

OUT OF THE PAST - TUBIST OZZIE OSMUNDSON

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To those who knew him, Ozzie Osmundson was one of the best tuba players anywhere. And as some records show, he and his big tuba were a fan favorite with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus during the 1920's. Ringling included him in their Hall of Fame in Sarasota, honoring him as one of the finest tuba players in the world.

A native of Bergen, Norway, Borge Martin Osmundson was born September 27, 1892 to Bjorn and Maron. His earliest years were anything but "routine", however. He was the youngest of three sons, and shortly after his birth, his boat-captain father had serious health problems. The family made an emergency move to France where the mother's brother was a doctor and could provide care. However, the infant was left behind with a mid-wife. When the family returned to Norway two years later, the mid-wife told them the baby had died, even taking them to the cemetery to show them the gravestone she had falsely placed there. So it was, that young "Martin" grew up believing the mid-wife was his real mother.

In 1907, at the age of 15, Osmundson signed on with the Norwegian merchant marines. But to do so, he had to provide a copy of his birth certificate. It was only then he learned who his real parents were. He quickly made contact with them and was able to spend a little time with his birth parents before he shipped out. He spent five years at sea, primarily working as a mess boy and cook. His goal had been to get to America, and in 1912 he achieved that. For his first two years in New York City, he was a baker. Next was a bakery job in Chicago where he became friends with a family from North Dakota. That quickly triggered a move in 1914 to Fillmore, N.D., where he was first a farmer's helper and then a railroad hand. That latter job soon took him to the Twin Cities. He left there to briefly run a car shop in Sault St. Marie, Michigan, but it wasn't long before he was back with the railroad as a steward and cook. By 1916, he was again in North Dakota as a freight handler. It was there Osmundson acquired his interest in music.

Osmundson first learned to play the accordion, then the piano and the harmonica. But it wasn't long before the tuba became his favorite instrument and he was playing one in the Drake, N.D. municipal band. In 1917, his work took him to Eveleth, MN. When the U.S. entered World War I, Osmundson joined the National Guard and served in the Third Minnesota Infantry. His musical talents landed him in that unit's band. Then, when the Third Minnesota Infantry was federalized as the 125th Field Artillery (34th "Sandstorm" Division), he ended up at Camp Cody, NM, for training. Again, he was in the band. And "Ozzie" became his official nickname.

Because immigrants joining the Army were automatically granted citizenship, Osmundson, now 25 years old, was naturalized on June 24, 1917. His unit was shipped to France in 1918, but the war ended shortly after they arrived. Ozzie later told the Eveleth newspaper: "Somehow the Kaiser must have heard (of our arrival). We had not been in France very long ... when Wilhelm spread the news that Minnesota had arrived and Germany went under." He was back home in January, 1919, with records showing he had service-connected damage to his teeth. As a musician, second class, he was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army.



Photo courtesy American Legion Department of Minnesota

Back in Eveleth, MN, Osmundson again became a baker. Over time his broader cooking skills increased and he was viewed in the community as a "master chef." In addition, he took on the commander role at the local VFW post and was active with The American Legion. Further, he was a scout master, an instructor for the drum and bugle corps, and organizer of what soon became a highly regarded municipal band.

By 1920, the municipal band was competing in contests across Minnesota and was featured in a performance at the Minnesota State Fair. That went so well, the band was selected to play for Warren G. Harding, who had just been elected president.

In 1924, Ozzie decided to take his musical career up a notch. He joined the Mackenzie Highlander Vaudeville Band and toured with them for a year. Then he joined the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus band, purchasing an \$800 tuba, one of the largest and finest he could buy.



Photo courtesy American Legion Department of Minnesota

The work was strenuous and living conditions strict. As a windjammer, he had to sign a contract forbidding drinking, gambling, women and other situations of "moral laxness." He told friends Ringling was not only "The Greatest Show on Earth," but also "The Most Moral Show on Earth."

The circus traveled eight months a year and wintered in Sarasota, FL. Generally, the band played eight hours a day, but the pay was good and Ozzie got to see much of America in the process. He stayed with the circus band for six years before settling down in Lexington, VA, to work for the Virginia Military Institute.

Years before, in Eveleth, he had met and courted Frances Jeanette Postudensek. Before joining the circus, he had proposed to her. She said yes, but her parents said no, and seemingly that was the end of that. But now in Virginia and off the road, he again asked her to marry him. This time her parents agreed, and Ozzie and Frances were married on August 30, 1931. Between 1931 and 1940, the couple had four children.

During the Depression, Ozzie was earning just \$90 a month as a quartermaster for the military school. He also played tuba in the institute's band, and offered lessons to others. While in Lexington, he helped organize the Shenandoah Valley Post of The American Legion, and served as the post's commander.

When World War II broke out, Ozzie had a decision to make. He was increasingly angry that Germany had occupied his home country of Norway. So, on June 27, 1942, he went to the Naval Yard in Washington, D.C., and attempted to enlist. In his interview, he noted he spoke fluent English, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish, and had many contacts in Norway. He was 49 at the time, and the Navy turned him down. Thus, Ozzie remained at the Institute and served as an air raid warden.

In 1947, Osmundson decided to leave VMI. He and his family returned to Eveleth, MN, to be with her family and his friends there. Again, he was back playing with the municipal band. He also played tuba with the Ragadaur's, a local dance band. He found employment in the drill shop of the Oliver Mining Company.

On December 22, 1956, he suffered a mild heart attack at work. He was taken to a doctor, but was misdiagnosed and sent back to work. He then had a second heart attack that same day, and died soon after at the Eveleth Hospital. He was 64.

His wife, Frances, was born September 21, 1902 in Austria, and died at age 100 on October 20, 2002. She and Ozzie are both buried in the Eveleth Cemetery, near her parents, Louis and Frances (Susnik) Postudensek.