

Music Festival A Saint John Cultural Tradition

by Jane Barry of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation

During 2010 Saint John will be celebrated as a Cultural Capital in many ways. It is fitting that the New Brunswick Competitive Festival of Music (NBCFM) be one of the sectors of the arts which are profiled. Seventy five years ago, music was flourishing in our community and had been for many years but competition outside the province presented problems. Participation in a competitive music festival sponsored by the Halifax Conservatory was open to all Maritime musicians but there were few competitors from New Brunswick.

Adjudicators, Sir Ernest MacMillan of Toronto and Sir Hugh Robertson of Glasgow, Scotland, along with Professor Harold Hamer of Mount Allison College encouraged Maud Cowan Cormier, Mrs. J. Gordon Likely, Louise Knight and members of Saint John's Ladies Morning Musical Club to galvanize local supporters, including members of the Rotary and Gyro clubs.

The "Competitive Festival of Music, New Brunswick" was subsequently founded in 1936, with a commitment to hold province-wide events annually. Dr. C.W. MacMillan was named president and Judge Benjamin R. Guss drew up the first constitution. Miss Amelia Haley, chairman of music for the School Board, arranged for the use of Saint John High School's piano at no cost. The NBCFM has carefully collected and preserved its historical documents (minutes of meetings, programmes, etc.) since 1936, now entrusted to the NB Museum's Library Archives and available to researchers.

In 1937 there were 206 entries in violin, piano, brass, voice, school singing groups, sponsored by the Ladies Morning Musical Club, the Saint John Rotary Club, and the Saint John Gyro Club. The clubs played a vital role with financial contributions and the efforts of members who served as Executive members and volunteers, the lifeblood of the festival for years. The first festival adjudicator, Reginald Stewart of Toronto, was a Scotsman and well-known pianist, choral and symphonic conductor. Archives record participants and organizers came from all corners of the province: Fredericton, Sackville, Moncton, Bathurst, Edmundston, Newcastle, Campbellton, St. Stephen, St. Andrews, Sussex and Woodstock.

Throughout the World War II years it continued. In 1943, the festival revised its name to The New Brunswick Competitive Festival of Music. As the NBCFM expanded its event, it became challenging for some participants to travel and miss school, giving the impetus for other communities to organize similar events.

The NBCFM has given many a young musician encouragement and support to excel. Over the years, many generous contributors and supporters of the arts and music have provided for prizes and scholarships, valued at over \$15,000 annually. Francis Chaplin, of Newcastle, studied at Mt. Allison, then Juilliard, becoming one of Canada's eminent violinists/teachers; Kelsey Jones, who later founded and conducted the Saint John Symphony Orchestra; Corey Smith of Moncton who became a charter member of the N.B. Federation of Music Festivals; Frank, Edna and John Little of Campbellton, siblings of George Little, nationally known choir director, organist, educator and founder of the Montreal Bach Choir and a Quebec bilingual summer music camp. Nadine Lane, Festival Administrator, notes that her uncle, Robert Stilwell, father of a well-known Toronto opera singer appears in Festival archives as one of their accompanists. Philip Thomson, Richard Thomson, Jane Gormley, Thomas Mennier, Lance Ouellette and Measha Gosman, all won the coveted Provincial Star's Centennial Trophy. Other achievers include Mary Lee McKenna, Robert Bean, Dr. Kevin Langford, Joanne Buckley, John Buckley, Jeffrey Parker, Jennifer Robinson, Stepan Arman, Gregory Gallagher, Pascale Beaudin, the Saint John Rotary Junior Men's Ensemble, to name but a few.

Today the NBCFM runs like a well-oiled machine, with countless volunteers, some who have served for decades, covering six venues in churches and schools over twelve days, with a budget of over \$50,000. In an average year approximately 4,000 youngsters are given the experience of performing, something they and their parents often remember for a lifetime. Some recent presidents include Shirley Dysart, Kay MacLean, Claire Driscoll and Chris Titus. The NBCFM has been volunteer-run but this year as plans get underway for a 75th anniversary, President Chris Titus explains they have hired an administrator, Nadine Lane, who comes with a wealth of Festival-related volunteer experience. 2011 will see the Annual spring Festival, Provincials in June and a fall Gala. Mark your calendars for April 19-May 1, 2010 for this year's Festival.



Photo: Kay MacLean, Chris Titus, Shirley Dysart, (seated) and Claire Driscoll (standing, right) have served as Presidents of the New Brunswick Competitive Festival of Music and look forward to the annual event April 19-May 1. As they prepare for its 75th anniversary in 2011, Nadine Lane (standing left) has joined as Festival Administrator.



Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca