

The Heather-Belle Ladies Pipe Band

In the 1940's Winnipeg's Sons of Scotland Benevolent Association was thriving, and promoted Scottish heritage and culture. Bagpipe music was integral to their monthly meetings and social events.

An idea was born, and girls in their mid-teens started taking lessons in 1947. John Service, Past Chief of the Sons of Scotland, taught bagpipes out of his Ingersoll Street home. Drummers learned their beat from Harry McKane of the Police Pipe Band. Every room in the house served as a classroom – even the bathroom (called “Studio A”)! Mrs. Service provided tea and baking. After 1961, weekly practices moved to larger quarters like the Marshall-Wells parking lot and Moore's Taxi Garage.

On April 15, 1951, the inaugural meeting was held regarding the formal establishment of this all-girl band. The original band was called The Winnipeg Heather-Belle Girls' Pipe Band and consisted of 8 pipers and 4 drummers, with Ruth Brooks as Pipe Major. Their “coming out” concert was on May 17, 1951. They wore skirts and white blouses. Mr. Service gave each player a rose as a symbol of a future uniform. In August of 1951, through the Hudson Bay store, the girls proudly wore their Stuart of Butte tartan skirts (\$18.95 each) with their white blouses. Their Glengarries were \$3.50 each. Over that year, they performed at many events and had some lucrative fundraising gigs. However, many of their performances involved helping out other organizations like the Society for Crippled Children via “Schmockey Night” and the Manitoba March of Dimes fighting polio.

In 1952 MacDonald Tobacco Ltd. wanted to hire the band for the 1952 MacDonald Briar curling event, but requested that the band be dressed like the “MacDonald Lassie” on their cigarette packages. The new kilts in Red Hamilton tartan arrived in April. The uniform included velvet jackets with silver braid, horsehair sporrans, white lace at the neck and tartan hose. This uniform remained for the next 40 years.

Now well established and well dressed, the band played for numerous parades, games and concerts, as well as out-of-town events. Band engagements often included Highland Dancing, as many of the players were also dancers and had competed through the Manitoba Highland Dancers' Association, founded in 1947. Band member and dancer, Isobel Wood, the band's first Pipe Sergeant, taught other players to dance.

In September 1952 the band entered its first pipe band competition, winning second place. This was at the Scottish Sports Day at the Polo Park racetrack. Polo Park was the site of Winnipeg's largest sports and band competitions. Years later the band event would move to Selkirk, becoming the Manitoba Highland Gathering.

The Band earned many trophies, cups and medals, but still occasionally experienced prejudice from men's bands who were reluctant to allow a girls' band to participate fully in competitions. Modern-day members of the Police Pipe Band and the Air Force Band will be embarrassed to read that in the early 1950's these male bands refused to participate in the Massed Band because a female band was playing in it!

The band liked to maintain its independence and control over its operation. Offers of sponsorship arrived but were always declined.

In 1957, the band was asked to play for the opening of Loblaws stores in Winnipeg. However, Mr. Shapiro of The Musician Union objected, stating that if they were going to be paid to play, they must join the union. The issue did get resolved eventually after the Heather-Belles pointed out that any funds earned went to travel and equipment for the band – not for individual gain. Also, the Heather-Belles were totally self-funded, while most other bands were funded by the military, government or local organizations. In 1958 the band did join the Manitoba Pipers and Drummers Association – probably the precursor to the present day PPBAM.

When one of the girls married, Mr. Service presented them with a beautiful silver tray from the band. On the band's 10th anniversary, the members presented Mr. and Mrs. Service with an engraved tray!

Attendance and punctuality at practice and gigs was very important. A point system was devised. Each person was allowed ten absences a year and each absence was fined 25¢. Arriving late cost 10¢. If poor participation or tardiness persisted, a letter of resignation was requested! As some members had to take a leave for reasons like pregnancy, an Alumna was born.

By 1961 the band was 10 years old and most of the players were now married with children. It was time for the name to reflect this adult status, so they became The Winnipeg Heather-Belle Ladies' Pipe Band.

Over the years, the band made many trips across Canada, down in to the States and visited Scotland five times between 1968 and 1998 for competitions and performances. In 1968, twenty-five band members,

their instructors and supporters went to Scotland to tour, perform and compete over three weeks. Members were billeted with relatives and friends of Mr. Service. One member continued to correspond with her billet family over the next 30 years!

At the Cowal Games, the Band tied with the Glasgow Police Band for the first place award for best band on parade at March-Past and for “marching discipline and deportment”. They placed second in the Ladies’ Pipe Band competition at Dunoon.

Interesting fact: the airfare to Scotland was \$277 each!

After the trip to Scotland, John Reay took over from Mr. Service as Band Director and enlisted Doug Will to assist with the piping instruction. Marlene Stephen took over as Pipe Major and her sister Nancy as Pipe Sergeant.

In 1967 the band developed a Constitution. And, over the years the band produced newsletters to maintain contact with players and supporters. By the 1990’s the band had a website.

The bagpipe music the band played was mostly traditional tunes, but over the years pipers like John Reay and Doug Will arranged tunes to suit the needs of the band. Plus some talented musicians composed tunes to honour special people and events. Mr. Will wrote some tunes, as did Heather Wiens and Jean Marr.

The Band played at both the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1967 Pan American Games. Years later, they would be in charge of the Massed Band that played for the opening ceremonies of the 1999 Pan Am Games.

In 1974 the band joined many others to form the City of Winnipeg Massed Pipe Band to perform in the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena, California under the leadership of Ken Steubing – 200 players in all! This was the first non-USA band to lead the Rose Bowl Parade.

In 1976 the Band celebrated 25 years at an Anniversary Dinner and Dance at the Masonic Temple for \$8 per ticket. When John Reay resigned in 1977, Doug Will became the Band Instructor, assisted by Bill Ramsay. Mona Donald continued as the Bass and Tenor Drum Instructor and Snare Drum teachers included Bob Cooper, Ken Ramsay, and later Roland Reid and Gary Wiens.

In 1969 Manitoba’s Folk Art Council started Folklorama – a multicultural celebration that has run every August since. At first, the Scottish community was included in “Mug Pub”, the British Pavilion at the University of Manitoba. In 1976 the Heather-Belles joined forces

with the Ena Sutton Highland Dancers of Winnipeg and the Caledonia Singers to branch off to form the Pavilion of Scotland. That first summer they performed in 24 shows over one week. It got so hot inside the Heather Curling Club it was torture to wear the velvet jackets all the time. Blouses were designed and cut out, and the players were expected to sew their own blouse together! After several deficit years, the band decided to withdraw from Pavilion ownership in 1985 but continued to maintain membership with the Winnipeg Folk Arts Council and perform at Folklorama as a guest band.

In 1994 the band retired their velvet jackets and lace jabots. They switched to a dark blue tailored jacket and tie. The horsehair sporrans were replaced by small leather pouches. The Band logo received an overhaul as well.

In 2003 the Band got a real kick out of their involvement in the production of Guy Maddin's 2003 movie "The Saddest Music in the World." They became regulars for years and years at curling bonspiels. Also, performing with celebrities was becoming routine. There were T.V. appearances with Joey Gregorash and concert appearances with Stuart Anderson, Toronto Tenor John McDermott, and Isobella Rossallini, as well as a major fundraiser for the 1997 Flood of the Century. However, on May 21, 1993 the Band had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to perform "Mull of Kintyre" with Sir Paul McCartney.

On May 12, 2001, one hundred and ninety-five band members and guests celebrated 50 years at a banquet held at the North Kildonan Community Club. It was a gala event enjoyed by all. Nevertheless, over the years following that, many changes within the band membership, leadership and instructors lead to the decision on Dec. 13, 2007 to disband the Heather-Belle Ladies' Pipe Band. **However, the legacy of this all-ladies pipe band is alive and well and hundreds of women are better for having been part of this very unique organization.**

En-route to competitions in Ontario and the USA, the Band wrote a song to sing as they journeyed along, to the tune of 'Scotland the Brave'.

*We are the Heather-Belles
The bonnie, bonnie Heather-Belles
We play the pipes and beat the drums
And march with our kilts a-swinging
Feathers held high in our bonnets*

*Give us space, we'll dance upon it,
We'll do the Swords, the Highland Fling or an Eight-some Reel
We travel North, We travel South
We travel East, We travel West
And when we perform we'll always do our best.
We'll keep the pipes a -skirling and the drums a-beating
Then everyone knows that we're the Heather-Belles.*

Compiled by Janet McCombe with the help of excerpts from "*The Story of the Heather-Belles*" – the band's recorded history book spearheaded by Mona McDonald and Velma Davis.