

A TRIBUTE TO OLIVER C. ZINSMEISTER, WJU #1022

by Barbara Bailey, WJU #18

It was about 6:30 pm and Buster and I had just finished dinner when the phone rang. I answered and it was an "Ollie Zinsmeister" calling to speak with Buster Bailey. Buster took the phone and the conversation went from introductions to "do you know's" and then to "whatever happened to's" before Ollie asked Buster to help him secure an autographed picture of New York Philharmonic conductor Zubin Mehta for his huge collection of "The Greats." Actually it was Ollie's daughter Carol who finally got the picture, but this was the beginning of a wonderful and treasured relationship between the Bailey's and the Zinsmeister's although we did not meet face-to-face until the 1988 Windjammer summer meet in Cincinnati, OH and Kentucky.

Ollie was well known for his phone calls, but even better known for his extensive collection of autographed pictures of famous conductors and soloists. He would sometimes bring one or two albums along for us to peruse at Windjammer conventions or meets. His enthusiasm was endless and he tracked down the most elusive "divas"!

Many Windjammers have memories of Oliver, but let me tell you a little about his history. He was the first percussion major student at the Eastman School of Music, but he never graduated. The second percussion student, who became his roommate in 1933, was Frederick Fennell. Fennell, as a student formed the first University of Rochester marching band and was the first at Eastman to receive a degree in percussion performance. According to the story Ollie told Mike Montgomery, in 1935 Ollie decided to audition for the Richmond Symphony job in Virginia and on the way north stopped in Washington, secured an audition, and was accepted into the U.S. Marine Band. What good fortune for a young talented percussionist.



Ollie Zinsmeister, circa 1939

Ollie had many tales of his years in the U.S. Marine Band, "The President's Own", but his favorite was telling the (sad) tale of having to play a concert in the rain, and there were only two people in the audience. Ollie would give a long pause to gather appropriate sympathetic nods, and then he would finish with ...

President Franklin Roosevelt and Sir Winston Churchill.

John Fleming recalls Ollie telling him of an earlier time when he was sitting patiently in the White House waiting to

begin a concert on December 7, 1941, when someone came in to tell the Band members that the concert had been canceled because the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

After 20 years of service, Ollie retired from the U.S. Marine Band and became the Executive Director of the Prince George (MD) Chamber of Commerce. Soon after, he joined Windjammers in 1987 and became a very active member of our organization.

We remember him playing concert solos several times for us and especially playing a duet with Chris Williams, principal percussionist of the Baltimore Symphony and son of Windjammer Russ Williams. But he was also well known for his prowess on the woodblock! He would play all kinds of tricky rhythms using just his right hand. None of this 2-handed technique for him.

In chatting with Ollie about a Marine Band performance I had heard in 1946 in rural Lancaster county, PA, I recalled being so impressed by the xylophone soloist that day. Ollie looked it up in his archives and there it was! He had been that soloist. He even knew what the solo piece was! He had a fabulous memory!

Tom Miller remembers him as a teacher who insisted that the snare drummers play "flam's" (grace notes) instead of single after-beats in marches because they were more musical. He was always fun and gracious in sharing his knowledge and experience. Diane Bergholtz remembers him as a gentleman who in his retirement years always practiced a half-hour daily before he went to play bridge.

John Fleming recalls: "Many years after Ollie retired from the Marine Band I was visiting the Zinsmeister's and took them to a Marine Band concert on the steps of the Capitol. Ollie and Marge were reluctant, but we found good parking not far from the Band. Ollie wasn't sure how he would be received, but he went to talk to the percussion section and Col. John Bourgeois. The soloist that evening was a woman clarinetist from the Band. She brought her music stand out (while Ollie grumbled that in his day soloists had to memorize their solos). Although it was not a windy evening a gust of wind came up and blew the stand into the soloist. She had to grab the stand and the clarinet. Col. Bourgeois signaled the Band where to pick up the solo and it went off without a further hitch. Ollie said that that was the reason to memorize the solo!

Ollie was really tickled when the Colonel turned to where we were sitting and had Ollie stand and be honored. Marge and I had to get him away from the percussionists so they

could pack up and go home.” John also remembers Ollie’s solos both at Band Camp and at Windjammers. Ollie composed two marches (“The President’s Own” - 2004; “The Few and the Proud” - 2005) and a waltz (“The Waltz Suite” - 2005) which the United States Marine Band recorded for him. He also composed the “U.S. Naval Academy Band March”, which was recorded by that band.

And speaking of Ollie and his solos, I’m a bit embarrassed to tell this! Some years ago we had a well known trumpet soloist who would volunteer to solo at the January Windjammer convention. One year he was playing “Willow Echoes” with an Encore of “Hold that Tiger” on the post horn, both of which he had played for us before. I expressed my feelings clearly, and tactlessly, to Ollie. I didn’t like “repeats”.



Ollie out front, still “soloing”

Time passed and Ollie called me during the summer months. I asked him what he was doing. “Oh, I’m learning a new piece so I can solo with Windjammers next time. Barbara Bailey is tired of the repeat performances”, he said with a chuckle. Maybe he was perfecting “Fluffy Ruffles”, which he did perform with us Windjammers? His

favorite marimba pieces, however, were often of a religious nature...his favorite being “How Great Thou Art”.

Ollie was a kind and generous man, as John Wetzel recalls: “Twenty years ago Keith House and I invited Ollie and Marge to Columbia, MO, where we wanted Ollie to be our guest soloist with our band. This July concert is the largest one of the year for us as it draws around 3,500 people to a beautiful outdoor setting. The band was going to pay their transportation and expenses, but he would not accept the money. Marge and Ollie flew into Columbia on a Friday afternoon. Saturday night preceding the Sunday Concert I invited Ollie to play with me in the Fayette Star Cornet Band in Roanoke, MO, a very small community that puts on a wonderful Ice Cream Social each year and the band plays in a 1906 bandstand. The band is mostly made up of Central Methodist College alumni and friends and plays Overtures, marches and everything in between with no practice. Ollie really showed off in the percussion section and loved every minute of it.

The next day was our big concert at 4:00 in the afternoon. Wouldn’t you know it, it began to rain and the sponsor

canceled our concert where Ollie was to perform on the xylophone. Of course, everyone was very disappointed. Ollie came up with the suggestion to go back to the band room and he’d play for the band. And that’s exactly what he did for 2 hours.”

Carol Zinsmeister always accompanied her parents to the meets and was well known to our members. After discussion with Bob Peckham at the January 1995 Convention, it was decided that a special band would be formed to include the wives, husbands and others who accompanied Windjammers, but had nothing musical in which to participate. So, The Puce Band was formed, so named because at that time we had Red, White and Blue recording bands, and mixing them together hypothetically produced “Puce” in color!

Ollie was the instigator and assistant, and the band performed for the first (and, I believe, last) time at the Allentown, PA, summer meet, July, 1995. The band was directed by Carol and used kazoos, triangles, tambourines and all kinds of percussion instruments. It performed to “Stars and Stripes Forever” which was played on a CD, controlled by Ollie who also “conducted” from the shadows while Carol, attired for the occasion in a cape, wielded her baton in front of the band. It truly was an unforgettable occasion!

Ollie died November 2, 2008 at the age of 97. He had spent his last years in Annapolis, MD, and had been “adopted” by the band at the Naval Academy. The members would come for him, provide transportation, and escort him to every concert.

Less well known is that Ollie conducted the choir in a Methodist Church where his wife, Marge, was the organist. He believed deeply in the power of prayer and his favorite bible verse (which guided his life) was Micah 6:6-8 where it says God requires us “To do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”.

Ollie was a well loved and admired fellow and a wholly unique, one of a kind personality. Those who have known him will nod their heads in agreement, and those who didn’t will wish that they had.



Barbara Bailey, Charles & Josephine Smith, Buster Bailey, Marge & Ollie in Sarasota for a Windjammers Annual Convention, January 28, 2001