



Colin Caldwell

HERITAGE

Planning for the future requires an examination of our past

Come hear the band

In a town so enriched with historic buildings as Cobourg, it's not surprising that we occasionally overlook one.

Victoria Park's Bandshell may seem unlikely company for some of our grander homes and public edifices. It's not Victorian either, which handicaps it as well. Frankly, we take it for granted.

This is a shame, for its story is as much a part of our heritage as any I've come across.

If you're going to be a summer resort town, as Cobourg has been for the last century and more, you have to have a beach and you have to have music to go with it. We have the beach and Cobourg was never slow in supporting bands of various sorts, between the Firemen, the militia and several others. In Victorian times, the town also built a "gazebo" for band music in the growing Victoria Park.

By the time of the first World War, musical pride of place was given to the Cobourg Citizen's Band, and after the war, many musicians gravitated toward Cobourg to join its ranks. This led to the inevitable conflict over the musical direction the band was going to take in that era of flappers and ragtime. Some of the bandsmen finally defected to form a new band, named the "Kiltie Band", after its kilted uniform.

The dissension was so marked that older residents may recall the "Kiltie Band", on festive occasions, marching west from Victoria Hall to the foot of Ontario Street to play, while the Citizen's Band marched east to Victoria Park. It must have been an interesting parade, even if it did look a bit like a straw poll on musical taste.

The "Kilties" under their leader Joseph Goldring, eventually prevailed. Under his influence, too, there grew a movement to build a more suitable venue for the newer, more sophisticated band music he wanted to provide.

Into our story there now steps the revered figure of Percy Climo, Cobourg's most famous chronicler. This time,



The bandshell, right under our noses, is still so easy to overlook

like the Greek historian Thucydides, Percy was a principal actor as well as recorder of events. Percy, who was an engineer, had taken note of recent developments in design from the U.S., in particular, the south-west states. There, they were building bandstands shaped like scallop shells to project the music outward in one direction, unlike the all-round Victorian version.

By the early 30s, the townspeople were ready to go ahead. The depression was firmly settled in, and many were out of work, so public improvements were in the air; but money was scarce so Cobourgers had to dig deep in long, nickel and dime drives to raise the money to get started.

Climo designed the structure himself, and — local contractors having turned the work down — agreed to supervise the actual construction as well.

The first controversy erupted over its positioning in the park. Incredible as it now sounds, the wealthier citizens in the east end of town wanted the shell facing east from the west end of the park, so they could hear the music at home, whereas the rest of the citizens wanted it correspondingly east-end-sited and facing west so the music

could waft downtown.

With truly Solomonic judgment, then Mayor Jack Delanty said, "Gentlemen, we will have it here," pointing to the middle of the park, "and facing north!"

Climo's design for the building is much grander than you might expect at first glance. For one thing, there are two structures, folded within one another. The "shell" part of the structure is completely separate, resting on its own foundations and made of redwood, while the "casing" or outer square framework rests on its own supports and is of sitka spruce. Thus the shell is allowed to resonate with the music on its own, nestled within the larger structure designed to showcase the performance. So too, the "shell" also has its own mini-dome, right over centre stage.

The building was opened with considerable fanfare on Aug. 5, 1934, with the "Kiltie Band" and Mayor Delanty doing the honours. Percy received a princely five dollars a day for his work on the construction, which had taken three months. Some carpenters got as much as fifty cents an hour.

To the best of my knowledge, we haven't a picture of it on that opening day, but we do have one of the bandstand,

festooned and crowded with participants, on what appears to be "Dominion Day" in 1937 — which was also Cobourg's centennial day. From accounts in the Cobourg World it appears to have been the focal point of an eclectic celebration of imperial, dominion, religious, ethnic (Ukrainian dancers) and across-the-lake (they included July 4 for good luck) harmony.

So the bandstand, born of discord between the different bands, stood eventually for a veritable symphony of goodwill.

Now it is being cleaned up and repaired for the Waterfront Festival, and Mike Brady and Craig Hebblerle are repainting it for good measure.

And speaking of neglect, some recent concerts have required extending the stage, thus obscuring the free-standing memorial to original "Kiltie" band-leader, Joe Goldring. In what may be the first major change to the bandshell's appearance in 64 years, Town of Cobourg Community Services Director Wayne DeVeau says the plaque will henceforth be affixed to the structure itself, to the audience's left side.

Maybe some day there will be room for one to Percy Climo, too.

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