

The Sousa Band's "Golden Jubilee Tour" of 1928 and Performances in Flagstaff, Arizona
by Peter Johnson, *member of the Flagstaff Community Band*

The Sousa Band's "Golden Jubilee Tour of 1928", the band's 36th annual tour, commemorated "The March King's" 50th anniversary as a conductor. This anniversary date corresponds to John Philip Sousa's term as conductor of the Philadelphia Church Choir Company's production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1878. Sousa had conducted other theatre ensembles as early as 1875, but perhaps did not count these activities as strictly conducting since he lead from the violin bow. Sousa did not actually become a bandleader until he accepted the position as the 17th director of the United States Marine Band in 1880. In 1892 Sousa formed his famous civilian band.

The entire tour spanned six months and traveled across much of the United States by a train which consisted of several Pullman cars, a baggage car, a dining car, and locomotive. By any standard it was a grueling affair with typically a matinee and evening concert in each location. In general, there were also no built-in travel days. The musicians boarded their train after the evening concert and traveled to their next destination overnight. The concerts were feats of endurance for the members of the band. A Sousa concert could last up to three hours and contained many encores, especially marches, not included on the printed program. John Philip Sousa turned 74 on the tour, yet seems to have held up remarkably well. During the tour, he appeared almost exclusively in his Lieutenant Commander's Naval Uniform, celebrating his past service during World War I.

The March King was by this time a living legend. He not only conducted the many, many, concerts of the tour, but amazingly found additional time for other activities. He gave talks and was a guest for many civic and Masonic groups. He also accepted the key to the cities in which he performed, conducted school bands and orchestras along the way, judged band contests, became an honorary Indian Chief, performed for President-elect Herbert Hoover, and even filled in as Santa Claus in downtown Chicago at Christmas time.

The timing and sheer scope of Sousa's 1928 tour spun persistent rumors that the March King was planning to retire. Sousa never failed to mock such rumors and always responded with, "When you hear of Sousa retiring, you'll hear of Sousa dead."

The Sousa Band at this time was quite large, consisting of 74 musicians, including the famous operatic soprano, Marjorie Moody. The various sections of the ensemble included 6 flutes/piccolos, 2 oboes/English horn, 2 bassoons, 23 b flat clarinets, 1 alto clarinet, 1 bass clarinet, 8 saxophones, 10 cornets/trumpets, 4 horns, 2 euphoniums, 4 trombones, 6 tuba/Sousaphones, 4 percussion, and 1 harp.

A very condensed version of the Golden Jubilee Tour, including specific concert dates leading up to the Flagstaff performances, follows. Though publicized as "Maine to California", the tour actually began on July 19, 1928 in Schenectady, New York. By August 12th the band was giving concerts in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. From there, they toured several New England states, performed at Chautauqua, New York, and then headed to Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, South Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, southern Arizona, and California, reaching Modesto by November 1st. Further concerts in California include Nov. 2nd: Sacramento, Nov. 3rd: Oakland, Nov. 4th and 5th: San Francisco, Nov. 6th: Palo Alto, Nov. 7th: Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz, Nov. 8th: Santa Ana and Pomona, and Nov. 9th and 10th: Los Angeles. From there, the band headed for Arizona, playing in Phoenix on November 11th and in Flagstaff on November 12th, then on to New Mexico for concerts in Albuquerque, Nov. 13th and Clovis, Nov. 14th.

The band concluded The Golden Jubilee Tour by heading east with further concert stops in Texas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, and finally performing for seven days in Chicago, December 8th to 15th. The grand tour concluded in Freeport, Illinois on December 15th.

It should be noted that the Sousa Band gave concerts in Arizona both before and after the extensive tour of California. The band gave two concerts on October 27th: a matinee performance at the Grand Theatre in Douglas, and an evening performance at the Temple of Music in Tucson, before they went on to San Diego.

In Douglas, the Douglas Municipal Boy Scouts Band met Sousa's train at the station. The Boy Scout Band also played one selection on the matinee concert and was "enthusiastically received." The evening concert in Tucson was delayed for forty-five minutes by a blown fuse in the Temple of Music. Undaunted, the concert began with light provided by candles, lanterns, and flashlights. The *Tucson Citizen* commented: "Sousa was so alert and withal youthful in his spirited attacks, one would not be surprised if he tours the world with his 75th jubilee concert."

An incident of note occurred at the November 6th matinee performance of the band at Stanford University, five days before the band's return to Arizona. This was The March King's 74th birthday and was celebrated in grand style. Lt. Commander Sousa was presented with numerous letters expressing appropriate birthday felicitations from the children of the local community along with bouquets of lovely flowers before the concert began.

Once back in Arizona, the band gave both matinee and evening performances on November 11th at the El Zaribah Shrine Auditorium in Phoenix. This building still stands at the corner of 15th Avenue and Washington. The *Arizona Republican* of November 12, 1928 proclaimed the headline, "Commander Sousa and his Band Enchant Audiences in Two Phoenix Concerts." The newspaper review states that about fifteen encores were performed on the concerts as well as a special Armistice Day rendering of Sousa's setting of *In Flanders Field* sung by Miss Moody. The Phoenix Union High School Band also performed a couple marches during the break of the matinee concert with Sousa conducting.

Prior to the matinee concert, Sousa found time to attend a Masonic cornerstone dedication ceremony in Phoenix for a new government building. It is notable that Sen. Carl Hayden served as Grand Orator for the Masons that afternoon and that Sousa, also a prominent Freemason, was introduced and invited to the speaker's platform.

The band boarded their special train after the Phoenix evening concert and arrived in Flagstaff in the early morning hours of Monday, November 12, 1928. The band was scheduled to play both matinee and evening concerts at Ashurst Auditorium on the campus of the Arizona Teachers College (now Northern Arizona University). Flagstaff citizen Jack K. Bracker had made all the necessary arrangements for the gala concerts with the aid of the local Kiwanis Club and the Teachers College. It was agreed that these two organizations would make up any deficits if such occurred.

As it turned out, the Sousa concerts were a great success with a combined attendance of about 1500 individuals. This is even more remarkable when one considers that the entire population of Flagstaff at this time was slightly fewer than 4,000 people! It was noted that many in the crowd were from Winslow and even band members from Holbrook High School, nearly 100 miles away, were in attendance. The evening concert was better attended than the matinee with few empty seats. Professor R.B. Courtright, head of the Music Department, introduced the famous ensemble and expressed his appreciation for the fine attendance. According to an article in the *Coconino Sun*, "the great Sousa was enthusiastically received"

and all numbers on the program were “vigorously applauded”. Soloists for the concerts included Marjorie Moody, soprano, William Tong, cornet, and Howard Golden, xylophone. A program of this memorable concert is on file in the Arizona Historical Society Archives but does not include specific selections played at the Ashurst Auditorium programs. It is very likely that a band version of Richard Strauss’s epic tone poem *Death and Transfiguration* was performed in Flagstaff as this seems to have been a feature number in the Golden Jubilee Tour. The Flagstaff concerts were profitable, and both the Kiwanis Club and the College received checks of \$190.00 each (over \$2700 in 2019), the proceeds earned by the college went into the student loan fund. After the evening performance the band boarded their train around midnight and proceeded to Albuquerque.

As was usual, the Sousa Band gave two concerts the next day, November 13th, at the University of New Mexico. Sousa played a new march for the occasion, *New Mexico*, which celebrated the Spanish, Mexican, and Native American origins of the state. At noon Lt. Commander Sousa gave a talk at the meeting of the Albuquerque Lions Club. He also found time to assist in judging a band contest, selecting Raton High School as the winner.

Many years later, November 13, 1985, the *Orlando Sentinel* published an interview with James Austin, who as a young man had played clarinet with the Sousa Band, including the famous 1928 tour. At the time he was one of the last surviving members of the group. Austin had become a member of the band when only 22. He fondly recalled:

“That was a big thing for a squirt like me sitting up there playing clarinet in the Sousa Band”. He further added, “If you weren’t perfect, you wouldn’t be staying in the band very long.”

Austin also recounted an anecdote concerning the March King and his even-tempered approach to discipline in the band. It seemed that Austin was late to a concert and sheepishly took his place on the left side of the band. Lt. Commander Sousa inquired in his usual high pitched voice:

“Young man is there a concert tonight?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Austin.

“Well, what time is it scheduled to start?” continued Sousa more seriously.

“7:30 p.m.” said Austin.

Sousa next tipped his hat to the young man and replied, *“Thank you, sir”*, thus making his point.

No recollection of the Sousa Band’s Golden Jubilee Tour would be complete without recalling the title march that Sousa composed for this auspicious occasion. It seems that Sousa initially had thoughts that composing a march based on an anniversary of his own life was perhaps a bit “over the top.” However, he apparently quickly reconsidered the proposition realizing that his public would expect such a musical offering. Sousa frequently expounded on the idea that his compositions came to him from a “higher power.” The inspiration for the *Golden Jubilee March*, however, was not what could be referred to as “typical Sousa.” It took five months for him to be properly inspired. When the melodies unfolded to him in his mind it took only one day for him to sketch out the basic score. The March King’s thoughts concerning this piece are recorded for posterity in one of the 1928 tour programs:

“I’ve always been inspired by an occasion and as I thought of the golden jubilee and all it meant to me—fifty years of band leading—I seemed to see the world passing in review. There they were, peoples of every land—on parade, at great music festivals, going to war, at expositions, attending the

opera, in the home—listening to a march. So the music took form and then the “Golden Jubilee March” was ready for placing on paper.”

There would never be another tour of the Sousa Band that compared with the Golden Jubilee Tour of 1928. The 1929 tour only lasted the months of August and September. The 1930 tour was actually three shorter tours from September through November. The 1931 tour consisted of only six different concert venues. The last performance of the Sousa Band was on Tuesday, September 8, 1931 at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, New Jersey. There were, however, a few radio broadcasts of the Sousa Band after the public concerts had ended. John Philip Sousa did indeed at least metaphorically “die on his feet” - on March 6, 1932, hours after rehearsing the Ringgold Band in Reading, Pennsylvania. This ensemble would be what now is referred to as a “community band.” The last selection he conducted was *Stars and Stripes Forever*.

Memories of the Sousa Band now survive in yellowed newspaper clippings and scratchy sounding antique recordings on shellac and wax. John Philip Sousa was a larger than life figure of indomitable fortitude. He and his civilian band gave over 15,000 concerts all over the world in a span of 39 years. There will never be another like him!

Archie Bell, writing in the *Cleveland News*, left us some beautiful thoughts concerning Sousa’s “Golden Jubilee”:

“America should toll all the bells and blow all the whistles from San Diego to Boston in celebration of John Philip Sousa’s fiftieth jubilee. He has made a distinct contribution to the happiness of every individual in his own country, in distant lands and in islands of the seven seas. For everyone, almost everywhere, has heard Sousa’s music through the medium of the band, orchestra, phonograph or radio. And everyone has applauded after his own fashion. The world not only admires, but loves him, because he has been a universal friend. He was America’s ambassador of good will long before anyone thought of the title.”