

“It has been a wonderful thing - being a band man - I’m glad I wasn’t anything else!” These words, a reflection in retrospect, were spoken by Karl L. King on the occasion of this 50th anniversary as director of the Fort Dodge, Iowa Municipal Band as he looked back on his career as bandmaster in Fort Dodge, Iowa, after those eighteen years spent previously in study and experience with military and circus bands. Mr. King looked back on the wonderment of a lifetime set to music, much of it composed by his own pen.

First published by The Instrumentalist Company shortly after Mr. King’s passing at the age of 80, Thomas J. Hatton’s book *Karl L. King* provides the reader the opportunity to explore the life and career and offers interesting insights into who he was and about his remarkable legacy for the band world. Since the book was first published, an entire generation of band aficionados has grown up, most of them knowing little, or nothing, about Karl L. King other than the fact that he wrote some of our country’s best loved marches. Those of us who were privileged to know Mr. King and play under his direction in the famed Fort Dodge Municipal Band have fond memories of him, not only as the great march composer and bandmaster, but also as the kind, gentle, and colorful man he was.

The American School Band Directors Association Education Foundation is privileged to once again make this wonderful book available to lovers of march music and expresses sincere thanks to The Instrumentalist Company for assigning the rights to the ASBDA Education Foundation.

Ross A. Leeper  
ASBDA Education Foundation Inc.

2011



## *Table of Contents*

Preface .....	vii
Michigan on Parade .....	1
Hometown Boy .....	13
Circus Days .....	29
Barnum and Bailey's Favorite .....	53
Hawkeye Glory .....	71
Trooping Days .....	89
Hawkeye Fair .....	109
The Wanderer .....	131
The Melody Shop .....	153
Fame and Fortune .....	175
Appendix .....	197

Complete Works of Karl King  
The Karl L. King Municipal Band, 1920-1970  
Bibliography  
About the Author

## *Preface*

In November, 1972 I brought my family to Fort Dodge, Iowa with the intention of writing "a comprehensive biography" of Karl L. King. Now that the project is completed, I find that, as usual, my aspirations were much too ambitious. It is, perhaps, presumptuous to suppose that any man's life may be "comprehensively" treated in a few hundred pages. Karl King's life was so rich and varied, and he knew and loved so many people, that such an attempt, in his case, is doomed to failure from the start. I have discovered that there are hundreds of people who considered themselves his special and dear friends. It has been, of course, impossible to give each of these the extended treatment he deserves or to recount the numerous kindnesses that Karl performed for those about him over a period of eighty years.

To all of Karl's many friends I can only say that I have tried to give as complete an account of his life as possible while, at the same time, keeping the manuscript within reasonable and marketable limits. If I have left you out entirely or given you scant treatment, I can only plead that I have tried to select those incidents and personages which seemed to me the most important to the understanding of King's personality or the most colorful and interesting to readers who did not have the privilege of knowing this fascinating man.

In a similar manner, I would like to apologize to the many members and ex-members of the Karl King Band whose names do not appear in the text of this book. Once again I must plead that to give extended treatment to all of the musicians who played under Karl King would be to write several dozen volumes. As I myself took part in many of the incidents relating to the band, I am no doubt biased in favor of men whom I knew well and who were, and still are, my friends or men about whom my friends spoke with affection and enthusiasm. I have tried as much as possible to overcome such slanting in my discussion of the band, but I realize that a completely objective viewpoint is probably impossible for me. I hope that the immediacy of firsthand experience will, to some extent, make up for this lack of objectivity; and to compensate somewhat for it I have included as an appendix a

list as complete as possible of the men who played under Karl King in the Fort Dodge Municipal Band over a period of fifty years. I recognize, however, that even this list is probably incomplete.

In writing this biography I had the invaluable aid of a great many very kind people. I would first like to extend a very deep thank you to Mrs. Karl L. King, who allowed me access to a collection of memorabilia and data that would have taken me years to accumulate. In fact, many of the records would be impossible to find today in any other place, I would also like to thank this fine lady for reading the manuscript, for her many helpful suggestions and corrections, and for the many kindnesses she showed to me and my family during our stay in Fort Dodge. I must echo her son in saying that if Karl King could see his wife today — and I, too, have a feeling he can — I am sure that he would be very proud of her.

In addition, I would like to extend thanks to Mr. Karl L. King, Jr. Although at this writing we have never met and have been separated by several thousand miles, I feel that we have become good friends. I found the analysis of his father's personality and philosophy which he wrote to me in two long letters extremely useful in the writing of this book, and I feel that I am safe in saying that without the encouragement he extended to me through several telephone conversations, this project might never have been finished.

I would also like to thank the past and present members of the Fort Dodge Municipal Band for their help and encouragement, especially Mr. John Magennis, Mr. Duane Olson, Mr. John Erickson, Dr. Robert Forbes, Mr. Ralph Peer, Mr. Russel Thorson, Mr. Carl Pray, Mr. Bill Hayes, and Professor W.B. Green for taking hours of valuable time to sit down and talk with me about the band and Karl King. Unless otherwise noted, it is these interviews that supplied me with all quoted material. In most cases these talks were accompanied by coffee and sometimes even dinner — I am sure that few researchers have enjoyed their work quite so much as I. I am also grateful to Mr. Kenneth Carlson, the secretary of the Karl King Municipal Band, for allowing me access to

der Karl  
fty years.  
complete.  
f a great  
very deep  
to a col-  
me years  
ossible  
ank this  
pful sug-  
e showed  
ust echo  
y — and  
l be very

L. King,  
been sep-  
: become  
ality and  
extremely  
fe in say-  
through  
ver have

rs of the  
agement,  
in Erick  
Thorson,  
i for tak-  
about the  
interviews  
ses these  
linner —  
quite so  
he secre-  
access to

the band records in compiling the appendix to this book and for personally going over the lists with me.

I must thank a number of Karl King's good friends for their contributions to this book. Professor Karl Holvik and Mr. Edward Breen graciously granted me interviews, and Professor Holvik kindly gave me access to the correspondence he received from Mr. King. Thanks must also go to Mr. Paul Yoder for a long and extremely useful letter and for permission to use the letters Mr. King had written him. I am also grateful to Professor William Revelli, Mr. George Cavender, and the Music Department of the University of Michigan for providing me with information on Michigan Band Day, 1960. In addition, I must express my appreciation to Mr. Jess Girardi for his encouragement and suggestions. Mr. Girardi is writing a dissertation on Karl King's music, and we were laborers at the same task. Once again, a man I have never met face to face has become my friend.

I would like to give many thanks to Mrs. Francis Tierney, who typed the manuscript of this book and to my wife, Lois, who in addition to occupying our three children while their father was working, proofread the manuscript, ran errands, did this and that, and in general proved that I was absolutely correct when, thirteen years ago, I decided she would be indispensable to my life from then on.

Finally, I would like to thank Southern Illinois University for granting me a sabbatical leave with which to undertake this project, even though there must have been some who wondered why a specialist in Middle English literature would want to write the biography of a contemporary composer. And I would like to close by expressing the gratitude of myself and my family to all the citizens of Fort Dodge, Iowa who made our stay in the city so enjoyable. In the past nine months we have discovered that Thomas Wolf was not entirely correct. There are times when you can go home again.

Fort Dodge, Iowa  
June, 1973

## *Michigan on Parade*

October 8, 1960 was a beautiful autumn day in Ann Arbor, Michigan. On the University of Michigan campus eighty thousand people had jammed into Michigan Stadium that sunny afternoon to watch the Wolverines beat the Duke Blue Devils 31 to 6. Those who did not immediately head for the refreshment stands at half time, however, witnessed a spectacle that was in many ways more unique and impressive than any college football game could ever be. As the two football teams trotted to the locker rooms, a massive section of the stands began to disgorge its contents onto the playing field. It was Band Day at the University of Michigan, and that bright afternoon the largest massed band concert in history was about to take place. One hundred and eighty-eight high school bands had descended upon Ann Arbor that morning; they were now about to play five numbers all together under the direction of one man.

Meredith Willson's famous seventy-six trombones would have paled into insignificance before this array, for here there were eleven hundred trombones, two thousand cornets, nine hundred horns, six hundred euphoniums, fifteen hundred saxophones, twenty-five hundred clarinets, one thousand flutes, seven hundred and fifty sousaphones,

one thousand drummers, and an additional fifteen hundred twirlers who entertained the crowd before the game started. Four hundred buses had transported this army a total of twenty-five thousand miles to the game. As the spectators watched, the University of Michigan band, stationed on the fifty yard line, played "Barnum and Bailey's Favorite," and the entire playing field began to fill with colorful band uniforms in golds, reds, blacks, whites, and every color of the rainbow. At last they were all grouped in places assigned to them long before by the Director of the University of Michigan Band, Dr. William Revelli, and his staff. A fifteen-foot-high podium had been placed on the fifty yard line in front of the home stands. The drummers of the Michigan Band launched into a long roll, and the man who was about to try to keep thirteen thousand high school musicians, all playing the same tune, in the same measure and on the same beat walked briskly up the steps.

If ever there was a man who looked physically capable of such a Herculean task, it was Karl L. King, the guest conductor that Saturday afternoon. Six feet tall and weighing over two hundred pounds, he carried himself with imposing dignity and a martial air. In spite of his sixty-nine years his step was still firm, and when he lifted his baton after mounting the podium, every one of those thirteen thousand young musicians could tell at once that here was a man who demanded and expected their absolute attention and concentration. The members of the University of Michigan Band who, positioned immediately in front of the podium, could get a closer look at their director, would have been able to see large dark eyes that were still piercing and sharp behind the sunglasses, a finely formed nose surmounting a gentle, almost delicate mouth, and a firmly jutting jaw tilted slightly upward to suggest confidence and strength. The hair under the gold-braided officer style cap was snowy white and the face was creased and lined, but if ever there was a man who looked like his



name, it was Karl King. Dressed in a navy blue military style uniform with medals gleaming on his chest and white gloves on his hands, he might have easily played the part of an admiral in a Hollywood war movie or a monarch in a musical comedy.

Karl King looked out over the vast sea of band uniforms and expectant young faces beneath him. He had had some doubts about the enterprise earlier. "I don't see how I'll ever keep them together on 'Night In June'," he had told his wife before boarding the train to Ann Arbor. Once on the podium, however, thirteen thousand musicians became just another band, and King had been leading bands for forty-four years. If he still had doubts, none showed in his manner. He waited for the last few bands to straggle down from their end zone seats. Then the baton in one of the gloved hands lifted sharply. "RAH!" roared out thirteen thousand voices. The noise echoed throughout the great stadium and quieted the crowd haggling over change for hot dogs or disputing the wisdom of a third down kick in the half just concluded. The little white stick came down firmly, and a great wall of sound rose from the playing field and rolled over the crowd. Thirteen thousand instruments hit the downbeat of "Drake Relays" march. The concert was under way.

They stayed together. They stayed together through "Drake Relays," through "True Blue," and through "Iowa Band Law" — all marches — and they even stayed together through the rubato "Night In June" serenade. The program concluded with what must have been in some ways the most impressive rendition of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" march ever produced. They didn't try to play the numbers very fast, for as one of his band leader friends once said, "Karl always had the sense to allow a massed band to find its own medium tempo. He didn't try to force it to accord with his own preconceived ideas." And it was probably not the most polished ren-

dering of any of the tunes (How do you get thirteen thousand musicians to play softly on a trio?). But one hundred and eighty-eight bass drummers kept banging away on more or less the same beat, and what came out of those thirteen thousand horns, drums, and reeds was easily recognizable as melody, harmony, and counterpoint. When the last mighty chord had died away, Karl King dropped his arms, stepped back, and shook hands with William Revelli. The largest massed band concert in the annals of music had become part of history.

Professor Revelli had selected Karl King to lead the great experiment because King was no stranger to massed bands. He had been leading them for thirty years, although none were ever as big as this. In 1960 alone he directed a total of thirty thousand bandsmen before a quarter of a million spectators. He had begun on September 17th at Band Day ceremonies at the University of Houston, where he had led seven thousand musicians. The next week he was at Purdue to direct ten thousand for the Purdue-U.C.L.A. game; and finally, he led the Michigan performance. However, it was not because of this experience alone that he was brought to Ann Arbor. King was also more familiar with the music the massed band was to play than any other man for he had written every one of the tunes except "Stars and Stripes Forever." They were a small part of the nearly three hundred compositions for band that he had composed since the publication of his first march in 1909. Among these was a march written especially for the University of Michigan and the Michigan Band, "Michigan on Parade." Thus, it was fitting that at a program dedicated to bands and band music the ceremonies be led by a man who, through his compositions, had probably done more for high school and college bands than any other individual.

And yet, the man who lifted his baton that day in Michigan was, in many respects, a strange study in paradoxes

and contradictions, for the leader who could keep thousands playing together never took a lesson in conducting in his life. When Karl King took the podium that afternoon, his marches, galops, and incidental music had been played by literally millions of high school and college musicians throughout America and, indeed, the world. Yet, this composer of hundreds of numbers never studied composing, arranging, or harmony. Seven years earlier he had been given an honorary Doctor of Music degree by Phillips University of Enid, Oklahoma; he was to receive distinguished service awards from such educational societies as the American School Band Directors' Association and Kappa Kappa Psi, the National Honorary Fraternity of College Bandsmen. He had judged hundreds of school band contests from primary through college and professional levels. The musicians who played for him called him "teacher," and his colleagues in the American Bandmasters' Association referred to him as "the philosopher." Yet, this man who was so much a part of the American school band movement never in his life played in a high school band. Indeed, he never attended high school, for Karl King's formal education ended with the eighth grade.

The deeper one goes into King's life, the more striking the contradictions become. He started his professional career leading the gypsy life of a circus musician and quickly reached the top in that rugged profession; yet he is probably best known for leading a single municipal band in the same town for over fifty years. A native of Ohio with strong roots in that state, he was later honored as a leading citizen of the state of Iowa. The man who led the band of the Greatest Show on Earth in New York's Madison Square Garden and who played for President Woodrow Wilson in Washington, D.C. spent fifty years living in a small Iowa town with a population less than half as large as the crowd which watched the Michigan Band Day. As a boy, he worked his way in Horatio Alger fashion from carrying

newspapers to owning a music publishing company. Later a major state highway bridge was named after him. Near the end of his life, he would say "My life has been a series of lucky accidents; I never did anything I didn't want to do." And in several respects he was absolutely right.

But for all his accomplishments — the hundreds of compositions, the famous bands conducted, the honors received — Karl King was at least as important for what he *was* as for what he *did*. "He taught us mostly by example," says J. Robert (Doc) Forbes, who began playing for King as a high school student and is now a highly successful osteopath. "He never moralized, but he always acted in such a way that he gave us to know that to behave badly was to behave stupidly, and that he expected us to be too smart to do this." "He had a knack that few people possess," says Johnny Magennis, who directed the Fort Dodge, Iowa Municipal Band before King took it over. "If someone would do or say something less than creditable to Karl, he would immediately go out of his way to make that man a friend, and usually he would succeed."

"He was the most successful and best loved man I've ever known," says his son, Karl King, Jr., and there is ample evidence to testify to the affection King won from musicians and lovers of band music in all walks of life. At his home in Fort Dodge there are hundreds of letters from people who considered themselves his special friends. Seven years after the 1960 Michigan concert, Karl was again scheduled to lead a massed band at Ann Arbor. Shortly before the event, however, he became seriously ill and was unable to keep the date. Every band that played in that event took the time to write King a letter of condolence and good wishes; in some bands all the individual members wrote. And when a disastrous fire wiped out the music library that Karl had assembled over fifty years, donations of money and music poured in from band directors all over the country, and Meredith Willson offered

Karl the loan of his entire library.

Yet King never curried favor with anyone, and he never sacrificed his principles. He actively disliked pretention and hypocrisy and had a wit sharp enough to expose and defuse phoniness even in the tensest situations. Instances of the King wit are legendary among band musicians. It was always deadpan, always dryly ironic, but never without a point; and usually that point was the exposure of some absurdity that other people were taking seriously. For example, there was the time at an American Bandmasters' Convention when eminent band leaders nearly came to blows over the problem of a definitive arrangement of "The Star Spangled Banner." Each service band championed its particular arrangement and other directors favored different versions; some wanted to play the anthem in B $\flat$  while others preferred C. Tempers were flaring and nerves and feelings growing ragged. Karl King had been sitting back listening to everyone else have his say. Finally, there was a tense silence with everybody glaring at everybody else. Suddenly Karl calmly drawled, "I don't see what all the fuss is about. Out in Fort Dodge, Iowa my band has played the National Anthem for forty years, and we've never worried about arrangements. We just fake it." The meeting exploded in laughter, and the issue of a definitive arrangement of the "Star Spangled Banner" was never again brought up in the ABA convention.

Everyone who knew and played for Karl has his own favorite "King story," and when musicians gather, these are trotted out and compared like treasured snapshots. "I am quite sure I never said half the things attributed to me," King remarked modestly at a banquet in honor of his seventy-fifth birthday. "If I did, I must have been a much wittier man than I thought I was." Even if some of the tales have been garbled in the telling and a few entirely invented, there isn't a man that won't swear that "such and such" were the very words that "teacher" spoke on his

favorite occasion. King was never simply a comic or a wise-cracker. He had so much dignity and such a sure sense of his own person that no one ever made the mistake of considering him frivolous or shallow. There was always a point to his humor, and it was never malicious — never aimed at hurting for the sake of hurting. Karl King enjoyed a good laugh, but he never sacrificed his own dignity or the feelings of his friends for a cheap joke.

In a profession in which temperament and emotion run rampant and are more easily excused than in most, King was entirely untemperamental. He detested emotional display and "artiness," partly because he felt such outbursts were usually phony, and partly because he believed that a musician's responsibility was primarily to the music he played and not to his own ego and its satisfaction. He was entirely "unflappable." "I've never known Karl King to lose his temper or be at a loss for words," says Ralph Peer, who played with King for thirty years. "No matter what the situation, he always found just the right thing to say to calm everybody down and get things back on the right track."

Peer's favorite example of King's ability to salvage awkward situations with just the right humorous phrase was an occasion at which this writer also happened to be present. One summer evening in the early 1950's the Fort Dodge Municipal Band with King conducting played a concert for a county fair in the little town of Alta, Iowa. The Alta Fair had been a regular date for the band twenty years earlier, but this particular concert marked the first time the band had returned since then. The occasion was the dedication of a new grandstand at the fairgrounds, and King had been asked to make a speech. The band played several numbers, and then Karl was introduced and took the microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, but the fairground happened to be immediately alongside a main railroad

track, and just as King spoke, a long freight train went through, the engineer laying on the whistle for all he was worth. Whatever Karl was about to tell the "ladies and gentlemen" was lost in its mournful wail. King waited a full five minutes while the freight train engineer played his whistle concert, and at last the cars rumbled off into the distance. Then into the awkward silence that followed, the man who was addressing a crowd at the Alta Fair for the first time in twenty years calmly drawled, "Well, I see the train is still on time."

But for all his humor, Karl King was essentially a serious man. He felt life — his own and the lives of others — was important, and he never ceased to study living both through his many associations with people and through books. Although Karl's formal education ended with the eighth grade, he never stopped reading. He was a student of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and he dabbled in a kind of pragmatic mysticism popular in America around the turn of the century. While he probably didn't read Walt Whitman, he was a man this poet would have taken to his heart. Like Whitman, King believed in the dignity and sacredness of each individual and in each man's responsibility to use to the utmost the talents with which his creator had endowed him. It was this philosophy — one which King seems to have worked out quite consciously — that was responsible for the strange mixture of dignity and humility in his personality which so impressed the people who knew him. King never shrugged off his own talent, but he always felt that it had come to him from some higher power. "Writing marches is a kind of temporary insanity with me," he once said. And because he took so little credit for his genius, he felt keenly that he had to use it for the benefit of others. Thus, he was a professional musician in the finest sense of the word, consistently sacrificing his own wishes and desires to what he felt were those of the people for whom he played and wrote.

And he knew music, especially the band music with which he worked. "No one ever second-guessed Karl King," says Duane Olson, who still plays baritone in the King Band. "Can you imagine anybody ever saying, 'Now, Karl, suppose we took that last march at a little brighter tempo'?" he asked me, and we both laughed at the absurdity of the suggestion. When Karl King stood in front of a band, he was always the boss, and his way was the only way. He expected his men to give as much of themselves to a performance as he himself did. "King never accepted excuses," says Olson. "If you made a mistake, you might apologize and he might graciously respond, but with him you either cut it or you didn't."

In fact "cutting it" was almost a creed with King. No excuses, no complaints — just buckle down and get the job done. He could forgive practically anything if a man was doing his best and playing his part, but if he felt a musician didn't care or couldn't be counted on, he had no use for him — at least as far as playing was concerned. Karl presented a concert in Fort Dodge on his eightieth birthday, which turned out to be only a few weeks before he died. A number of ex-members of his band came from all parts of the country sensing that this would be the last chance to watch "teacher" lead a band, and they were invited to sit in for the rehearsal and performance. The rehearsal did not go particularly well as long out-of-practice fingers and lips sought unsuccessfully to do what they had once done with ease. King himself was very sick, sicker than even he himself knew. He was old, tired, and gaunt, but about halfway through the second number, in a particularly bad place, he stopped the band and looked out over the familiar faces which had come so far just for him. "From here on," he said sharply, "all friendship ends. Now let's get with it." And for the next two hours he worked that band just as hard as any he had ever directed. King loved his friends, but he loved music and his profession even more.



usic with  
arl King,"  
the King  
ow, Karl,  
ghter tem-  
absurdity  
of a band,  
only way.  
elves to a  
epted ex-  
ou might  
with him

King. No  
id get the  
; if a man  
f he felt a  
he had no  
concerned.  
s eightieth  
eks before  
ne from all  
e the last  
they were  
ance. The  
of-practice  
t they had  
ick, sicker  
and gaunt,  
in a parti-  
d out over  
im. "From  
ow let's get  
that band  
g loved his  
even more

Karl King was, then, a completely unique personality — a prolific composer, a competent performer, an outstanding conductor, and equally important, a wit and a sage. When he died in Fort Dodge in March, 1971, tributes poured in from all parts of the country. Iowa's governor, Robert Ray, wrote, "Karl King was a master of this people's music, and it brings him a special kind of immortality that will last as long as human beings thrill to melody in the air."<sup>1</sup> Meredith Willson sent a poem:

Muffle the drums — mute the brasses  
Iowa has lost her royal son, King of band music.  
Our famous Karl is, no doubt, already at work  
forming choirs of angels into heavenly bands with  
the smiling approval of John Philip Sousa.<sup>2</sup>

King himself probably had the last word some time earlier. Near the end of his life he was bothered by a man of rather intense religious convictions who somehow had gotten the idea that Karl King needed to be "saved." King was a deeply religious man, but he felt that religion was a private matter and not one to be aired emotionally in public. Thus, for a while he fended off his "savior" with quips and half answers. At last, exasperated, the man said, "But Mr. King, you want to go to heaven don't you?" King gave him a long, thoughtful look and then drawled calmly, "Well . . . I have friends in both places." And although he was joking when he said it, he is probably right.

<sup>1</sup>Official statement of Governor Robert Ray, March 31, 1971, supplied to the author by the Office of the Governor. Printed in the *Fort Dodge Messenger*, April 1, 1971, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>*Fort Dodge Messenger*, April 1, 1971, p. 1.