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PIPER & DRUMMER

September 2004, Vol. 21, Issue 4

£57.00
US\$55.00
£3.50

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september'04

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On the cover: Edith MacPherson of Inverness, 1947.



SANDY KEITH

THE P&D INTERVIEW



Sandy Keith as a 16-year-old College of Piping student in Glasgow.

From Paisley to Paradise: we visit with a man on a mission to teach good piping to anyone who wants to learn.

Some of our favourite interviews are those with the unsung, or, more aptly, the *less*-sung heroes of the piping world: those who have made a difference well beyond simply winning lots of prizes, those who have contributed to the prosperity of the art in different, though equally extraordinary, ways.

One of these people is Alexander "Sandy"

Keith. Since the early 1980s, Sandy Keith has been the instructor and director of the piping program at Dunedin High School on Florida's gorgeous Gulf Coast. Employed by the City of Dunedin, Keith has built the program to the point where it supports five bands (including a contending Grade 2 band), dozens of soloists, and hundreds who have learned piping and drumming through the system. Indeed, thanks chiefly to Sandy Keith's efforts, central Florida is a hotbed of emerging piping and drumming talent.

Born in Glasgow, Sandy Keith started piping at age 11, and was one of the earliest students at the recently-formed College of Piping in Glasgow. His main teacher was the principal and co-founder of the College, the legendary Seumas MacNeill. Keith also worked with other College tutors, such as Bob Hardie; John Garroway; Charlie Scott; and Archie MacNeill, uncle of Seumas and the famous blind piper. He was later to receive one-to-one tuition from the renowned composer Peter MacLeod Sr., who, like his pupil, was known for his straight-up personality.

When he was 17 Sandy Keith immigrated to Canada, leaving Scotland as a rising-star on the solo scene. Settling with his parents in Hamilton, Ontario, Keith competed at the open level and was a regular prize-winner. He gained further instruction from Major Archie Cairns in Hamilton, and went on to join the Royal Canadian Air Force where he received more instruction from ex-Scots Guards pipe-majors J.T. Mackenzie and George Grant.

In Ontario, Sandy Keith's ultimately led the now-defunct Erskine Pipe Band, taking it from Grade 3 to Grade 1. Many prominent pipers played under Keith in Erskine, including Scott MacAulay, now director of the College of Piping & Scottish Performing Arts in Summerside, Prince Edward Island; and Ian Whitelaw, a well-

known soloist who now lives in California.

In 1982, Sandy Keith was recruited to take over the piping programs with the City of Dunedin, Florida, and idyllic and quiet community just north of Clearwater. As Piping Director, he manages three educational programs, and directs the Dunedin Middle School and Dunedin High School pipe bands, as well as an adult Grade 4 band. He is also Pipe-Major of the Grade 2 City of Dunedin Pipe Band.

Sandy Keith is active politically, and serves as president of the Southern United States Pipe Band Association. He judges around North America, and returns at least once a year to Canada to adjudicate a major championship on the Pipers & Pipe Band Society of Ontario's circuit.

Known for his direct, no-nonsense, and occasionally irascible personality, Sandy Keith is always lively conversation. One knows where they stand with him, and his somewhat brusque nature is remarkably alluring. He gains respect from people who take the time to get to know him mainly because he gets things done. He has little time for those who talk and don't act on their words.

In this *Piper & Drummer* interview, Sandy Keith's words carry weight, because he can back them up with substance.

Piper & Drummer: Tell us about your piping background. When did you start? Who taught you?

Sandy Keith: I started my piping career as a Boys Brigade piper when I was 11-years-old. Good playing was not the primary function of the band; get ready, get out on parade and if you don't know the music, just "dummy it." My uncle, Andrew Keith, worked with George Bell, a piper with the Kenmure Pipe Band in Scotland and later the pipe-major of the Parlin & District Pipe Band in New Jersey. He arranged for my first set of bagpipes. The piper who delivered the pipes asked me to play a tune. On finishing, my mother asked, "How did he do, do you think he will be a good piper?" I will never forget his answer:



As Pipe-Major of the Hamilton Police Pipe Band, Hamilton, Ontario, c. 1970.

"Maybe someday . . ." The conversation that followed I believe set up one of the best things that ever happened to me—I enrolled at the College of Piping and met Seumas MacNeill.

P&D: So that must have made you one of the earliest students at the College of Piping. What was the College like in the 1950s?

SK: The College was first located in Glasgow on Pitt Street, in the basement of an old tenement building. I remember my first lessons were from other students who were called junior instructors. They had earned their first certificate by learning five tunes. Learning 12 tunes promoted you to senior student instructor. After a few months, I started to spend time with the masters: John Garroway, Charlie Scott, Bob Hardie, Seumas MacNeill, and sometimes "Blind Archie" MacNeill, with Seumas as my principal teacher.

The College was divided into two nights. Monday night was run by Tommy Pearston and Wednesday night was run by Seumas MacNeill. Students paid six-pence a night, and this wasn't for tuition but just to cover the cost of electricity and coal. This principle

stayed with me, as I have never charged anyone for a lesson. The teachers were paid by the city of Glasgow. Every piece of music we studied had to be written out by the student, and this is a great method of teaching. Even with the availability of music books today, I still insist that my students write out music.

P&D: You then went on to work with the legendary Peter MacLeod Sr. Could you tell us about him.

SK: I first met Peter MacLeod as a young player. On Saturday nights, all the young competing players would be at the Highlanders Institute on Elmbank Street. We would sit in the back row, listen to the professionals and wait to be asked to play. You might not be asked to play until later in the evening or sometimes not at all. Some of the young players who attended were John Graham, Iain MacFadyen, Norman Gillies, and Tom Hutton. It was a really big thing to be asked to get up to play.

One night, after playing, Peter told me to come to him for lessons, starting the next Saturday morning. He never asked me if I wanted to take lessons. Then I had the predicament of going home and telling my mother that Peter



The Erskine Pipe Band, c. 1978. Sandy Keith is first on the left in the middle row. Scott MacAulay is fourth from the left, middle row.

MacLeod, someone she had never heard about, had asked me to come for lessons. I was already going to the College and my mother thought the world of Seumas. She thought it would be a slight to go to anyone else. Peter did not have many students, but one of them had recently joined the Scots Guards. I believe at that time he was teaching only four pipers. It was an honor to be selected by Peter.

P&D: Was he really as crotchety as he's made out to be?

P&D: Well, I don't ever remember him telling me that I was playing well. I remember times that I would be in his bedroom, playing, and would think, "He's gone to sleep." He would sit in front of a big fireplace stretched out in the chair with his eyes closed. But if I played anything wrong, I found out that he *wasn't* sleeping. His wooden leg would bounce and vibrate off of the floor and he would scream and shout.

On one occasion his daughter ran in and said, "Father, father, is something the matter?" He told her to leave in no uncertain terms. She whispered to me, "Don't worry about him, he gets that way when he gets mad—he's harmless." This did not make me feel any better.

because he would act so violent and shout so much. He attended all the indoor amateur contests in Glasgow and if you played well, he was very pleased and proud as a peacock about it. But, if your playing did not please him, he would get up and stomp out, letting everyone know he was unhappy. One year I was assigned to play three of his tunes: "Willie MacLean," "Dora MacLeod," and "Major Manson." Once, he stopped me while I was playing and screamed, "Never play that march again!" The only problem with my playing of the tune was a weak bubbly note. Cranky, yes, I believe so, but he was a genius and someone who took me to another level.

P&D: When and why did you decide to immigrate to Canada?

SK: My uncle and my stepfather worked for a steel company in Glasgow, and in 1952 they and many others found themselves out of work. Work was available at other steel companies in England; Buffalo, New York; or Hamilton, Ontario. They decided on Hamilton and moved there soon after. I joined them two months later, settling in across the street from George Henderson.

The bagpipes have probably decided what steps my life has taken since then. I spent two years with Archie Cairns and never have forgotten the things he taught me. Then, at 19 I joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. I was lucky to spend five years in the Air Force with J.T. MacKenzie and George Grant, both ex-pipe-majors of the Guards. This was probably the biggest break I ever had in piping. My education in how to play with and run a pipe band all came from J.T. MacKenzie. The first band of my own was located in Trenton, Ontario, where I started an Air Force Pipe Band. Over the next two years I found out just how difficult it was to be a pipe-major.

While competing that summer, I was approached by a man from the Hamilton Police Department and was asked if I would be interested in joining the department. I did eventually join, and took over the Hamilton Police Pipe Band. I enjoyed not only the piping, but the police work. I took to detective work like a duck to water. This Pipe Band became the most sought-after show band in Ontario, but I yearned for the competition field, so I joined the Erskine Pipe Band.

P&D: You were Pipe-Major of Erskine for many years, took it to Grade 1, and then it sort of folded up. Can you tell us about that?

SK: The Erskine band started in 1971, with George Dobie, the first Pipe-Major, and pipers Hugh McLean, Hugh McLean Jr., Jack McLeod, Scott MacAulay, Ian Whitelaw and me. The band's first competition was in Alma, Michigan, where we won two first prizes in Grade 3. The band did well that year and was promoted to Grade 2 the next year, which was when I took over as Pipe-Major. The new band started to attract many good pipers and drummers, such as Bill Hilbert, his wife Rosemary Nodwell, Diane Eller, Davey Moore, Kelly Buckley and others. Eventually promoted to Grade 1, our first good prize was a third place at Maxville that year.

In 1981 I was offered the job in Dunedin Florida and after much soul-searching, I decided to move. Leaving



An early shot of the Erskine Pipe Band with Grade 3 prizes.

Erskine did not come easy. I knew the track-record of other bands that lost their long-time pipe-major. Luckily many of the pipers and drummers found good homes in other bands.

P&D: How did the Dunedin program discover you?

SK: My attraction to Florida started in 1977. I spent my first of many trips to Florida while I was a police officer working in Hamilton. I chose the Clearwater/Dunedin area after hearing good things about it from other officers, and knew that Sandy MacPhee lived there and was teaching bagpipes in the Dunedin school system. I was so in love with Florida I bought a condominium in Clearwater and began visiting three or four times a year. I enjoyed the weather and the laid-back atmosphere of Dunedin.

During this time I found myself helping out with the Dunedin Highland Games committee and spending more and more time teaching the school's students. In 1979, while judging in Orlando, I was offered the job of Piping Director for the City of Dunedin. While waiting for a visa, the teaching job changed hands two more times. I arrived in Dunedin as a permanent

resident in January 1982. I found the calibre of playing quite good. It was obvious that Sandy MacPhee and later Ed Krintz had done a good job. These students had been well taught.

P&D: What's the Dunedin program like? Are you free to establish the curriculum by yourself?

SK: Three separate piping programs operate in the City of Dunedin. The Dunedin Middle School Program, with students ranging in ages from 10 to 14, has a Grade 5 band consisting of nine pipers and six learners. The student-learners join the program throughout the year and are used to supplement the graduating class.

The Dunedin High School Program, ages 14 to 18, has two bands, a Grade 5 band with 12 pipers and a Grade 4 band with 10 pipers. The new pipers come from the graduating middle school seniors. Both the middle school and the high school integrate their pipe bands with their school's marching bands, so it is necessary to teach not only traditional piping music but to assist the band directors in blending the pipes with other band instruments.

The City of Dunedin program has two adult pipe bands, a Grade 4 band



Sandy and Ken Eller in Hunter Mountain.

Bands Sandy Keith has played with

- 1953–55—Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders of Canada
- 1955–1960—RCAF Rockliffe
- 1962–1964—RCAF Trenton (pipe-major)
- 1965–1981—Hamilton Police (pipe-major)
- 1971–1981—Erskine (pipe-major)
- 1981–present—City of Dunedin (pipe-major)



City of Dunedin Pipe Band, EPCOT Center in Disney World.

with 12 pipers and a Grade 2 band with 15 pipers. About 10 per cent of the high school graduates stay in the program as adults. The Grade 4 band, the Elliot band, serves as the feeder band for the Grade 2 City of Dunedin Pipe Band.

My time is spent equally between the schools and the city pipe bands. The success of the programs stems from the use of adult and senior pipers teaching throughout the school system with me. The curriculum I set up just after arriving in Dunedin has changed very little over the years. The school system

Sandy Keith's teachers

- Seumas MacNeill
- John Garroway
- Charlie Scott
- Archie MacNeill
- Bob Hardie
- Peter MacLeod Sr.
- Archie Cairns
- J.T. McKenzie
- George Grant

and the city have always been very supportive.

P&D: How many kids have you taught over the last 20 years?

SK: A great many people have gone through the program. Now I seem to be getting the sons and daughters of past students. I give talks at the elementary schools in Dunedin, explaining the bagpipes, the Scottish heritage of the city and of Scotland. The young kids are given a question and answer period, where you hear some amazing questions. One such question turned out to be, "Do you know my Dad?" Luckily, a teacher on stage whispered his name and luckily I knew his dad well. The young boy eventually took up the drums and today is a real talent. His dad is our lead-drummer, Charley Street.

Another day, I was talking to a small group of children. My grandson, Daniel, was in the class. Questions came fast and furious, but nothing from Daniel. Finally I said, "Okay, just one more question," and Daniel's hand went up. I thought, "Great, finally a good question." His question turned out to be, "Is Grandma picking me up after school?"

Yes, I have had many students and I have enjoyed every one of them.

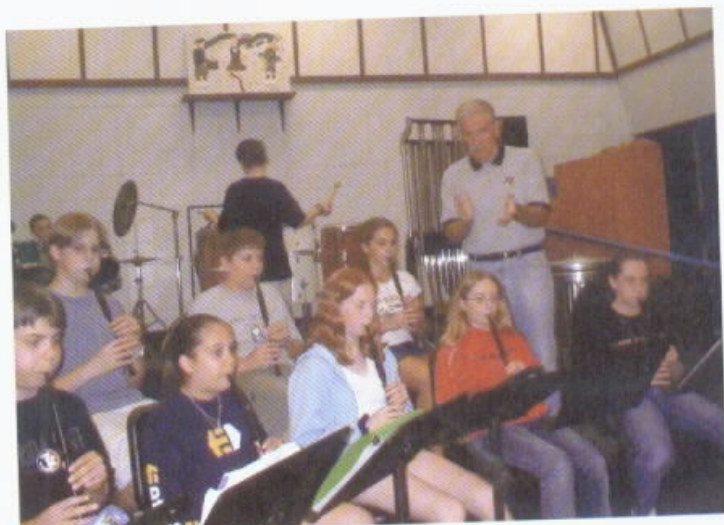
P&D: What about all that hot weather? It must be great year-round, but it's bound to be too hot to play for the summer. Any complaints?

SK: I have no complaints about the hot weather. But you're absolutely right—playing the pipes during the summertime in Florida outdoors is something you don't normally do. The Southern United States Pipe Band Association's [SUSPBA] playing season runs from November to April for just that reason. We practice indoors during the summer. And if we're planning to travel to Scotland, Ontario, or other out-of-state games, we practice outdoors on Saturday mornings, under large shade trees.

You can't beat the weather. It's true that you can't always play outside, but I still love it here.

P&D: What's your philosophy for teaching kids? What would you recommend to teachers wanting to get the best out of their students?

SK: One thing I can say is that the art of teaching the Highland bagpipe has not been studied or documented like



Teaching at the Dunedin Middle School, 2003.

other instruments. That is why there are so many different methods of teaching. But, if the job is done properly, then that method is a good method, and results tend to prove the method to be good or bad. In other words, there is no absolutely correct method.

Every student is different and should be treated differently. I try to make every one of the young players feel like they are my favourite. That's not an easy job, but it's possible. Being treated as a special individual produces a hard-working student with good work habits. We must not forget how hard it was for us, so don't let them ever get discouraged. As students progress, I feel my job changes from teacher to coach. I still control tune selections but now encourage the student to have opinions about the music. Conversation at this level instills confidence.

How many times have you heard the question, "How does it go?" A good teacher emphasizes theory and technique by incorporating music theory at every session—speak the language. This is absolutely vital. Correct finger posture from day one is another must. I personally start every student and work with them until I am

sure they have the correct fingering.

I've found that a piper's life is made up of three phases: 1) learning, 2) studying and playing, and 3) passing on the knowledge to others.

P&D: The SUSPBA is an established organization in the shadow of the much larger EUSPBA. Any political strife between the two organizations?

SK: Though the numbers aren't huge compared with other associations, the SUSPBA has been building slowly and solidly over the past 20 years. The cooperation level between us has always been very good. Additionally, since the advent of the Alliance of North American Pipe Band Associations [ANAPBA], the cooperation level has grown and grown between all the associations. This past weekend two of our bands competed at two EUSPBA games and were very well received. In my opinion, the open door policy works well with all the ANAPBA member associations.

P&D: Would you ever move back to Ontario?

SK: No, I don't believe I would move back. I manage to get up to Ontario and Prince Edward Island every summer and look forward to these trips. I enjoy Ontario, and I love going back to hear

the bands play. Going up to judge the Ontario bands is always a big thrill, such as at the Fort Erie Games and the Alma Games where I have judged now for the past seven years.

P&D: What about judging? What's your approach to it?

SK: I started judging in March 1962. I had just returned from Goose Bay, Labrador, after two years of not even touching a set of pipes. I worked hard for one week in preparation for the Toronto Indoor Games. The day was full of unfortunate problems as to the playing order, since it wasn't as well-organized as today's Pipers & Pipe Band Society of Ontario [PPBSO]. Prior to competing in the march contest, I was able to listen to the player before me, John MacDonald. He played flawlessly on an excellent pipe. I played my tune and played well. But when the results came out I was shocked. I placed second and John MacDonald didn't even place. Not being afraid to complain, I asked the then president of the society, Ian Burraway, "How could this injustice happen?" His comment was, "Do you think you could do any better?" Thus, I became a judge.

Thankfully things have changed. I have written many piping examinations since then, including the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association's Intermediate



Sandy Keith stresses fundamentals with all of his pupils at the Dunedin schools in Florida.

Certificate some 12 years ago. Now I take great delight in setting up the examinations, both written, oral, and playing, for the SUSPBA. I judge throughout Canada and across the United States from California to Florida. Judging is a passion of mine. My only disappointment is not being asked to judge yet in the U.K.

I have been asked many times, aside from a solid piping background and examination skills, "What makes a good judge?" My answer is always, "People who have the strength of their own convictions and who feel sure of their decision-making process."

P&D: Would you ever move back to Scotland?

SK: Another no. I am asked this question many times and always seem to give the same response: I love going back to Scotland every year, but Florida is my home.

P&D: You must be at least thinking about retirement. What's the future of the Dunedin schools piping and drumming program?

SK: The word retirement comes up mostly when I am traveling to games, whether playing or judging. It's usually mentioned by people who I think are after my job! I personally do not feel I am ready to retire at the present time. I still play with the City of Dunedin band, and feel that I am still capable of showing talented young pipers how to play. If I thought that I was a liability to the band, I would quit playing tomorrow.

Recently I was playing at a Saturday night ceilidh and a fellow judge remarked, with astonishment, "You play very well!" and I replied "Why the big surprise?" As you age, people automatically think that your skills diminish. Of course they diminish, but the ability to express and give feeling to the music never leaves. I am amazed at the dexterity of some of these young pipers today. I could never play that fast. I like doing what I do, I enjoy the kids, the competition field and I enjoy playing myself. The future of the Dunedin's piping program is still Sandy Keith. **pd**



Sharing a bevvvy at the Lord Todd's Bar at Strathclyde University in Glasgow with friends, including Iain MacLellan, former Strathclyde Police pipe-major.



Preparing a student to compete at the Sarasota, Florida, games, 2004.