

## Have Pipes Will Travel



Have pipes will travel. That was my motto at one time. And no, I'm not in Hawaii in this picture.

Bagpipes have been a rather big part of my life. I began at the age of 13 in air cadets. Having a music background (a little piano, a lot of choir), I took to the instrument rather quickly musically. Not so much physically. They're a hard instrument to play. For starters, you have to have rhythm separate from your breathing. Next, because the chanter reed is not anywhere near your mouth, you can't tongue notes. So, ancient pipers (mostly some dude named MacCrimmon) devised a series of finger flicks called grace notes, doublings and a few other names that are hard to spell in Gaelic to advance the art and frustrate learners.

But oh, the sound.

Bagpipes grab your attention. The drones mellow the chanter, which can sound quite harsh by itself. And when well tuned, bagpipes will make you cry with a lament, puff up your chest with a march, or dance to hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels.

Tuning is important. I believe people adore or hate bagpipes according to who they hear play first. A badly tuned set played by a poor player conjures up a scene of strangling cats. But a good piper and a well tuned set is magic. Magic that has blessed my life for over 45 years.

Bagpipes have an interesting history. There are many types of bagpipes, not all of them Celtic. Check out bagpipes on Wikipedia. Quite an interesting read. Many different cultures have versions. The Roman army used to use them to give commands. Even in the load heat of battle, centurions and legionnaires could hear the pipes over everything else. Quite handy when the general is surprised by a flanking movement.

The first pipes didn't have the drones. It was just a blow pipe, a sheep stomach and the double reed in a chanter. Somewhere along the way, someone added a drone to mellow the sound. The Great Highland Bagpipe only had two drones well into the modern era. Considered a weapon of war during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, bagpipes were banned by the British government after Culloden. Once proved useful to the Scottish regiments in the British army, the ban was lifted.

And so, the pipes entered my soul. I've had a pretty mobile life. Changing jobs, changing cities. I've lived in 15 different towns and cities so far and there is always a pipe band (in smaller towns, perhaps a trio) that will welcome me to join. Sometimes more than one. When I lived in Peterborough, Ontario, I played for the college band, a regimental band, was pipe major for a band 40 miles to the east and played with a legion massed band. I had three kilts hanging in my closet. And I've traveled far and wide with all my bands. I've been to Scotland twice. I've done parades all over Canada and the USA. I've played for royalty (the Queen and Princess Margaret on two separate occasions), played in the Rose Bowl parade, and many other big events. One of the most memorable parades was with the legion massed band marching up the road to Scone Palace in Scotland. We marched under a canopy of willow trees that arched across the road from both sides. It was quite the visual. We played the Earl of Mansfield. Appropriate since the Earl lived at the Palace.

There are so many memorable moments. I cherish them all. The friends I've made. The places I've been. The beer I've drank (no band bus trip is complete without a keg or two).

Over the last few years, however, I've stepped back from bands. Basically, all I've played at recently are Burns dinners, Remembrance Day ceremonies and certain Masonic events as a soloist. But the other day, I went to an open house for a new pipe band in Calgary. Started to get that "feel" again, missing playing with others. Hearing that sound of multiple bagpipes and playing harmonies. Time will be a constraint, but maybe it's time to get back into a band and be part of the sound that makes heads turn at parades.

I'll keep you posted.