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Retired teacher keeps playing

Former band director busy with music, model trains

By David Berman
CentralOhio.com

CHILLICOTHE — The music bug bit Donald Fetrow when he was a fourth-grader in Massillon in the 1930s.

That's when the former Zane Trace music teacher and band director got his first paying gig — \$1 for a solo in the boys' and men's choir at the local Episcopal church.

"That was big money in those days," said Fetrow, who turned 90 in June.

So began Fetrow's foray into music, which led him to join the school band in seventh grade, study music at Ohio Wesleyan University and play in the 47th Air Corps Band at an air base in Casper, Wyo., which in turn led to him to meet his wife, Betty.

In 1944, the Battle of the Bulge "broke up the band," Fetrow said, and he eventually was deployed to Antigua, where he helped direct air traffic as a radio operator.

Fetrow returned to Ohio Wesleyan to complete his degree. The superintendent of Centralia schools, which later became part of Zane Trace, recruited him in 1948 to join the district as its music teacher. Fetrow also was offered the job of choir director at a local church.

"I had that whole school district under my command," Fetrow said with a laugh. "Vocal from the first grade to the 12th. Instrumental from the fourth grade to the 12th. They had an orchestra, but they didn't have a band."

Fetrow convinced the superintendent to let him start a band from scratch, with the help of some dedicated "band mothers."

"Within eight years, we had a marching band — fully uniformed, about 56 people," he said.

Fetrow said he had played in a number of bands but never had directed one.

"I had to teach oboe and bassoon and all that good stuff," he said.

Fetrow led the marching band, the choir, the boys' glee club and, at one point, two church choirs.

Throughout the years, Fetrow said it became tougher to recruit band members because of the growing appeal of athletics. In fact, it's part of what prompted his retirement in 1976.

"I could see the writing on the wall," he said. "The kids were going more toward sports than music."

Fetrow retired but went on to work as a salesman, work he had done on the weekends and in the summer during his teaching career to pay for his kids to go to college. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he drove a school bus.

Fetrow still keeps busy. As a member of the VFW Honor Guard, he plays taps at local veterans' funerals.

He also tinkers with an elaborate train set he began building 44 years ago.

In September, Fetrow directed a band for the first time in decades when he led the Adelphi Community Band through a rendition of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" at Indian Summer Fun Day in Hallsville.

"We finished together," he said. "I even slowed them down for the ending. I knew it was coming."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIMMY S. ASH

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