

## A Step in a New Direction Women in Austin Marching Bands

*by Katie Whitehurst*

As a cool autumn breeze fills the air, stadium lights shine down on well-manicured football fields, illuminating each yard line until they seem to glow. When the football team leaves the field for halftime, another group of students enters the spotlight. Almost indistinguishable from one another in their crisp uniforms, they march onto the field as a single unit. Underneath the tailored garb, the modern-day marching band exists.

At the intersection of Twelfth and Rio Grande streets in Austin, Texas, sits a Romanesque-style yellow-brick building, with columns and arches that served as Austin High School (AHS) from 1925 to 1975.<sup>1</sup> A talented band director from Houston, Weldon Covington, arrived at the school in 1931 to find a significant problem in the music program: the bands, once award-winning, had dwindled to almost nothing. The marching band he inherited consisted of a meager eight members, and his choir and orchestra also suffered from low participation numbers.<sup>2</sup> One of his choir members, Verna Long, expressed interest in joining the marching band, but “school regulations excluded girls from the Maroon Band in the early 1930s.”<sup>3</sup> She was not the first girl to express interest in joining the marching band and she would not be the last.

Nicknamed “Everybody’s Sweetheart,” Mary Love Armacost, the first drum majorette at Austin High School, joined the band in 1934.<sup>4</sup> Drum majorettes, the only females then allowed to be part of the group, were baton twirlers and leaders who did not march with instruments on the field. Despite the limitation of excluding girls to march, Covington built a successful and large band of more than ninety members by 1938, earning many accolades in his first years at AHS.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Whitlow, Elizabeth. “The History of Stephen F. Austin High School: A Tradition and Spirit.” (Austin: 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Tuttle, Henry Stanton. “Weldon Covington and the Development of Instrumental Music in the Austin, Texas Public Schools.” PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1997, 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>4</sup> Austin High School Yearbook, *The Comet*, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Austin High School Yearbook, *The Comet*, 1938.

In 1939, a young girl new to Austin High School challenged the all-male marching band rule. Charlotte June Stevenson, a talented flutist, moved to Austin from New York and asked Covington if she could join the marching band. Although his band had grown significantly from the meager band he inherited, he still yearned to increase the depth and aptitude of the Austin High Maroon Band. He thus encouraged Stevenson to join the orchestra and use that ensemble as a musical outlet until he could get the rule changed. According to an account by Covington in 1996, once she started drawing attention to the issue, other girls started to voice their desires to march in the band. Covington, noted for fairness and excellence in teaching, desired talented musicians in the band and no longer wanted gender to be a factor in membership.

Covington pressed the issue, and Nellie Robinson, a school board member, formally raised the matter with the board on Monday, March 11, 1940. Her inquiry forced the board to address the issue of allowing girls to march in the band, and they ultimately decided Superintendent Arthur N. McCallum and the principals should resolve the issue.<sup>6</sup> McCallum, renowned public educator and leader, became the superintendent of the Austin Public Schools in 1903 and served the community for thirty-nine years. During his time as superintendent, he saw the school system grow from 3,591 students to 16,126 and worked diligently to manage the ever-changing face of public school education in Austin.<sup>7</sup>

On Thursday, March 14, 1940, McCallum called a special meeting comprised of junior high and high school principals to discuss the issue introduced by Nellie Robinson. He specifically requested Covington's presence at the meeting and, according to Covington, McCallum's commanding nature was not questioned often.<sup>8</sup> Covington later recalled that McCallum asked each principal their opinion on the issue and then asked them to vote with a simple yes or no. During the morning meeting, the principals unanimously voted against allowing girls to march in the band. Covington, still insistent that girls have the same opportunities as boys, remained resolute despite the setback.

The meeting of the principals and McCallum generated a great deal of discussion, as they addressed the issue that girls who learned instruments at the elementary and junior high school levels could only join the orchestra in high school. Eloise Cabaniss, member of the Band Mothers Club and president of the University Junior High School P.T.A., expressed concern that the root of the issue was discrimination and concern about girls wearing pants, commenting that the girls wearing trousers "...are more completely dressed than the drum majorettes that lead the band."<sup>9</sup> In a 1997 interview, Covington explained the reason McCallum decided to call a second meeting of the principals: the superintendent's wife, Jane Y. McCallum, read the article in the *Austin Statesman* about the meeting's outcome and strongly encouraged her husband to rethink the decision and allow girls to march in the band.<sup>10</sup> Jane Y. McCallum, a noted advocate for women's suffrage and the second female secretary of state in Texas, worked tirelessly throughout her life to promote equal rights for women in all capacities.<sup>11</sup> With his wife's

<sup>6</sup> "Problem of Girls in the Band Is Still Undecided," *Austin Statesman*, Thursday, March 14, 1940.

<sup>7</sup> "Who Was McCallum? What is McCallum?" *The McCallum Shield*, Thursday, September 6, 1956, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Interview by Henry Stanton Tuttle, Weldon Covington, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> "Problem of Girls in the Band Is Still Undecided," *Austin Statesman*, Thursday, March 14, 1940.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by Henry Stanton Tuttle, Weldon Covington, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Flynn, Jean. *Texas Women Who Dared to Be First* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1999), 123-130.

influence, Superintendent McCallum called another meeting for the principals to meet and discuss the issue.

During the second meeting, the principals and Covington faced a superintendent with a new agenda. As in the initial meeting, McCallum asked each of the principals to vote yes or no about the issue; unlike the initial meeting, though, he accused the principal who cast the first vote of being “old fashioned” when he voted no.<sup>12</sup> McCallum’s commanding nature pushed the other principals at the second meeting to vote in the affirmative thereafter, fearful of being scolded by the superintendent. Thus, the principals and superintendent signed a memorandum on Friday, March 15, 1940, allowing girls to march in the band. Urging girls to “participate primarily in the strictly musical aspects of the work of the band, rather than in the more strenuous physical activities of marching and parading,”<sup>13</sup> the memorandum gave the permission Covington sought—girls could now march in the Austin High School Maroon Band.

Charlotte June Stevenson, the girl who triggered the vote, graduated from Austin High School in 1939.<sup>14</sup> By the time the school board gave the issue to Superintendent McCallum and the principals, she had graduated and was pursuing music at the University of Texas (UT). She participated in the UT Symphony Orchestra, and after graduating with a bachelor’s degree in music, she attended the Eastman School of Music for her graduate education. Though her later degrees, teaching positions, and musical accomplishments show her talent and drive, it is unknown how she felt about being unable to march in the Maroon band. She died in Troy, NY in 2007, and based on the research, it seems her stories died with her. We might never know how the new girl to Austin felt when she realized she would be restricted from the marching band, but we do know she persevered and continued to make music a part of her life for many years after graduation from Austin High School.<sup>15</sup>

McCallum called the 1940 decision to allow girls to march in the Austin High School band, “revolutionary, but not objectionable.”<sup>16</sup> The decision to open the ranks of the band to girls changed the Austin High School marching band permanently, giving new opportunities to female musicians. Prior to 1940, the only girls in the marching band were the drum majorettes who were typically popular and attractive young women who served as figureheads for the band. After the decision, girls trickled into the band at a slow, steady pace and by the end of 1940 the Maroon Band had six female members.<sup>17</sup> Covington continued to grow his marching band’s participation numbers. The fair and just teacher, always focused on talent rather than gender as a

<sup>12</sup> Interview by Henry Stanton Tuttle, Weldon Covington, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> “Recommendations Concerning Girls as Members of the Austin High School Band,” Memorandum, March 15, 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Austin Independent School District Graduating Lists, 1885-1953, Austin High School, Austin Public Schools Records (AR.D.003). Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Texas.

<sup>15</sup> Information about Charlotte June’s life derived from a variety of sources: *History of Texas Christian University – A College of the Cattle Frontier*, by Colby D. Hall, 1947, p. 355; Wedding Announcement in the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, February 22, 1948; Mu Phi Epsilon Program Book, 1968; *Ruth Shaw Wylie: The Composer and her Music* by Deborah Hayes; University of Utah Math Department Newsletter, 1998-1999; *Salt Lake City Tribune* January 17, 1960 and November 18, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> “Who Was McCallum? What is McCallum?” *The McCallum Shield*, Thursday, September 6, 1956, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Austin High School Yearbook, *The Comet*, 1940.

deciding factor for joining his band, also practiced fair employment policies and hired the first female band director in Texas in 1943.<sup>18</sup>

Verna Long expressed interest in joining the Maroon Band during Covington's first year at AHS but graduated in the summer of 1932, eight years before girls marched in the band. After catching the young band director's eye as a senior, but waiting until after her graduation to date, Verna married Weldon in 1933. The couple started a family, and Verna pursued her degree in music education at the University of Texas. Many married female teachers with working husbands, typically removed from their positions during the Depression years, came back to teaching during the war years. When the war came, everything changed, and labor shortages and the smaller pool of male teachers pushed the Austin schools to allow married women to teach again in 1943.<sup>19</sup> As AHS's successful band director, Weldon Covington also worked with the junior high band students and felt the strain of the war on a professional and personal level. Verna remembered, "I was a senior at the University [of Texas] in 1941 when we were stunned with Pearl Harbor...the men band directors were drafted. I took over two junior highs and assisted at the high school and he had a junior high and the high school. He and I kept the whole program going."<sup>20</sup> Officially hired in 1943, Verna taught at Allen, Baker, Fulmore, and Porter junior high schools before retiring in 1977. During her successful teaching career, her bands earned first division ratings every year.<sup>21</sup>

Verna and Weldon Covington actively served the community until the end of their lives. Covington Middle School, built in 1986, became the couple's second home, where they dedicated countless hours to their namesake school, of which they were extremely proud.<sup>22</sup> Another milestone the couple accomplished together was induction into the Texas Bandmaster's Hall of Fame, in 1991; Verna was the first female inductee. The Covingtons, dedicated to the community for the majority of their lives, worked to improve education for Austin children through the arts. As such vital members of the community, the couple played instrumental roles in all aspects of arts education, including hiring and supporting women as high school band directors. Weldon hired three women as directors in Austin, at a time when other cities in Texas did not do the same, and Verna, according to a memorial piece, "as the first woman band director in Texas, paved the way for many women who now lead public school bands and orchestras."<sup>23</sup>

Weldon Covington became Instructional Music Supervisor for the Austin public schools in 1953, a significant year that marked the opening of two new high schools: A.N. McCallum and William B. Travis. By the early 1970s, Austin Independent School District had nine high schools. After twenty-two years as the director of the Maroon Band, Covington transitioned into the larger role, working to keep up with the city's growing school populations. He also refused to narrow his candidates for open band director positions because of gender. "Many young,

<sup>18</sup> Tuttle, 80-81.

<sup>19</sup> "Timeline of the History of Austin Public Schools," Austin Public Schools Records (AR.D.003). Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Texas.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Verna and Weldon Covington, 1994, Henry Stanton Tuttle.

<sup>21</sup> "Fulmore Junior High has Successful Female Band Director," *The Texas Music Educator*, date unknown, 10; Program from Verna Covington's Memorial Service (Texas Bandmaster's Hall of Fame, Digital Scrapbook).

<sup>22</sup> Sly, Carla. "School Board bestows honor by naming school after couple," *Austin American-Statesman*, February 20, 1986; Vlerbome, Peggy. "A Lifetime of Commitment." *Austin American-Statesman*, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Program from Verna Covington Memorial Service.

inexperienced instrumental music teachers received their first job offers in Austin because of Covington's efforts."<sup>24</sup> His work was exemplified when David B. Crockett High School needed a Director of Bands, and he handpicked Paula Crider, a director at Allen Junior High School at the time, to interview for the position. Crider credits Covington for helping her with her interview and pushing for her employment at Crockett. Covington, the director who encouraged girls to march in the band at Austin High School and who hired the first female band director in Texas, thus also hired the first female Class 5-A band director in Texas in 1971.<sup>25</sup> "The Crockett Bands went on to earn 12 consecutive Sweepstakes Awards and won first place State Marching Band honors in 1980 and 1981."<sup>26</sup> Crider joined the faculty at the University of Texas in 1982 and became the first female director of a Big 12 marching band in 1995. Crider credits her successes to working hard and remaining dedicated, and to Weldon Covington giving her a chance and supporting her endeavors. Crider joined the Covingtons in the Texas Bandmasters Hall of Fame in 2011.

Verda Herrington, a former student teacher of Verna's, began directing the L.C. Anderson High School marching band in 1973. Given her four years of teaching in Austin schools, Covington believed she would be the best choice for the job. After school integration by means of busing became mandated and the all African-American L.C. Anderson High School closed in 1971, Austin's black students dispersed around the city. The "new" L.C. Anderson High School, in northwest Austin, opened shortly thereafter, and Herrington became its first head director. She remarked in 1997 that her "career would not have happened without Mr. and Mrs. Covington. They were inspiring role models." Herrington's illustrious career earned her induction into the Texas Bandmasters Hall of Fame in 2002.

Charlotte June Stevenson's innocent request to join the Austin High School Maroon marching band in 1939 set off a domino effect of change for women musicians in Austin. Seemingly unbeknownst to her, other girls wished to join the marching band at Austin High and voiced their wishes to Covington simultaneously. Covington, a director more focused on talent than gender, pushed for girls to join the marching band, and his ultimate success changed the opportunities for females in the Austin public schools. Hired in 1943 by her husband, Verna Covington became the first female band director in Texas. By the 1950s, Austin had two other high schools, Travis High School and McCallum High School, both with large mixed-gender bands. Weldon Covington's impact on the music community in Austin, from pushing to allow girls to march in the Austin High Maroon Band in 1940 to hiring Paula Crider and Verda Herrington, outlasted his lifetime. Music professor Mary Brown Hinely poignantly said, "The history of American women from the Colonial times shows that progress of women in American music has closely paralleled the progress of women in society."<sup>27</sup> A year before women entered the work force in mass quantities to aid in the war effort, they marched in the band, and unlike the women who left the factories after the war, the female marching band members stayed long after V-J Day. The influence of the Covingtons through their indiscriminate hiring choices and

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<sup>24</sup> Tuttle, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "2004 Bandmasters Pamphlet," Paula Crider's Digital Scrapbook, Texas Bandmaster's Hall of Fame.

<sup>27</sup> Hinely, Mary Brown. "The Uphill Climb of Women in American Music: Performers and Teachers." *Music Educators Journal* Vol. 70 No. 8 (April 1984): 31-32.

the support they gave to the students of their namesake school (now a Fine Arts Academy) pushed marching bands in a new direction.

From a distance, the modern-day marching band members are indistinguishable from one another in their matching uniforms and hats. Women and men (or girls and boys) of different religions, races, and socio-economic statuses combine and form a cohesive unit in their matching rough-polyester uniforms. In the 2014 Austin High School Maroon Band, ninety-one boys and seventy-one girls took the field together as a marching band.<sup>28</sup> Seventy-four years after the decision to allow girls to march in the band, it seems unreal to think of a time when female participation seemed dangerous and “strenuous.”<sup>29</sup> Female directors like Verna Covington, Paula Crider, and Verda Herrington, so successful and accomplished, make one forget that their positions as directors of bands were once viewed as inconceivable.

Before her death in 1957, suffragist Jane Y. McCallum described the reasons she fought so fervently for women to have the right to vote. “We never said that women would improve the world, though in our hearts we believed it.”<sup>30</sup> No longer strictly the domain of men, voting booths and marching bands are now among the places where women can not only participate and succeed, but also lead in new directions.

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<sup>28</sup> Interview by author, AHS Director Brian Frock, March 2014.

<sup>29</sup> “Recommendations Concerning Girls as Members of the Austin High School Band.”

<sup>30</sup> Flynn, 130.

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