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Age isn't slowing these band members down

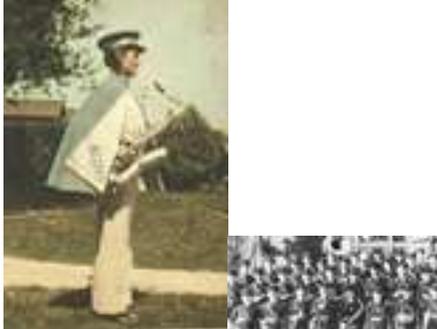
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By Bill Morem | bmorem@thetribunenews.com

OK, Sherman, it's time to get into the WABAC Machine and travel to San Luis Obispo, circa 1874. That's the year the SLO Military Band was formed, a brassy outfit that would eventually be known 134 years later as the San Luis Obispo County Band.

Fast forward to Paso Robles, circa 1922, when Henrietta Brown is born. Her father, a Brit by the name of Joseph F. Brown, has Joe Brown's Orchestra, in which he plays saxophone at dances around the North County.

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Fast forward a few years and Henrietta is learning how to play sax in fifth grade, and goes on to perform with school bands in King City and Paso Robles. After graduation, Henrietta marries Wilmar Tognazzini, a teacher with a musical ear for piano.

In addition to starting a family that would ultimately include 10 children — eight of whom are still living — Henrietta and Wilmar began playing music in the Morro Bay Community Orchestra, formed in 1954. During this time, like her father, Henrietta played in a dance band with husband Wilmar called Tog's Orchestra.

Sons Mark and Noel played drums while Wilmar played piano and Henrietta played E flat baritone sax, alto sax and clarinet.

Later, daughter Anne picked up the saxophone and helped found the Atascadero Community Band, in which Henrietta also played.

Thirty-one years ago, Henrietta began her tenure as a member of the SLO County Band, while also playing in the Morro Bay White Caps Band. She's still riffing with both groups at the age of 90.

Are you beginning to see a pattern here, Sherman?

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It's no secret that school districts are grappling with money issues and that the arts and music programs are in the crosshairs of budget cutters. When it comes down to a choice between teaching math or music, well, there doesn't seem to be any argument; math will take precedence every time.

Yet music is mathematical in its construction, and once you enter the world of cadence, harmony, pause and rest — as our youngsters have since the time of Confucius (who noted: "Music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without") you can begin to get a sense of why Henrietta Tognazzini has been a devotee for 80 years.

As she says, when she begins playing her alto sax, she enters another world, a world where aches, pains and inertia end and her energy levels seem boundless.

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Bob Wiese, a cohort of Henrietta's in the county band and White Caps, is a poster boy for the belief that music is something you can do your entire life.

Bob, 91, had an almost 60-year hiatus in his bassoon-playing life — having dropped it in 1941 until, on a whim, he bought another bassoon in 1998 on eBay. After a little practice, he was back in the groove.

Coincidentally, Bob's daughter, Nipomo resident Patti Dolengewicz, had also picked up the bassoon while in school, not knowing that her father had played the same instrument decades before, and was blown away when he started playing

again. Patti, a member of the SLO County Band, challenged him to join the group and they continue to play their bassoons side by side in that 50-plus member ensemble.

For Bob, playing music is just as much a “medicine of the mind” as John A. Logan noted, as being involved in the camaraderie of those who are also players.

And there seems to be yet another positive aspect of staying musical, at least within the wind instrument realm: These two nonagenarians look and act like youngsters.

Henrietta, for instance, has the skin tone and glow of someone half her age. Daughter Anne — who with son Gabriel also played baritone sax in various bands — grinned when she said, “We all got a laugh out of a dermatologist recently assuming she has been good about staying out of the sun all her life — because she’s always been happiest outside and goes out whenever she can.”

Her fountain of youth? “Playing saxophone with all of that controlled breathing has been great for my mother, both mentally and physically.”

So, what’s the value of music, whether taught in schools or picked up on the streets? How about generations of joy?

In other words, priceless.

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