OSHKOSH. MUSIC.

ARION BAND

Between the years of 1877 and 1919, the Arion Band of Oshkosh served as one of the premiere musical groups of Oshkosh and the state of Wisconsin. Several other communities around the country, usually with German heritage, had bands and orchestras of the same name which were part of the larger Arion Musical Association. This organization was founded in the 1860s and produced local bands in communities across the eastern U.S. between the 1860s-1880s. The term Arion originates from ancient Greek lore, referring to the Corinthian Arion who was a legendary performer of music and arts. The Oshkosh Arion Band and Orchestra Association served the city of Oshkosh and its surrounding communities between 1877 and 1919. The band was formed when two smaller musical groups merged in 1877. Businessman Robert Brand, owner of the Brand Manufacturing Company, was the leader of the local chapter of the American Cornet Band since the 1860s. R.A. Spick, who was a photographer in Fond du Lac and Oshkosh, city alderman, and one-time director of the Grand Opera House in Oshkosh, was the director of another smaller band. Brand, who had once served as the director of the Arion Musical Association of Milwaukee suggested that the new band adopt the Arion title as well. This was also a practical decision considering a number of members in the band were also former members of the Arion Band in Milwaukee, so they were still in possession of their Arion uniforms.

The Oshkosh Arion Band began playing a wide variety of venues and occasions across the Fox Valley such as weddings, fundraisers, community concerts, and even funerals. The band was also invited to play at the Wisconsin State Fair nearly every year of the band’s existence. It was at the State Fair in 1907 that the band received the title of ‘the official band of Oshkosh’. This came as no surprise to those from Oshkosh, considering the band was invited to lead nearly every city event including parades, plays at the Grand Opera House, and weekly concerts beginning in 1890. They played for President Grover Cleveland during his visit to Milwaukee in 1887, and provided the music during President William Howard Taft’s 1911 visit to Oshkosh. Another distinction bestowed upon the Arions came in 1883, when the band became the official musical accompaniment of the Wisconsin Knights Templar. The band joined the Knights Templar for their triennial conclaves in Chicago in 1883, St. Louis in 1886, Washington, D. C., in 1889, Denver in 1892, and Boston in 1895.

The Arion Band of Oshkosh also played at two National Encampments of the Grand Army of the Republic during their time. These were national reunions and encampments of Civil War veterans that took place every year from 1866 to 1949. During the years the Arion Band attended, the encampments attracted between 250,000 and 400,000 people. The Arion Band played at the twenty-third National Encampment of the GAR in Milwaukee (1889) and the thirty-fourth National Encampment of the GAR in Chicago (1900). The band also led the parade of the Iron Brigade, one of the most decorated Union brigades of the Civil War, through Oshkosh during their reunion celebration on September 1, 1886.

Smaller groups from within the full orchestra played separately, both in public and at private events. An advertisement from an 1892 event states that “the Arion Band, Banjo Club, and Orchestra” would all play.

First references to the Arion military band are in 1890, when they played a series of outdoor concerts. The Arion Military Band, at that time around 30 men, served as the band for the 2d Wisconsin National Guard, accompanying it to training exercises at Camp Douglas in western Wisconsin in the early 1890s. A July 1897 photo held by the Oshkosh Public Museum shows 26 men in uniform with “2d Wisc. Vols” printed across the bass drum.

During the Spanish-American War, they followed the unit to Camp Thomas near Chickamauga, Georgia. Robert Brand jr., a longtime member of the band, was the only serviceman from Oshkosh who died in that war, of disease, at Camp Thomas. An obituary refers to the group, which played at his funeral, as the “Second Regiment Volunteer Band.”

On July 2, 1921, former members of the band in Oshkosh formally became a part of the 127th Infantry as a part of the Service Company, also from Oshkosh. During World War II they were assigned other duties.

Despite their success, the band found itself in trouble more than once during its existence. The band was often short of money. The budget used to buy uniforms, as well as travel, came from fees they charged to play. On more than one occasion, the band cancelled events because they did not receive enough compensation. They also went many years without adequate uniforms. The money troubles led to problems with enrollment throughout the years. A number of band members quit in order to accept positions with other bands which could pay them more. The combination of low enrollment, no funds, and dwindling jobs for the band led to its demise. The band was disbanded in 1919 following years of fewer and fewer invitations to play. The band also began to shrink in numbers, with the core of the band becoming older and retiring. The band was unable to recruit enough new musicians to replace the retiring members. Another offshoot of the Arion Band, the New Arion Band, was organized shortly thereafter but suffered the same fate as the original Arion Band. The New Arion Band disbanded in 1923.

Researched, compiled and written by Adam Kohler for the Oshkosh Public Library, 2014, with additions and clarifications by Mara Munroe, November 2015.