

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

1971: ANOTHER YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A KING

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Karl L. King was the first Windjammers Unlimited Hall of Fame laureate, followed the same year -- 1974 -- with Merle Evans. The January-February 2021 *Circus Fanfare* featured a similar article by Jimmerson, that one focused on 1921 when Karl King conducted his first Municipal Band concert in Fort Dodge, IA. King's final year on this earth was 1971, the same year Windjammers Unlimited was founded to continue the traditions King helped foster.

Sometimes we hear that whatever happens in life seems to happen to a person in groups of three. Have you ever felt that way? Whether it was good or bad, have you ever had that experience?

Fifty years ago, in 1971, this scenario played out in the Midwestern city of Fort Dodge, Iowa through the life of Karl L. King, noted band conductor and distinguished composer of band music.

Health issues had begun to surface 6 years earlier, in the fall of 1965, when King was hospitalized for 15 days and then forced to recuperate at home for several more weeks. He entered the Lutheran hospital (now Unity Point Health – Trinity Regional Medical Center) in Fort Dodge on October 8th, 1965, with serious chest and lung congestions. Being the 'trouper' that King always was, he was present to conduct the Fort Dodge Municipal Band again at their first of three winter concerts on January 20th, 1966.

These health issues would continue off and on for the next 5 years. Karl King continued to conduct the Fort Dodge band during that time with the occasional help of an assistant conductor who would step up to direct 2-3 selections in the middle of a concert program while King would sit down to rest as the band continued playing the concert.

Then those events in the winter of 1971 started to play out.

A Disastrous Fire

Overnight on Tuesday, January 12th, 1971, a massive fire in downtown Fort Dodge claimed one life and destroyed eight businesses. Some of those businesses included the Fattle's Department Store on the corner of 9th Street and Central Avenue (where the Great Western Bank is now), along with the Brittenham Bakery and the Knights of Columbus Hall along South 9th Street.

The Fort Dodge Municipal Band had held their practices in the third-floor ballroom of the Knights of Columbus Hall

since moving from the old Band Hall on 6th Street in 1954. In fact, the band had just practiced there the previous Thursday evening.

Fred Larson, then a photographer with the Fort Dodge Messenger newspaper commented, *"That was a hard day because of that death and because of the damage. Karl King (Municipal Band) had a lot of their instruments up on the third floor and they lost everything."* Larson worked from 3 a.m. to 6 p.m. that day, which he once described as *"the longest day of my career"*.

Lois Johnson, at that time a staff writer for the Fort Dodge Messenger, interviewed Karl King the day after that catastrophic event. She quoted King as saying, *"It's true we'll never have as large a music library as the one lost in yesterday's fire – a lot of it is now out of print and irreplaceable, but we'll keep going – we'll start getting more arrangements together one concert at a time!"*.

This music library had been accumulating for more than 70-plus years, including the 50-year period of time parallel to King's conducting career in Fort Dodge. Included were many special arrangements, some original scores, and several of King's circus act books from his 5 years conducting circus bands.

Also lost were the band's music stands, percussion equipment, some band instruments, loud- speakers and PA equipment, 35 spare uniforms, and various other irreplaceable artifacts. Fortunately, the individual band members had their uniforms and instruments safe at home. The music inventory list was also kept off-site, so at least there was a record of what music had once been there.

King was quoted as saying, *"We have until February 21st before the next concert, time enough to get our arrangements ready for that one – then we'll worry about the next"*. In spite of his illnesses, he found a renewed energy and set to work to find a rehearsal space and some music to play.

Happy 80th Birthday

The Municipal Band's next concert on February 21st, 1971 was planned to be a gala affair. Like the mythological Phoenix rising from the ashes, so did the Fort Dodge Municipal Band. A program was planned, band music was donated or borrowed from wherever it was available, and King's Band was ready for the big day.

This was to be a special day in Fort Dodge. Karl King was turning 80 years old, and today was his birthday. This was also the beginning of his 51st year as conductor of the Fort Dodge Municipal Band, a career that began with that first concert back on January 10th, 1921, and further cause for celebration, considering his previous health issues.

The television crews, photographers, and news reporters were ready. The concert began promptly at 3:00 pm in the North Junior High School Auditorium (later known as Phillips Middle School). The entire city was invited to *"come and wish the Maestro a Happy Birthday"*. The local newspaper described Karl King as **"Bandmaster to the World, Our Leading Citizen"**. And there he was, right where he belonged on the podium, ready to lead the band in another thrilling concert of band music! When King appeared on stage, he was greeted with a well-deserved standing ovation!

The auditorium was packed, the pit area was full, and people were standing in the wings backstage, in the lobby, with an overflow crowd standing in the aisles and in the stairways leading to the balcony. Attendance was estimated at 1,500

people (normal seating is 1,100). Some were even turned away at the front doors. Friends and bandmasters had come to honor King and some even sat in with the band.

The format for the concert was in King's typical style. Opening with two of his earliest march publications – **"Sons of Veterans"** and **"Canton Aero Club"** – the concert then moved on to what King always described as a 'heavy', the challenging **"Slavonic Rhapsody"** by Carl Friedmann.

Next came two solos by one of King's favorite performers and protégés, Dean Olson, on trombone. Olson was a 1948 graduate of Fort Dodge Senior High and had performed with the Band for several years. At that time he was the Orchestra director at Edina-Morningside Schools in Minnesota. He performed the traditional solo, **"Atlantic Zephyrs"** by Gardell Simons, and followed that with an encore, **"Adagio"** by Haydn, as arranged by the maestro himself.

King was then presented with the Edwin Franko Goldman Award by Robert Dean, past president of the American School Band Directors Association and a legendary Iowa director himself. This award is the highest recognition which can be given to any band director. Dean commented, *"No musician in the world today commands more respect than Iowa's own Karl King"*. Another standing ovation followed!

Later, a congratulatory letter arrived from President Richard Nixon, which stated *"Mrs. Nixon joins me in extending warmest greetings and congratulations"*.





Continuing on, appropriately, the band next played King's composition, "***The Goldman Band***", which he wrote and dedicated to honor the late great New York City conductor and composer, followed by one of King's favorite classical pieces, the emotional "***Pilgrim's Chorus***" from the opera 'Tannhauser'.

Then it was time for some fun! One of King's favorite band compositions, "***Rush Street Tarantella***" by his good friend Paul Yoder (WJU 1983-1988; WJU Hall of Fame 1986) was followed by some circus music – "***Kentucky Sunrise***" and "***The Big Cage Galop***". The concert closed with King's 1946 tribute to his adopted state, "***Iowa Centennial***".

The concert ended with "***The Star-Spangled Banner***", a King trademark, followed by another standing ovation. This entire celebration had lasted just an hour, about the same amount of time that King could comfortably be away from his oxygen. On this special day, however, Karl King was still in complete charge!

As Thomas J. Hatton later stated in his book, **Hawkeye Glory**, "*this was Sunday afternoon in the winter in Fort Dodge, whether it was 1921 or 1971. For an hour, at least, time seemed to stand still.*"

This was my 11th year playing with the Municipal Band under King's direction. It was also my 5th year teaching at a small Iowa school about an hour west of Fort Dodge. My students were well-aware of who Karl King was and had been fed a steady diet of his marches. Fortunately, I had brought a busload of students to the concert that day and one of my trumpet players had brought his camera. You can view his candid photos on the band's website at www.karlking.us, by

clicking on the 'Karl King stories' icon and then clicking on my name. These are great, one-of-a-kind photos that I am proud to share.

The End of an era

The next concert was on March 14, 1971, which was the band's annual St. Patrick's Day Concert. It is believed that King started this annual event during his early years in Fort Dodge. It was held at the Corpus Christi Parish Center on North 8th Street.

Opening the program was King's march, "***Ponderoso***", followed by "***Seventy-Six Trombones***" (which had been loaned to him by Meredith Willson after that disastrous fire in January), George Barnard's "***Gems of Ireland***", and Leroy Anderson's "***The Irish Washerwoman***".

Then it was time for the Men's Civic Glee Club from Fort Dodge, directed by Larry Mitchell, to present musical excerpts from their annual variety show.

The band, still seated on stage, next performed "***The Irish Patrol***" by George Drumm, followed by one of King's favorites, "***Old Timers Waltz***" by M.L. Lake. The music of George M. Cohan was next with "***Star-Spangled Spectacular***" before the concert closer, "***The Stars and Stripes Forever***" by John Philip Sousa.

Coming off the euphoria of that February concert, and in spite of his recurring health issues, none of the band members really realized this would be the last time we would perform together under the baton of our inspirational leader and "teacher" (as he was affectionately called), Karl King.

About two weeks later, the sad news came that Karl King, the world's "march king", had passed away. The date was March 31, 1971. He had been taken to Bethesda General Hospital (now Unity Point Health – Trinity Regional Medical Center) in Fort Dodge at 1:15 Tuesday afternoon following a sudden illness with acute diverticulosis. He passed away at 5:55 a.m. Wednesday. Suddenly, the baton that thousands of band members and students had followed for so long was lowered. It was the end of an era. The city of Fort Dodge was in mourning. The person everyone considered a friend was gone!

No longer would people see Karl King at the barber shop, the coffee shop, the post office or walking down Central Avenue. Sometimes when he would walk about a block to the post office from the music store, it might take him an hour or two to get back with so many people stopping to visit with him. When he would take the upcoming concert program to the local newspaper, a distance of about three blocks, he might be gone half the day visiting with the staff. He might even visit in the press room, his first love growing up. On a good day, he might even get printer's ink on his hands or on his shirt.

Tributes poured in from around the country. Allen J. Bloom, then vice president and director of tours for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, wrote, *"Everyone connected with this show has a heavy heart after hearing that Karl King passed away."* F.L. McAlister from Joliet, IL, editor and publisher of *The School Musician* magazine, sent a telegram to Karl's widow, Ruth King, which stated, *"Karl King is not dead. He will live for many generations to come in the minds of the young and not-so-young who have been inspired by his great teachings, generosity, and kindnesses."*

One of the most moving expressions came from Meredith Willson, Iowa's famous Music Man, from his home in Los Angeles, CA. He said,

**"Muffle the drums – mute the brass.
Iowa has lost her royal son, King of band music.
Our famous Karl is, no doubt, already at work forming
choirs of angels into heavenly bands with the smiling
approval of John Philip Sousa".**

Karl King's last parade

The funeral services for Karl King were held on Saturday, April 3, 1971, at 1:30 p.m. at the First Congregational Church in Fort Dodge, which was located at the corner of 2nd Ave. North and 15th Street. The sanctuary was filled, with seating provided for 450 mourners, along with overflow seating in the lower-level social hall.

Reverend Ben Hearn stated during his eulogy, *"Karl King was a joyous man. He experienced joy. He wanted to share*

it. He did! From the Circus Big Top to the bandstand, fair, festival or parade, his music told us who he was – a man of purpose and joy."

Naturally, music was a big part of the service. Two songs from a recording by The Band of Her Majesty's Life Guards in London were played which included ***"Barnum and Bailey's Favorite"*** and ***"The Melody Shop"***, two of King's most famous compositions.

Members of the 40-piece Fort Dodge Municipal Band attended the service in uniform and were seated together as a group. Several of the long-time band members served as pallbearers. A group of 15 music teachers from Fort Dodge were also present.

At the conclusion of the service, the long funeral cortege moved up North 15th Street to the North Lawn Cemetery. This was perhaps the longest funeral procession that had been seen in Fort Dodge up to that time with hundreds of automobiles in the caravan.

The opus of life's beautiful symphony had reached the grand finale. In 1966, King said *"I've sung my song. It was a rather simple one; it wasn't too involved; I'm happy about it"*.

Finally, after all those wonderful 80+ years living the music of life, this was Karl King's last parade! The inscription over his grave from Reverend Hearn's eulogy put the perfect coda on a life so well lived by Karl King. It simply reads

"Music told us who he was, a man of purpose and joy."



NOTE: The material for this article comes from the author's personal recollections of many of these events while playing in the King Band during this time, along with numerous news articles the author has collected from the *Fort Dodge Messenger* newspaper, from Thomas J. Hatton's two books, *"Karl L. King, An American Bandmaster"*, and *"Hawkeye Glory – The History of the Karl L. King Municipal Band"*, and from the band's website www.karling.us.

The author played in the band for 43 years - eleven of which were under King's baton - from the summer of 1960 until spring of 2003, when he was selected as only the 5th conductor in the now 120+ year history of the band (2003-present).