

# HILL: Concert delivers message of pride

- By BOB HILL Local guest columnist for The News & Tribune, Aug 5, 2015

My tears came as a surprise in a summer evening aimed more toward lawn chair tranquility.

Several hundred people – most us old enough to personally remember Lawrence Welk and Tommy Dorsey, if not Ludwig van Beethoven – were seated on deep green grass at Warder Park last Friday night for the 25th anniversary celebration of the River Cities Concert Band in Jeffersonville.

We sat in the shadows of a perfect evening; towering trees; nicely manicured hydrangeas; bursts of bright yellow perennials; the band members crammed beneath a time-piece wooden gazebo; the underlying patriotic feel of it all; the inevitable comparisons to the sweet sentimentality of a Norman Rockwell illustration.

All true, and so what? That was our hope. That was our summer wish. That's why we were all there.

As well as, of course, to listen to the music such a setting deserved — the rich mix of sounds spanning the music scale from the 1800s classical to Frank Sinatra to Batman.

The event began with a few hundred “Thank You’s” sincerely tossed out to the concert band members who have played all 25 years, the concert band volunteers, the folks who built the gazebo and landscaped the grounds, the sponsoring Jeffersonville Main Street staff, the weather gods and the obligatory parade of politicians who recognize a voting crowd when they see one.

And let's not forget the free goodies passed out by Adrienne & Co. bakery and Schimpff's Confectionery – the latter which may have passed out free red hots to George Rogers Clark on his way out of town.

It's impossible to live in Southern Indiana more than five minutes without knowing someone else at such a concert; family, co-worker, neighbor, friend or foe; just force a smile and wave like you mean it.

We all sat in a wide arc of quiet anticipation. It was fun to watch the very talented, deadly-serious four-year-old kid steal the gazebo show by performing his robot-like gestures in time to the music, his best competition a young girl in swirling ballet dance just across the grass.

It was a good night to be in Warder Park as the shadows fell across the grass, to think about how little such entertainment Jeffersonville offered 40 years ago and how far it has come; to watch hundreds of aging feet and fingers tap the grass and chairs in time.

It was good to later learn that the park — named in 1881 for then Jeffersonville mayor Luther Warder — was once the site of a Civil War bakery producing hardtack for Union soldiers.

It was good to watch Boy Scouts in full uniform delivering hot dogs, water and soft drinks to the assembled throng with earnest demeanors that touched all the Boy Scout bases; trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.

Then they came back through with big plastic bags and picked up the garbage.

The River Cities Concert Band — which has volunteer members and performs for free on both sides of the Ohio River regardless of college basketball-team affiliation — had obviously put a lot of time and work in selecting music for this 25th anniversary show.

Director Rick Dugger offered deep background on many of the selections, and turned over a portion of the show to his wife, Cheri, who kept the mood alive.

So yeah — the night, the setting, the music, the small kid dancing and showboating, the Midwest charm of it all in the shadow of a Carnegie Library: Norman Rockwell was pretty much in the room — along with The Music Man.

It was real. There were no larger messages. Volunteers formed the heart of this celebration; all of them working to bring us together on a community, tax-supported lawn. We could enjoy the moment for what it was, take it home and put it in the memory bank.

Then Dugger announced a music selection that would combine the songs of the four branches of the U.S. military; Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines.

He asked that anyone who had served in that branch of the military stand while their song was played. I didn't qualify. Vietnam was my war but college, marriage and child-birth kept me out of it. I've never quite felt guilty about that — my friends who went said don't bother — but their mass pardon has never quite been enough either.

I wondered at first what the response from the veterans would be — never thinking about mine. But as they stood up — men and women — my eyes unexpectedly filled with tears.

I glanced in both directions; afraid I might be caught in an act I didn't quite understand. About a half-dozen veterans from each branch of service stood up as their song was played. Several of them — looking to be in their 80s or even 90s — struggled to rise, then, bent over while clinging to a partner or a lawn chair, almost shyly looking around for others who also might be standing in mutual acknowledgement.

Maybe the ghosts of some of those hardtack-eating Civil war soldiers were hanging around the park, too?

The veterans' collective pride was obvious. As each stood to welcome applause I wondered about their lives, their stories; the best and the worst of what they had seen and lived. We tend to automatically paint them all as heroes not really knowing anything about them — and then we mostly forget about them between such concerts.

Best I could tell my tears were in appreciation. They lasted until the start of the evening's obligatory final number: "Stars and Stripes Forever." It's always best at summer concerts to leave waving the flag.

The raspberry sherbet was good, too.

— *Bob Hill is a Utica resident and former columnist for the Courier-Journal.*