” he said. “I started out on



Left: A city letter carrier pictured with his flugelhorn
Below: The Memphis, TN Branch 27 Band, circa 1926





trumpet, then a baritone horn, and a fugalhorn and trombone.”

“We play waltzes, marches—just about anything we can play, we’ll play,” Eline said.

The band has played at national and Washington state conventions, rallies and other special events, and along with a weekly rehearsal, performs at local retirement centers each week.

Every band member is a volunteer who plays just for the joy of it, he said.

“We like to play for the community, and it’s surprising that we don’t get paid and that everybody still shows up,” he added.

The membership has dwindled, though. “We used to have quite a few people, but now we’re down to 14, 15 people,” Eline said. “We practice, but we’re not out so much now because COVID did a number on us. Things haven’t built back up yet.”

Even after most of the world has reopened following the pandemic, nursing homes are still nervous about outsiders, said band member Judy Logen.

Trombonist Logen was one of the first members to join who is not either a letter carrier or the family member of a letter carrier. She and her husband, Lynn, who plays baritone horn, joined the band about the same time as Eline. She began as a substitute player when another trombonist couldn’t make it to a performance.

“And we were hooked,” Logen said, “because they were nice people, and [it was a] great opportunity to play and represent the band in the community.”

The Logens have performed with the Seattle band at many NALC national and state conventions, other union events and just for fun at local venues. They became so fond of letter carriers



and NALC that they joined the local NALC Auxiliary #99.

“Everyone was very friendly and very knowledgeable, and great group of people,” Logen said. “Of course, conventions are fun, but we worked really hard in conventions. We had to go around the community and play.”

Though the band has shrunk over time—when she joined, it had about 50 or more members—the Logens’ daughter and grandson have participated in the band, continuing the family tradition. When she joined the Seattle band, bands were not only part of a tradition at NALC but also an overall union tradition, she said.

“In those days, all unions had bands,” Logen said. “Firemen had bands. Steelworkers had bands. Everybody had bands. And so, they were quite popular.”

Live bands can still thrill in a way recorded music can’t, and letter carrier bands continue to bring their magic to their local communities. After a recent concert at a senior center, a staff member wrote to the band: “Your presence brings peace, calm, and joy to our residents in such a meaningful way. Your cheerful melodies, energetic rhythms, and professional talent awaken the spirit of every person in the room.” **PR**



The Seattle Branch 79 Letter Carrier Band is led by retired NALC member Ken Eline (above) and recently played at the fair contract rally held on Feb. 22 (top).