

# The early ladies' bands of Indianapolis: six short-lived ensembles from 1879 to 1907

*Gavin Holman, 16 January 2025*

## Indianapolis Ladies' Cornet Band - 1879

This first ladies' band was founded in March 1879 by their instructor R.L. Carlin. He himself was a good cornet soloist who worked for the music house of Theo. Pfafflin & Co. in Indianapolis. The initial members included:

- Arethusa Colwell (Eb cornet, leader)
- Mrs E.A. Perkins (Mary Eurette) (Eb cornet)
- Millie Perkins (Bb cornet)
- Ella Norris (Bb cornet)
- Ollie [Olive] Torbet (alto)
- Ida Kitchell (alto)
- Lillie Boynton (tenor)
- Nora Hammond (tenor)
- Ruth Torbet (baritone)
- Belle Shonacker (tuba)
- Lavonie Kackley (bass drum)
- Mrs H. Barmeier (tenor drum).

Other members, at a later date, were Fannie Mooney & Miss McGinnis.



Their first major engagement was to compete in the band tournament at Muncie, on 4/5 June 1879. There were three judges – Professor Heyer of Sandusky, Ohio; Professor B. Weis of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Professor John Lathrop of Delphi, Indiana. Each band played three pieces each.

The Indianapolis Ladies' Band played one of their selections before the main contest started.<sup>1</sup>

The Class Four contest (marks awarded) included the bands from Ridgeville (166); Crescent Band of New Carlisle, Ohio (221); Hagerstown (234); and Jonesboro (277). Each band played a waltz, followed by a selection and concluded with a quickstep.

The Class Five contest, for bands in the Delaware county outside Muncie, consisted of the Selma (94) and Daleville (78) bands.

The Class Three contest had the bands: Hartford City (304), Union City (466), Perkinsville (339), and the Lockwood band of Muncie (462).

The Class Two contest only had one entry – that of the Indianapolis Ladies' Band. No marks were given, but the judges stated that the band 'exercised skill in playing and judgement in making choice of their selections – they are justly entitled to the prize in Class 2.'

The Class One contest attracted the Currier's Band from Cincinnati (673) and Beissenherz's Band from Indianapolis (668), both with 21 members.

Curriers' Band won the Class 1 first prize of \$500, Union City Band (Class 3) \$100, Jonesboro Band (Class 4) \$100, Selma Band (first, Class 5) \$50, and Dalesville Band (second, Class 5) \$25. The Ladies' Band's travelling expenses had been paid by the organising Musical Association, and they also took home the Class 2 prize of \$150.<sup>2</sup>



*Ruth and Ollie Torbett*

Following the tournament one of the judges, G. Heyer, arranged several pieces of music and dedicated them to the Indianapolis Ladies' Band. In a letter to their director, R.L. Carlin, he said:

“At that occasion (Muncie tournament) it gives me great pleasure to congratulate you and the ladies of the band for their grand success, as you were entitled truly to the prize of the second class. The skilful way and the pleasant manner in which they managed their brass instruments have shown that there must be some particular musical education besides the knowledge of brass instruments among most of the young ladies.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Indianapolis News, 5 June 1879

<sup>2</sup> The Muncie Morning News, 9 June 1879

<sup>3</sup> The Edinburg Daily Courier, 21 June 1879



School. Their 'final' concert was on Thursday 18 December for the fifteenth anniversary of the Knights of Pythias, at which R.L. Carlin reaffirmed his earlier decision to resign as director of the band.<sup>5</sup>

A few details are known about the members:

Arethusa Colwell was born in 1858 in Piqua Ohio, and was a music teacher, living with her parents at 87 St Clair St, Indianapolis in 1880. She married John Ewald in August 1882.

Lavonne Kackley was a music teacher, born around 1861 in Kentucky. She lived at 120 Bellefontaine, Indianapolis in 1880 with her mother and siblings, and married Alexander W. Posey on 11 June 1884.

Millie Perkins was born in 1859, and died in January 1881

Mary Euretta Perkins was born in 1838 (née Huddleston)

Ella Norris was born in 1856, and was a teacher

Ruth D. Torbett was born on 15 June 1861

Olive B. Torbett was born in 1865

Ida May Kitchell was born on 8 Dec 1862, and married Albert Matthews in January 1883

Lillie G. Boynton was born in 1859, and married Harry Smith in March 1881

Nora E. Hammond was born in 1859

Isabella C. Shonacker was born in 1860

The next we hear about the band is in September 1880 when it is reported that the band is being reorganised for the coming season. The 'new' band, with 13 players, gave a concert at the Fletcher Place Church on Wednesday 29 December 1880, with Arethusa Colwell as leader. A concert in Greencastle, in March 1881, was the last known of this ladies' band.

## **Binager Ladies' Cornet Band - 1879**

Not long after the debut of the Indianapolis Ladies' Cornet Band, George T. Binager formed his own band of female musicians in the city. It was founded in July 1879, and its initial members were: Maggy Surber, Libby Kershner, Maggie Frick, Lizzie Smith, Minny Gage, Laura Black, Florence Sellers, Ella Bills, Kitty Horton, May Morrison, Mrs Fanny Wands and Mrs Ida Scott.<sup>6</sup>

Binager's band only has one reported engagement – at an entertainment for the Washington Lodge 114, K. of H. on 2 December 1879.

Following the emergence of two such female bands, and the ongoing prevalence of yellow fever in the state at the time, a comment in the South Bend Tribune in July 1879 noted:

“Indianapolis has two female brass bands and her citizens have come to the conclusion that the yellow fever is preferable.”

Nothing more is heard of this band, but some details of its members are given below.

Margaret J. Surber, b. 6 Jan 1866

Elizabeth C. Kershner, b. 23 Nov 1854

Margaret Gretchen Frick, b. 31 March 1861



*Ida Scott*

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<sup>5</sup> The Noblesville Ledger, 19 December 1879

<sup>6</sup> Indianapolis News, 12 July 1879

Elizabeth Gertrude Smith, b. 1 June 1859  
 Minnie Gage, b. 1867  
 Laura Black (née Glidewell), b. 1857, m. Peyton Black in October 1874  
 Florence Viola Sellers, b. 7 Oct 1859, m. James Smith in 1881  
 Catherine (Kitty) Jane Horton (née Jackson), b. 28 February 1858, m. Joseph Horton in 1879  
 Mary (May) A.T. Morrison, b. 1859  
 Francis (Fanny) Wands (née Read), b. 1859  
 Ida B. Scott (née Gray), b. 1856, m. William Scott in 1876

## Indianapolis Ladies Cornet Band - 1899

After a gap of some eighteen years a successor ladies' band was formed in the city. Details of its foundation are not known, but it must have been earlier in 1899, at least. It performed at the Dubois County Fair, Huntingburg, Indiana, on 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> September 1899, on its return from a three-week tour in southern Indiana and northern Kentucky.



The fate of this instance of the band is not known, but it (or an immediate successor) reappeared in early 1900,

It gave a concert at the lawn fete of the Ladies Section of Hallplace Church, on 6 July 1900, dressed in 'pretty white gowns'. This band had reportedly only been in existence for five months (since around February 1900). The band performed the following music:<sup>7</sup>

March "On Parade", andante and waltz "Brighter Days", march "Nahant", overture "Snap Shot", "Medley Waltz", serenade "Asleep in the Deep", march "Geneva", overture "Uncle Sam", "Lawn Dance", march "Vena", cornet solo by Jessie Stumon.

The personnel of the band were:

- Mrs J.M. (Jennie Elizabeth) Stumon (leader) (b. 1864, née Mitchell)
- Mrs Sadie Emery (solo cornet)
- Mrs Jessie Belle Stumon (first cornet) (b. 1888)

<sup>7</sup> The Indianapolis Journal, 7 July 1900

- Miss Bessie Fisher (second cornet) (b. 1886)
- Miss Emma Dreithaler (third cornet) (b. c. 1868)
- Miss May Leonard (trap drum) (b. 1886)
- Miss Jessie Leach (tuba) (b. 1874)
- Miss Jennie Stumon (trombone) (b. 1891)
- Miss [Mary] Olive Leach (alto) (b. 1871)
- Miss Anna Howard (second alto)
- Miss Bertha Dreithaler (third alto) (b. c. 1870)
- Mrs Ida Cox (solo clarinet) (b. 1876)

The band's next engagement was at the Picnic of Old Settlers at Broad Ripple Park on 9 August 1900. After their performance, the band were taken for a ride up the White River.

Tuesday 28 August 1900 the band played at a lawn fete for the Sons of Temperance, at 1521 Montcalm Street, Indianapolis. The remaining known engagements of the band were:

Sunday 16 September 1900 – accompanying the excursion of the Knights of Pythias to Lafayette.

Thursday 20 December 1900 – playing at an entertainment at the St Joseph Industrial School, for the opening of their new hall. The band contributed the march “*Neptune*”, overture “*Snap Shot*”, “*Asleep in the Deep*”, march “*Nahant*”, a waltz, and a march.

Tuesday 1 January 1901 – the band performed at the Y.M.C.A. in conjunction with the High School Glee Club.

## **Indianapolis Ladies Concert Band - 1901**

This band appeared in May 1901, conducted by Mrs R.S. Coxe, with fifteen players. Emma Dreithaler and Ida Cox were the leading cornetists of this particular ensemble, so it is probable that some others from the earlier ‘Cornet Band’ were included.

The band accompanied an excursion on the steamer “*Helen Gould*” on the White River on Sunday 5 May 1901.

It performed at the Old Settlers’ Reunion at Broad Ripple Park on Thursday 15 August.

Its final performance was on a boat-ride excursion at Riverside Park, Indianapolis, on Thursday 3 October 1901.

## **Seneff’s Ladies’ Military Band - 1903**

This band was formed by J.H. Seneff and first appeared in June 1903. It was active through to 1906.

Engagements for Seneff’s band included:

- Sunday 21 June 1903 – at the Grand Sunday Picnic, in London, Indiana
- Friday 17 July 1903 – at a lawn social of the First M.E. Church at Blaine avenue and Howard street
- Friday 7 August 1903 – at the Old Settlers’ gathering at Acton
- Tuesday 25 August 1903 – playing at the North Indianapolis Street Fair, in aid of the Summer Mission at Fairview. The band played in the middle of the square between Annette and Rader streets, in Thirty-first street.

- Wednesday 26 August 1903 - at a porch and cards evening for the Knights of Pythias Ladies' Auxilliary
- Wednesday 9 September 1903 – at the street fair in Haughville
- Sunday 20 September 1903 – Seneff's Ladies' Band took part in the band tournament at Brazil, Indiana. Other bands taking part included the Greencastle Band, Ben Hur Band, Danville Band (Illinois), and the Goodman Band (Decatur, Illinois)
- Thursday 1 October 1903 – the band led a torchlight procession for the Prohibition mass meeting at the Masonic Hall
- Tuesday 6 October – the band gave two concerts at the Lafayette Merchants' Fall Festival



*Seneff's Ladies' Military Band, 1903*

For the next six months the band apparently had no further engagements, but Seneff advertised frequently for players in the city and county newspapers. Clearly Seneff had had some issues with one or more of the players, as one of the adverts, in July 1904, stated:

“WANTED – Few girls to learn instruments in Seneff's Ladies Band; flirts not wanted; reference required; rules very strict; band will travel, accompanied by chaperon.”<sup>8</sup>

Their first engagement for 1904 was playing for a fencing and cane drill exhibition at the Y.M.C.A. on Friday 15 April.

On Thursday 14 July 1904, the band gave an evening concert at Fairview Park:

<sup>8</sup> Indianapolis News, 7 July 1904

The concert last night at Fairview park by Seneff's Ladies' band delighted thousands of persons from all parts of the city, It was the first concert of the week-night season and one of the largest crowds that ever visited Fairview enjoyed the music. Attired in jaunty caps of blue, white shirt waists and red skirts, the twenty-five young women of the band presented a striking appearance. From the shell-shaped bandstand the music could be heard with ease and perfect enjoyment by the thousands of persons who thronged the grassy slopes of the picturesque pleasure ground. The program comprised twelve selections, and chief of these was the spirited march entitled "*The Band Girl*," composed by J.H. Seneff, director of the band. and dedicated to his young women players. A trombone solo, "*Down in the Deep Cellar*," by Miss Grace Hammond, and a saxophone solo, "*Longing for Home*," by Miss Orpha Walden, elicited splendid applause. Between the musical numbers the large crowd found amusement in the moving pictures which were thrown on a canvas to the left of the bandstand. <sup>9</sup>

The leader of the band, which had 28 players that season, was Florence Mogle, solo cornetist, who frequently also directed the band, and delighted audiences with her renditions of Seneff's piece "*The Band Girl*".



*Seneff's Ladies' Military Band, 1905*

Further engagements were:

- Friday 15 July 1904 – at the midsummer festival at 2013 East 10th street, given by the sales ladies of Cash & Dove for The Star's fresh air fund.
- Tuesday 19 July 1904 – at the Hoyt avenue fair
- Saturday 20 August – the band played at the Ben Hur Picnic – for the fraternal organisation "The Tribe of Ben Hur"
- Thursday 25 August 1904 – at the lawn fete for the Y.P.S.C.E. of the Sixth Christian Church
- Monday 5 September – the band played for the Labor Day holiday in Fairmount

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<sup>9</sup> The Indianapolis Star, 15 July 1904



- Tuesday 18 July 1905 – the band played at the Shaw’s garden party in aid of the Flower Mission.
- Tuesday 29 August 1905 – playing for the big fete at Fairview Park in aid of the Summer Mission for Sick Children.

The last report of the band was from an advertisement for players in 1906.

WANTED – Few ladies for Seneff’s Band: rare opportunity offered suitable parties to study and fit themselves for profitable musical career; will enter vaudeville.<sup>10</sup>

## The Ladies’ Band - 1907

The final ladies’ band of Indianapolis in these early years only appears only once, and it may have included some of the players from Seneff’s band. It performed at a lawn fete on Wednesday 7 August 1907, at 328 North Pennsylvania Street, given by Hollister Hive No. 52, L.O.T.M., in aid of the Indianapolis Star’s Summer Mission Fund.<sup>11</sup>

The players in the photograph below are – standing: Jessie Knight, Ada Larison, Dora Reed, Ida Pease; sitting: Mrs A.A. Womack, Alice Pottenger, and Lela Neff.



## Further reading:

Quigley, Barbara - Strike Up the Band - *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* - Fall 2008, pp. 14-19

<sup>10</sup> The Indianapolis Star, 14 May 1906

<sup>11</sup> The Indianapolis Star, 7 August 1907