

## **A Brief History of the PEI Music Festival Association (PEIMFA) 1946-1995**

The history of the PEI Music Festival Association is a fascinating account of one important element of PEI's cultural development. The story is not of the PEIMFA, itself, but of many things – the one and two room school houses, the development of arts education and cultural activity in the province, the significant role of the Women's Institutes on PEI, and the many people of PEI who gave so much of themselves for the benefit of Island youth. This history is only the beginning. What is written here is by no means a complete account of the PEIMFA, but it is hoped that for those unfamiliar with the work of this organization it brings to light their many achievements and that for those who have been involved a sense of pride in what they have accomplished. There are many gaps in the PEIMFA archives. If anybody has information – documents or stories – that they would like to bring to the attention of the organization, it would be welcomed.

### **Jessie Beck and Nadine Archibald's Ambitious Wish for P.E.I.**

The first competitive music festival was held on PEI on May 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> on 1946 at Prince of Wales College Auditorium in Charlottetown. The festival was started by two women, Mrs. Jessie Beck and Mrs. Nadine Archibald. It was their idea to have a festival in order to raise the standard of music in the province. At that time (1945), PEI's education system was primarily contained in one and two room schoolhouses in rural regions. There were no licensed music teachers in the school system and little or no music education. Mrs. Beck and Mrs. Archibald were familiar with music festivals in Nova Scotia and held the firm conviction that a competitive music festival was the best way they could improve the standard of music performance and assist with the musical education of the Island youth. They were both members of the Central Royalty Women's Institute and approached this organization with their idea.

There was interest in the idea but no initiative was taken. Mrs. Beck and Mrs. Archibald were not about to give up so easily. After considerable consultation with individuals and groups, the two decided to bring the idea to their District Convention Group of the Women's Institute (this included nine districts from the Queens County region). The meeting, held at Mrs. Beck's home on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1945 opened the chapter of this important part of our island's history. At this meeting, the charter members elected officers and a decision was made to have the first festival the following May. These women drew from the Institute members for committees. All the Institutes in the district were anxious to cooperate. The women approached a local musician, Mr. Walter MacNutt to discuss a scheme for training pupils at the schools within the district. Mr. MacNutt was engaged to give music lessons to school groups wishing to participate in the festival and he also drew up the first syllabus. His composition, "Take Me to a Green Isle" was included in the first syllabus and became part of the standard repertoire for singers on Prince Edward Island. The rules and regulations for the festival were drawn from the New Glasgow, N.S. Festival and information about procedures and development were gained through contact with the Saint John, N.B. association.

As funds were needed, a committee held a craft and bake sale in the market building where they raised \$154.74. The P.E.I. Department of Education granted \$200.00 on a strictly experimental basis – taken out of the Physical Fitness Fund. At that time there was no money allocated for arts education at all in the province. All Women's Institutes in the province were invited to send a "delegate" to the first festival, with the idea that the festival, if successful, could become province-wide. The women were particularly interested in advancing the idea to the rural areas where there was less opportunity for music training. The first festival was quite successful – there were 126 entries and Prince of Wales College Auditorium was crowded with enthusiastic

audiences for classes and the final concert. Shortly after the festival, a meeting to organize the PEI Music Festival Association was held. It was reported in the minutes of that meeting that “the first musical festival was a decided success and had proven to be a definite benefit for improving teaching music in schools which participated.” (*PEIMFA Minutes, 1946-48, Public Archives of Prince Edward Island [PAPEI] 2649.*) A motion was passed to include the entire province in the next festival. With this goal in mind, the organizers decided that members of the PEIMFA would attend W.I. district convention groups all over the province to promote the festival and encourage these groups to arrange for music teachers for schools that wished to participate in the festival. The committee positions and the organization of the festival were still done through the auspices of the PEI Women’s Institutes, although, with much foresight, the executive approached the Deputy Minister/Director of Education, Lloyd Shaw to be the Honorary President. Mrs. Beck remained PEIMFA President for the following year and for many years after was an indispensable member of the organizing committee in a number of different roles. Mrs. Archibald moved out of province in 1949 but maintained an interest and involvement in the development of the festival from her home in Truro, N.S. In 1952, the festival paid tribute to the work of these two women by naming them Honorary Life Members of the PEIMFA.

### **The Development of the PEIMFA: bringing music into P.E.I. schools**

The festival’s success made it very quickly the resource for arts education on PEI. As early as 1947, the Director of Education was forwarding any requests for music funds to the festival and stated, officially, that the government would support music education on PEI through the PEIMFA. The Department of Education recognized days spent at the festival as legitimate teaching time, and participation in the festivals by students was considered school attendance. The second festival, scheduled for May 20-23, 1947 was well under way with 371 entries. Miss Dorothy Allen, from Mt. Allison, was hired as the adjudicator for the second year in a row. Interest was growing in the festival – Mrs. Archibald had made a trip to Summerside where there was a “keen desire by many of the citizens to enter the festival.” (*PEIFMA Minutes, 1946-48, PAPEI 2649*)

After the local radio station CFCY donated free publicity time, word of the festival spread quickly across the province. At the second annual meeting of the PEIMFA, on June 16, 1947, Hon. President Lloyd Shaw suggested three main projects for the executive to pursue for the following year – a refresher course for teachers, a percentage allotment plan for funding and a scholarship committee. These three projects were proposed in the interest of further developing the teaching and support of music education in the province. Committees were established immediately to oversee these new projects. The first refresher course was held in Charlottetown in January, 1948. This five day teaching course was inaugurated by the association to help local instructors of music in their work of directing individuals or groups planning to enter the festival competition as most of the teachers entering schools in the festival had no formal music training. It was also opened to any person interested in becoming a music instructor for a school or community group. There was no charge for the course. The instruction was based on the 1948 syllabus and was reported to be of great benefit to all. (*Refresher Committee Report, 1948, PAPEI 2649*). The refresher course continued throughout the 1950’s and, in addition to them, choral clinics were held in conjunction with the festival. The percentage allotment plan was established to give financial assistance to schools that did not have music instruction or the resources needed to participate in the festival. It was the essential means for most schools to have any music instruction – in 1949, they gave grants to 24 schools, ranging from \$14.00 to \$41.50. The money was given on a per pupil basis and later, a per mile basis for any school more than fifteen miles away from the performance venue. The scholarship committee was started as a way to recognize the achievements made by young performers in the festival and as a way to encourage their further music education. It was also, initially, a source of funds for music teachers to attend summer programs to develop skills, an important investment in the future of music education in the province.

The festival had also established a field committee to do work in the rural areas to gain support and interest in the festival (a suggestion made by the organizers of the Saint John Festival). The field committee was organized to “foster music in the rural areas by introducing singing into the schools, by helping to get teachers and sponsors for this and to interest groups of people in the annual music festival of PEI.” (*Field Committee Report, 1948, PEPEI 2649.*) The committee members traveled from one end of the province to the other, speaking to more than 40 Women’s Institutes and other interested groups. “We have since watched

with interest the introduction of music, this winter, into the schools in various Island localities.... There is lots of talent on PEI, but there is also a great deal of latent talent as well which needs only backing and training to develop." (*Field Committee Report, 1948, PEPEI 2649.*)

In 1949, the efforts of the PEIFMA began to see some results with the amendment to the P.E.I. Public School Act which allowed the Minister of Education to grant a special license to teach any particular art or craft. "At least it can be said now that it is possible under the above amendment to license teachers of music and to provide in measure for salaries." (*PEIMFA Minutes, 1949, PAPEI.*) Even so, the province still depended on the PEIMFA to develop the music community on PEI. By 1951, the provincial government was paying the statutory salary to four full time and two part time music teachers in 32 schools in the province. The field committee continued to lobby the Women's Institute for support in obtaining a superintendent of music for rural schools. In 1960, the PEIMFA made a formal request to the province for a director of music for the province and in 1961, Mr. Christopher Gledhill was appointed, a major achievement for the PEIMFA and for the province. The creation of this position led to new developments through the Department of Education, specifically the P.E.I. Music Educators Association. With this development of music education in the school system and the growing number of music teachers on salary there was less need for financial support from the festival. Over the years, the festival has focused more attention on the granting of scholarships to participants in the festival. The Rena Wood Scholarship, awarded since 1983, was the PEIMFA's first endowment fund. With the ever-increasing cost of education and the depletion of funding sources for the arts, scholarships like the Rena Wood are becoming more crucial to the young musicians in our community.

### **The Event of the Season: the PEIMFA enriches our cultural community**

The years between 1948 and 1950 saw much growth and development in the festival. The executive of the PEIMFA had three vice presidents, one representing each country of the province. The number of entries doubled from 520 in 1948 to 1047 entries for the 1950 festival. By 1951, the PEIMFA had gained the reputation as one of the fastest growing festivals in Canada. The festival was steadily requiring more days and more venues. The 1950 festival saw the addition of folk dancing and choral reading as well as sight singing classes for school choruses. These additions required additional adjudicators. After the first four years of one adjudicator per festival, the fifth year saw a total of five: two music adjudicators, two dance adjudicators and one for choral reading. The festival was an enormous event with a multitude of people involved (138 committee members!), including many prominent citizens.

With its high profile and the sheer number of participants, the festival gained a lot of media attention – including newspaper editorials, cartoons, and detailed daily coverage on happenings at the festival. The festival classes were broadcast on CFCY and listened to as far away as Nova Scotia. Halls were packed and there was a lot of excitement around Charlottetown and across the province. A newspaper report from 1950 tells how a Summerside school couldn't get the bus they had chartered and at the last minute the CNR made arrangements for an extra train so participants and family members could get into Charlottetown for the competition! (*1950 Guardian clipping, PAPEI 2649*). In 1951, there were an estimated 6,000 participants in the festival. After the sixth annual PEIMFA meeting in June 1951, the Charlottetown Guardian reported the organization to be "undoubtedly the fastest growing organization in the province..." (*June, 1951 Guardian clipping, PAPEI 2649.*) The festival had grown so large that there soon began talk of holding preliminary classes in Summerside for younger classes and having only the finalists compete in Charlottetown. This was done for the first time (with some confusion for organizers) at the 1954 festival. Islanders were proud of the achievements made at the festival and of the improving quality of performance. Any comments made by adjudicators were noted in the papers and discussed in the community.

The progress of festival "stars" was followed from year to year. One of the first young stars of the festival was singer Gaelene Craig. She eventually went to Europe to study voice and when her finances were low, the PEIMFA established a fund to assist her. Although the community enjoyed the spirit of competition at the festival, the ultimate purpose of the festival was "to discover and encourage musical talent and to create an appreciation and awareness of excellence in the performance of music" (*Article 2, PEIMFA Constitution*) has never been forgotten.

## **Links With the Rest of the Country**

From the beginning, the PEIMFA was in contact with other festivals across the country. They were, before the 1947 festival, being approached by other festivals in the region to block book adjudicators, this being known in Canadian music festival circles as the “circuit” or “the chain”. Canadian Music Festivals were modeled after the British and adjudicators in the “British chain” were seen as the essential measuring stick for increasing standards of musical performance in the country. In fact, no festival was eligible for national trophies unless they had been adjudicated by a member of the British Chain. The PEIMFA became a member of the Federation of Canadian Music Festivals after delegates attended the annual Federation meeting in 1951. The Federation of Canadian Music Festivals was in its own beginnings. Festivals were fairly new to the Dominion and much of the Canadian Music Festival movement came from the western provinces. Still, there was always strong support from the PEIMFA for continued membership and participation in the Federation. Many ideas for developing the festival came from the PEIMFA participation at the national level.

In 1958, a national festival of music was held in Montreal. This was the first of its kind, although there had been some earlier attempts at regional festivals. The following year, PEI, as one of the ten largest festivals in Canada, was invited to participate in this national venture. Upon reflection, the PEIMFA executive decided not to participate in the national festival as there was some question about the motive of the organizers. PEIMFA President, Mr. Gordon Bennett and Queens County Secretary, Mrs. Ella Wood were both active at the national level and voiced their hesitation about this event to the Federation as it was not a Federation organized event. The other festivals asked to participate must have had similar doubts as nothing ever did become of it. In 1967, a special Centenary Festival was held in Moncton, New Brunswick, the first of what would become known as the National Music Festival. PEI was represented at this festival by Walther Lutz of Montague, in the vocal category and Birchwood Junior High Girls Choir, in the choral category.

Many young Islanders have participated in the National Music Festival. In 1984, Trio Minniken {Christine Anderson (piano), Lynn Davidoff (flute), Allan Kennedy (Violincello) from Queens County placed first in the ensemble category. For the first time all ten provinces achieved a first place standing in the National Music Festival, sponsored by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce.

In 1992, the PEIMFA hosted the CIBC National Music Festival. This was a large project successfully managed to a group of volunteers. One must keep in mind the often quoted phrase of Sir Waldron Davies, the credo of all music festivals: “The object of festivals is not to gain a prize or defeat a rival, but to pace one another on the road to excellence.” What an achievement it is for the founders of this festival to have so many Islanders capable of participating at a national level and organizing at a national level, especially when one considers how far we have come in such a short time.

*(Compiled by Andrea Ledwell 1995)*