

GENE EIDEN

He played the accompaniment to Rochester's history



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Gene Eiden still plays his trumpet. He still practices each day in the basement of his Rochester home. His bugle still rings out in solemn tribute to fallen service members at funerals.

But Eiden, Lourdes High School's first full-time band director, no longer maintains the torrid pace that once made his music the dramatic flourish and punctuation to much that has gone in Rochester in the last fifty years. Eiden retired in 1993 after serving 36 years as director.

As Rochester has grown and evolved, Eiden was often the musical accompaniment to that history. Before the age of DJs, music was live, not recorded. His bands played at high school proms and wedding dances. His pep bands stirred the crowds at sporting events.

When work began on Rochester's massive flood-control project in the 1970s, Eiden's band was there to regale the crowd as the first shovel of dirt was turned.

Name: Gene Eiden Age: 81

What makes him extraordinary:

A talented musician, Eiden has played his trumpet at many key moments in Rochester history.

He shared the stage with Garrison Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion."

His music was sometimes the prompt to history. His band played when President Nixon came to town. When President Ronald Reagan was boarding a plane after a visit to Mayo Clinic, Eiden's band struck up the Minnesota Rouser. Reagan turned and doffed his cap to reveal a half-shaven head, as his mortified wife, Nancy, reached out in alarm. The picture became famous.

"You're so busy, and it was fun," said Eiden, who moved to Rochester with his wife, Frances, in 1957. "I think one of the reasons I became a band director was because I love all the instruments. Trumpet

is my main instrument, but if I had the flute in my hand, I would think, 'gee, I should have spent all my time on this instrument.'"

Yet Eiden's life might have been different but for an accident of personal history. Eiden grew up wanting to play not the trumpet but the clarinet. And he would have followed through with that inclination if not for a store manager who convinced him to start with a cornet instead. His argument was straight-forward. When you listen to a band, what section stands out? The brass section, of course. Thus was the career of a trumpet player born.

As one member of a group that often played in nursing homes, Eiden has often been reminded of music's power to animate an audience that was raised on polkas and waltzes. Someone might be sitting a wheelchair, slumped over and seemingly detached from his surroundings, and then the music would start. Eiden, looking over, would suddenly see the foot of the wheelchair-bound person begin to tap, keeping time with the music.

It never gets tiring, Eiden said, because music is always changing, a living thing. No song, no matter how many times performed, is ever played the same way twice.

"Music is alive," Eiden said. "I mean, the band can play the same tune three times in a row, and it'll never be exactly the same. It's a living thing."

His contribution to Rochester's musical heritage has been commemorated in different ways. He was inducted in the Rochester Quarterbacks Club Hall of Fame, the only musician to receive such an honor, in recognition of the many performances his bands put on at athletic events.

"When they had a tournament here and they wanted music, I put a pep band together and we played," he said.

And Eiden, 81, still plays, perhaps not at the same punishing pace he once did. He still goes to his basement every day to practice to keep his lips going. He still travels the midwest with polka bands. He still plays in the pit orchestra at Rochester Civic Theatre.

"I tell people: I keep doing it until I get it right," Eiden said.