

Recollections of Jack O'Brien

SPIRIT OF '76



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The Hoboken Oral History Project

VANISHING HOBOKEN
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*Contemporary photos of Jack O'Brien by Robert Foster, 2004. Cover image of Hoboken Colonials
Fife & Drum Corps, Pershing Field, NJ, ca. 1952 by Jack O'Brien (second from left). Photo of
Henry Krajewski with Anna Marie Yezo and mascot, 1956, ©Bettmann/CORBIS. All other images
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*I happen to be seventy-six,
and my entire life has been the spirit of '76,
so I've had a long wait for it.*

—JACK O'BRIEN, JULY 15, 2004



Jack O'Brien, Grand Marshal of the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Hoboken, playing a fife tied to a shillelagh, 2004.

— Introduction —

Jack O'Brien and Hoboken's Drum & Bugle Corps

For generations ordinary Hobokenites—most with paying jobs unrelated to music—joined together to commemorate the city's many special occasions by performing in fife, drum & bugle corps established by local churches, American Legion posts, police stations, and assorted social clubs. Born on Monroe Street in 1928, Jack O'Brien began playing the fife in his eleventh year, when he joined the Jefferson Street Hoboken Playground Band. The Hoboken Playground became the New York World's Fair champions that same year, 1939.

The Hoboken Playground Band was an offshoot of the early 1920s Stevens Castle Point Cadets. Both were directed by Julius Durstewitz, who was active in city bands and recreation for 38 years. Other musical units were formed by the American Legion Post #107 (Jack marched with them after serving in World War II), the Elks, and the Hoboken post office. Our Lady of Grace, Sts. Peter and Paul, St. Ann's, and St. Joseph's had bands, and there were independent corps established by the Hudson County Boys Club and the Hoboken Girl Scouts. Hoboken hosted units called the Lancers, Bonnie Lassies, G.I. Joes, and Hoboken Colonials—the latter directed by Jack O'Brien.



James O'Brien, Jack's father, First and Clinton Street, Hoboken, ca. 1940.

Mr. O'Brien was inducted into the New Jersey Drums Corps Hall of Fame in Sayreville, New Jersey, on May 16, 2002, in recognition of his sustained contributions to fife, drum, and bugle corps. By then Jack had not only played in five Hoboken-based bands, he had instructed 14 other musical units, from South Jersey to Brooklyn to Manhattan's Chinatown.

This Chapbook is derived from a 2004 taped interview with Jack O'Brien, conducted by Robert Foster and Holly Metz. Mr. O'Brien was then 76 and in his 65th year of fifeing, performing with the Spirit of Liberty. That same year he was also honored to be the Grand Marshal of Hoboken's St. Patrick's Day Parade.

J. O'Brien, Hoboken

I was born February 21, 1928, at 132 Monroe Street, the corner of Second and Monroe. It was a four-family house—walkup, of course. (You talk about tough jobs today. How would you like to be the ice man? Bring up the bucket of ice, and turn it around in the winter, and bring up a bucket of coal. You talk about jobs!)

I went to the kindergarten across the street, in the Number Nine School, which was Tom Connor's school. I had



Elsie O'Brien, Jack's mother, in front of the family parish, St. Joseph's, Hoboken, ca. 1940.



B.F. Goodrich picnic, ca. 1939-40. PHOTO BY JAMES O'BRIEN OF HIS COLLEAGUES

Tom Connor as a teacher, in the Number One School. Quite a nice man. To see a school named after him!

But we moved up to 363 First Street, between Clinton and Grand. I started on Second Street and I made it uptown to Fourth Street. As the Jeffersons said, "We're movin' uptown."

[First Street had a lot of stores.] Strictly Jewish selection, up to Grand Street—Narashinsky, Dr. Keizman, 3 Brothers, Weiners, Ornsteins.

I have two sisters, younger. Jean O'Brien Liguori, her last name now. And Joan. Jean, Joan and John. And my father's James. We had a great thing on luggage and towels—J.O.B. And the first cousins were Jack, Jimmy and Joe O'Brien, too. We lived in the same house, and when a letter came to J. O'Brien, it was lots of fun.

John Henry and Mary—Grandma and Grandpa—they lived on the top floor. Mother and father (James and Elsie) were paying \$23.00. Grandpa and Grandma were paying \$20.00. The top floor was always cheaper. Today it would be \$500 more with a view.

Dad worked for B.F. Goodrich Tire Company, for forty-four years. Now the big parking lot—that's where B.F. Goodrich was, the parking lot on 14th and Park Avenue. It later became United Testing. Pop started in Hoboken, right there. He retreaded tires and so forth—again, which you never see today. He was the union delegate and he was also a manager. You can't have that in the present life. If the guy was drunk, he'd go after him. But the guy who was sick, they'd hide him in the back of the place for the day.

[Pop stayed with B.F. Goodrich when they moved to Flushing, Queens.] Couldn't find another job. How in the hell did that man travel every morning. . . Walked up First Street—Appicella would tap at the window to him—up First Street to the ferry boat, [travel on subways afterwards] like two hours, which you never got a nickel for, for forty-four years. But it was a way of life. That's what you did.

[He got the job after he came back from World War I.] He was in the Marines in 1917. Pop was down in Nicaragua, Haiti, and Cuba. You say, "What's new?" You've got guys, today, going down to Haiti. I still have some pictures of Dad, with the khaki uniform on.

Sixty-Five Years of Fifing Begins

In 1939—let's see, I'd be approximately eleven years old—the big thing was to join one of the musical units in Hoboken. We didn't have computers and stuff, as they have today, and it was a great outlet. I can attest to some twenty musical units in Hoboken; so, therefore, just about every kid in Hoboken must have had a drum or a bugle. I've often wondered, if you opened up any closets today, what would roll out of them, from those years. Some of these people became police chiefs, judges, mayors. It was our way of getting off the city streets. At a parade in Hoboken, you never had to hire an outside band, there were so many bands going. Every church in Hoboken had a corps (as we called them then, drum corps).



Julius Durstewitz with the Jefferson Street Hoboken Playground Band, 1917. Durstewitz (with mustache) is at the far right. COURTESY OF THE HOBOKEN PUBLIC LIBRARY

One kid would be a drummer, another would be a bugler, [another] a fifer. A fife is an instrument from back in George Washington's time, which most people would familiarize themselves with the Spirit of '76—the "Yankee Doodle" fife. Also, some of them had glockenspiels. A glockenspiel was a German instrument, and in German it means "hammer and bell"—glockenspiel. So that was a big feature. And, of course, you had color guards. While a boy or girl was in training, instead of disappointing them, you'd fit them out, carrying a flag or a dummy rifle, and the kid would get out in the parade.

The drum corps, that was my start, under Mr. Julius Durstewitz. That was at the recreation center, at the Hoboken Playground on Jefferson Street. [The kids were] from all of Hoboken. Anybody. You had wonderful recreation down there—women teaching sewing to little girls, how to May Walk. There was plenty of activity down there.

Now Mr. Durstewitz, long before my time—a very stern, old

German professor—he taught the Stevens Cadets, up at Castle Point. That fence you see around Holy Innocents was donated by the Castle Point Stevens Cadet Fife & Drum Corps.

I do have pictures here of Durstewitz with the 1917 Hoboken Playground guys. “Were you in that, too, O’Brien?” “No. I wasn’t always in these things.” People think I was at Valley Forge, you know?

But to this day—how people shape your life—Durstewitz is long gone, but I’m still playing the fife he issued to me. So the hundreds, well, maybe thousands of kids that I taught, came from one man—from him on.

I was taught from scratch. Every kid wants to be a drummer. A kid this big, you put him on that big drum—little skinny kid—they’ll pull down the harness on you [and it weighs] like fifteen pounds. “The parade’s only five miles.” You think, “Maybe there better be some second thinking here!” So, O’Brien, to this day, that’s why he carries a fife in his pocket.

Hoboken Playground at the World’s Fair

In 1939-1940, the Hoboken Playground went to the New York World’s Fair at Flushing Meadows, where Shea Stadium is now. We left the Hoboken Playground, at First and Jefferson Streets, in our very decorated uniforms, made by the WPA [initially the Works Progress Administration, after 1939 this major federal employment program became the Work Projects Administration]—orange jackets, blue pants, blue hat with white trim. It just so happened that the World’s Fair colors were blue and gold. We may have had a little advantage in that.

Thirty-five, forty-some-odd people [went to the World’s Fair from the Jefferson Playground]. Yes, it’s a lot of kids to take off the



*World's Fair Winner, Hoboken
Playground Band, 1939.*

street at one time. We marched up First Street, then we got on the ferry boat (very expensive, probably three cents or five cents a person) over to New York, where we got another train, probably up to midtown, and then all the way to Flushing—all by train. That’s the way we traveled. We went to the World’s Fair. For kids from Hoboken, it was the World of Tomorrow. One thing still in my mind is what you see at all the airports now—the moving street: You get on the sidewalk, a long moving belt, and it goes along without you walking. I always thought we would have that in Hoboken, along Washington Street, but it never materialized.

How did we get the uniforms from the WPA? You couldn’t afford uniforms, so I guess it was through a city function. Somebody said, “Hey, we need forty boys’ and girls’ uniforms.” (The only girls you had were four in the color guard—and three of them are still alive, that I know of.) There was no big uniform company, which you have today. The price of uniforms today, and instruments! God, almighty. We have contra-bass horns that stand about to your elbow,

if you're standing up, and you could buy a Volkswagen for the price of music equipment. Things were much simpler at that time. I still have the first fife my father bought me, for \$1.25. Now they'll give you \$100 for it. The guys said, "Why didn't your father buy more?" Because all he had was a buck and a quarter.

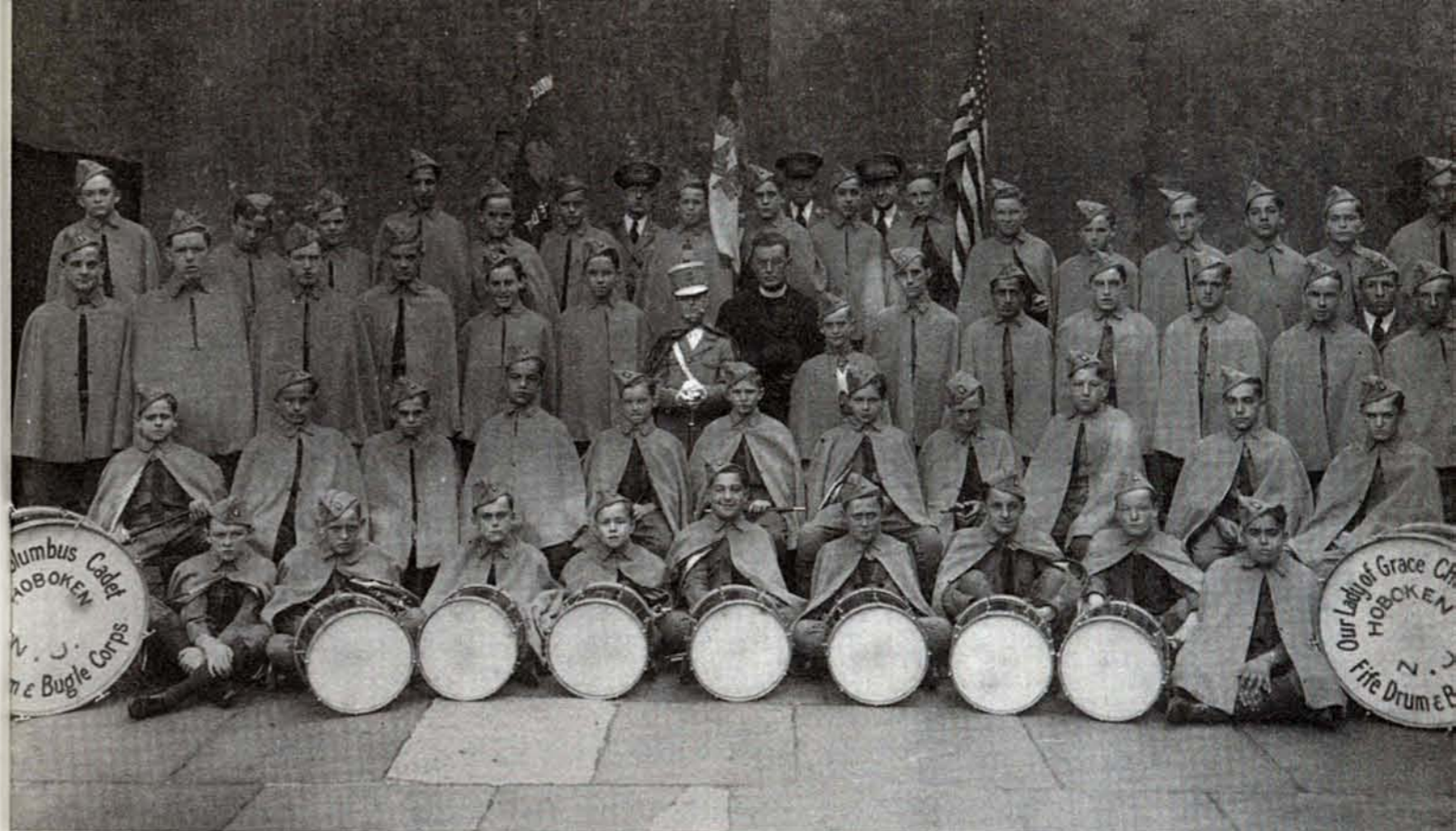
Oh, may I add: Every corps likes to have a nickname, like "the Raiders," "the Kingsmen." Before [the Hoboken Playground's Jefferson Street Band] got the blue and gold uniforms from the WPA, they had all-white sailor suits. At a meeting up at City Hall last year, an older woman, like myself, came over, and said to me, "Did you belong to the Jefferson Street Band?" I said yes. "Were you a Street Cleaner?" A nickname based on the white uniforms! "Were you a Street Cleaner?!" I haven't heard that name in years.

Our Lady of Grace Fife & Drum Bugle Corps

The bigwig of Hoboken at that time [late 1930s, early 1940s] was the Our Lady of Grace Fife & Drum Bugle Corps, across the street here. Full cadet uniforms. OLG's [nickname] was "the Lancers." The cadets were always macho-macho, you know.

Being a church unit, it was very highly Catholic, and at one time one of the provisos in joining it was that you had to be a Columbus Cadet—like you had Boy Scouts, Columbus Cadets, and Girl Scouts. [The Columbus Cadets were like Boy Scouts, but a specifically Catholic group, for boys.]

I was not a Columbus Cadet. Joey McManus (another Hoboken guy from Jefferson Street, who later became a detective in Hoboken)—he and I were invited because we had a couple of years of fifing under our belt. Being an Irish parish, "Well, they're all right, McManus and O'Brien. Take them in, without being a Columbus



OLG Columbus Cadet Drum Corps, 1935. PHOTO COURTESY OF DUKE MCCOURT

Cadet." So we were an added tribute to the OLG Drum Corps. Again, such men as you depended upon—Father F.X. Coyle, the moderator. [Lay people ran the drum corps for the churches] but you had a moderator. It was like, "Oh, here comes Father," and everybody would shape up. [Like a chaperone.] Some of them attended just about everything we did, to keep the kids on the level, you know? And it was somebody we looked up to at that time, really. As a pal. We just followed him to the end of the Earth.

Out of this small corps (I always being the joker), you had six or seven fifers who became Catholic priests. So my thing was, if you couldn't play the fife, it was off to the seminary with you, you know?

Our Lady of Grace Fife & Drum Corps was an all-boys unit. I remained with OLG from about 1942 to 1944, until I went in the service.

Just before leaving OLG, before going into the service [I started to teach others.] You have a couple years under your belt. This guy knows a song. We've got three new kids coming in and they want to learn. I could certainly show a kid how to play a scale, play "Yankee



Major Jackie Phillips, Our Lady of Grace Fife & Drum Bugle Corps, with the American Lead Pencil factory behind him, Hoboken, 1943. Phillips later became the mayor of Lawrence Harbor, NJ.

Doodle.” That would be the start of it. I was always good in talking to people. Throughout the years, I taught—I’m saying hundreds, it could be thousands, of boys and girls.

There were always two types of teachers. “Well, here, Bob, here’s a fife, now. Here’s ‘The Stars & Stripes Forever.’” Oh, my God. Even Sousa took time to do that, you know. We met some Irish kids in the New York Parade. The last thing their mother said was, “Don’t talk to strangers in the street,” you know. You had the penny whistles and the fifes. “Can you play a G?” “Yeah. Dah.” “Can you give me two more Gs?” “Dah Dah.” Two dah dah. “Put a D in front of it.” [Sings Mickey Mouse Song] The whole outfit was playing on the side

of the street! So you don’t break him in on “El Capitain,” or “Stars & Stripes.”

St. Joseph’s Fife & Drum Corps

OLG was a junior corps. So when I came back, of course, you were a man by that time, out of the service. [It became time for another corps, for older players.] It was 1949. Hoboken always had a Holy Name parade. All the churches did, once a year in October. That October, my own father was elected Grand Marshal. Now St. Joseph’s was always the poorest parish in Hoboken. Other people were hiring bands from Brooklyn or this and that. I was very inter-



Holy Name Parade, Hoboken, October 9, 1949.
James O’Brien, center.

ested. [The Grand Marshal was] my own father. Gee, who are they going after? We couldn’t afford a band. [Then we asked around.] “Hey, Bob? You got a drum?” “Yeah.” All of a sudden we put out about a twenty-piece fife and drum corps, mostly made up of the old OLG cadets. Instantly, you had about thirty songs. We came down, and people were asking, “Who are they? Who are they?”

Uniforms? Again, El Cheapo O’Brien. George Fitzpatrick was up at City Hall. When the politicians used to go around and advertise



St. Joseph’s Fife & Drum Corps, Hoboken, 1949. From left to right fife players Kenny Nodes, Dennis Haggerty, and Jack O’Brien, wearing their Modell’s shirts, 99-cent pants, and free U.S. Army helmets. A local woman who sewed for the church, Mrs. DeAngeles, made their sashes.



*St. Joseph's parishioners with a church banner,
before the Holy Name Parade, Hoboken, ca. 1948.*

occasionally, for a big event, they'd have a band. They had no uniforms. "Would you go out for me?" Fitzpatrick asked. I said, "We have no uniforms, just civies." "Okay. I'll fix youse up." I'm over in New York. I saw the black shirts we needed at that time, \$4.00 each. I pulled them from Modell's. This guy don't know me from nothin'. I walked out of Modell's with thirty black satin shirts! That was a makeshift uniform, for our first parade: black satin shirts, white and navy pants, and Army helmets painted white.

And there we were, the St. Joseph's Fife and Drum Corps. "Who are they? Where did they come from?" And we're playing stuff that nobody else could play. So that was the surprise of that.

Everyone Loves a Parade

Big parades? After the war, Flag Day was the big one, up in West New York, year after year. Then you had your Memorial Day. In Hoboken, I don't think we ever had a Fourth of July parade. The

Holy Name parade was the big one. Once a year, all the parishes of a city—whether it be Bayonne, Jersey City, Hoboken—would do their thing, showing the faith of the Catholic Church, all Catholic churches, once a year. At first it was a great, great, great thing. Jersey City used to be a fashion show. The women would put on their fur collars for the Holy Name parade. It went for a long, long time, and just started getting smaller and smaller. They had something else to do that Sunday, and it just dissolved.

Ragamuffin parades, at Halloween, [were big]. Then, of course, when the corps became good enough, you got calls for firemen's parades, you know, from the surrounding towns. Secaucus, Carlstadt, said, "Hey, is your band available on so-and-so date?"

G.I. Joes

We left the church, St. Joseph's, and we became the G.I. Joes. Just chalked out of St. Joe's. At that time, again, people were going into service, and we kept losing [band members]. To my little sister—there's ten year's difference, the same birthday, February 21st, but ten years apart—I'd say, "Jean, keep away from those glockens." Keep away from bells. All of a sudden, she's playing, "The Bells of St. Mary's." Jean became a glockenspiel player, with the G.I. Joes.

The G.I. Joes can say we met some big people. [In late '59,] my daughter was able to answer the phone, and we got a call from Secaucus. Henry Krajewski was running for president of the United States. He was a pig farmer [with] a big cowboy hat. He got my daughter on. "Honey do you like pigs?" "Oh yeah!" "I'm gonna send a little pig to Hoboken." This was like, his calling card. He said, "Hey, I need the band. Tell your father I need three bands. We're bringing in an elephant." And he painted the elephant. Now this was before Jimmy Carter's time. Have you ever seen a ton of



Henry Krajewski, Secaucus pig farmer and repeated candidate for president posing with his 1956 running mate Anna Yezo, and campaign mascot Little Miss Secaucus.

peanuts? One ton, he had dropped on his backyard, with the pink elephant and the bands.

The other claim to fame was my dear friend, Mike Chiotta, who taught at Immaculate Conception in Seacucus, New Jersey. He took a bunch of kids over to New York for a patriotic affair, and parades stopped at different times in between, so we had the kids play "God Bless America." Oh, the people clapped and all, and this one man said, "That was a very nice rendition." "Well, thank you. Thank you." But he said, "You know, there's a little problem now with ASCAP, the musicians' #802, James Petrillo, that you should have permission to play certain songs. 'God Bless America' is one of the specials." Mike looked him in the eye and he said, "Look, partner. You see all those little black kids, Irish kids, and Italian kids? That's their song. That's 'God Bless America.'" The guy says, "Since you feel that way about it, you play it as long as you want. I'm Irving Berlin." Mike didn't wash that hand for a month and a half. Of all

the civilians in the parade, Mike met Irving Berlin. So we all have our little stories in this thing. I tell that at our Hall of Fame convention. A guy came up to me—"Are you the guy with the story about Irving Berlin?" I said, "No. I knew the guy who knew the guy."

Pride and Brass

When you look back, there was pride in those things. The Hudson County Boys was the pride and joy, I would say. How could people run something like this on their own? Your parents and my parents? Independent, not run by the city. Where could they get this money? Bingo and carwashes and candy sales.

[Shows large photo] Nineteen-thirty-seven. People's Studio. In front of Demarest. Their headquarters were on Eighth and Clinton, next to the firehouse, where the glass place is now, upstairs there. They used to line up in front of the firehouse, going right down the street to the front of the 10th Street Park. Red coats and white pants.



Hudson County Boys Club, Drum & Bugle Corps, on the steps of Demarest High School, Hoboken, 1937.

There were four brass bands in Hoboken, too. One of them was the Hoboken Elks. And there was the Hoboken Police Department, Our Lady of Grace Holy Name Band, which was besides the Fife & Drum Corps. And the Hoboken Post American Legion #107, which had the drum corps and the brass band. [They'd be] a little larger, and not just plain drum and bugles, a full complement of clarinets, oboes, tubas.

All Kinds of Weather

This was the American Legion Drum & Bugle, at 14th Street. "Heaven, Hell or Hoboken" on our drums. This is immediately after the war, '47-'48-'49. These were army uniforms, and they dyed the jacket a little darker, like a maroon. With the ANZAC [Australian-New Zealand Army Corps] hats. It was the uniform of the day, here.



American Legion Post 107 Drum & Bugle Corps, outside the post on 14th Street, Hoboken, ca. 1948

You keep asking for a weather story: Thanksgiving parade, Macy's, American Legion. Eddie Mallen and I went out in the color guard. These flags are so heavy. It's raining, it's sleeting. Thanksgiving is Thanksgiving. Usually falls in November, on a Thursday. We say, "Hey, let's take the aluminum poles, instead of the big, old wooden poles." Oh, boy. A very great idea. After you march eight or ten blocks, the captain always says, "Switch hands," and Eddie [can't]... The dew had gotten in his hand, and [laughs]—he had frozen palms, couldn't release.

Another one: We were down in Wildwood. It's June, it's ninety degrees, and the rain felt so good. Well, 2 o'clock. What are you gonna do? We lined up in the street. The VFW says, to this day, "If it wasn't for you guys, they would have canceled that parade. We thank you." So we get out in the street. One guy—he had a brand-new pair of shoes. "I'm not going to get them wet! Like Guadalcanal. I went barefoot," and he put them around his neck. He did the thing in his bare feet. Bill Van Doren is carrying our flag again, with the chrome pole, to make it light. All of a sudden, we'd gone about three blocks, and the state trooper [imitates siren], "Put down that flag!" Bill says, "We're Americans. This is the American flag." "There's a guy that just got hit by lightning!" Bill became a Communist in about two seconds!

Guys say, "Do you make up half of these? Before you go, you've got to put it on paper." Honest to God. Zzzz! That's why Bill has curly hair to this day. He wasn't gonna give up his flag to nobody, until that time. Zap! It's the thought that follows it.

Hoboken Colonials

Things were getting very popular for drum and bugle corps. The fife was a thing aside. There were some good instructors then, teaching good bugle and drum music. We only had maybe six or eight

guys who played fife. To make a breakaway, I started the Hoboken Colonials. An ancient fife and drum corps is the one with the big rope drums, like Williamsburg, three-cornered hats, and your music is all played at upbeat—six-eight and two-four—a lot of historic stuff in it. We made quite a hit as the Hoboken Colonials, '52 or '53.

My Many Adventures

My plaque is in the New Jersey Drum Corps Hall of Fame [from when I was inducted.] The Drum Corps Hall of Fame is, primarily, 99.9%, drum and bugle people—like the great Hawthorne Caballeros. I am the lone fifer, due to my many adventures. Sixty-five years fifing.

A good friend of ours, a couple of years ago, said, “Did you ever do anything else but play in drum corps?” I said, “What do you mean?” “Did you ever fly kites or play ball?” “Well, yes. I played with the Hoboken Bears.” He said, “Your whole life—How did you find time for anything else?”



Jack O'Brien, representing St. Joe's, First Prize Drum Corps competition, St. Lucy's, Newark, NJ, 1949.



American Legion Post 107 Drum & Bugle Corps, Hoboken, marching on Washington Street, ca. 1948.

[We did have] Cut Rite Field on Harrison Street. That was our ball field, [alongside the factory for] Cut Rite Wax Paper. Talk about your ball field. We'd go out and pick up the broken bottles, because if you slid into second, they'd probably have to take you to the hospital for your knee. We had [another] problem. I played the outfield. “Watch your back, watch your back.” The billy goat would go after you. They all had goats down there.

But the corps, it's been an outlet. And for many kids, as I'm saying. You took the kids from Hoboken to the World's Fair. How could they get to the World's Fair, otherwise—you know?

We took them out of town. We had the Bonnie Lassies in Hoboken. We're up at the Hoboken parade, about two years ago, and a lady comes over and she says, “Are you Jack O'Brien?” I say, “Yeah.” She says, “I'm fifty years old, and you took me to my first

bar." I said, "Well, there's a claim to fame!" We took the kids, the Bonnie Lassies [to play in the] St. Paddy's parade in New York—new jackets, snow comin' down. We get to the end of the parade, it's freezing. Forty kids had to go to the bathroom. Where? So we start down a side street, 4,000 people in every bar. Finally, I see a little bar door—and I say, "Hey, the kids got to—" "So let them play something!" So they went in playing "Wearing of the Green." They went to the ladies' room. They come home, and every parent wants to know, "How was your big day in New York?" "Mr. O'Brien took us to a bar!" Now if that happened today!

Now we'll do twenty, twenty-five [parades a year]. Sure. With the Paddy's parade, there was always two: The one in Newark, and the one in New York. But throughout the years that increased to a third one. Then in '76 it got real heavy, Paddy's day. It was the entire month. We started like the third of March, in Hoboken, and we ended up, the 28th of March, in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. So you had five. Throughout the years I had, to the best of my knowledge, 202 St. Paddy's parades. I should be painted green and sent over, you know? Among them were two parades in Dublin, Ireland.

There again, for a kid in drum corps... I tell the kids today, "I never expected to go to Ireland, to play in two St. Paddy parades. And we played in Bermuda, with the Grenadier Guard, down there. We opened up Freedom Land in the Bronx. We played at the World's Fair. We played at the Metropolitan Opera House—guys, come on—the Journal American, General Sarnoff was there, and Nixon. They had an All-American Night and the Sons of Liberty played at the Metropolitan." To tell the kids today what can happen. This is what can happen, if you're dedicated.

[I don't choreograph my marches] Today it's a whole different—it's flash, it's a show. Well, they are playing stuff from all over the musical stage show. In my day, the best you could hit was something semi-patriotic, like "Oklahoma." Ours is strictly the military ven-

ture, of military music, taking after the early American, ancient patriarchs, "Yankee Doodle" up to John Philip Sousa, and we have intermingled with the U.S. Marine Band of today.

I'm going to a contest Saturday night, primarily the old-timers. The greatest show today is the alumni drum corps, like the old guys from OLG, and the American Legion. We have two outfits come out with guys on folding chairs. They get out on the field, they just face the stands, but in the same uniforms they wore. They don't have to practice, because these are the same songs they played in the 1958 Dream Contests at Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City. So it's a lot of kicks, that part. You do have the younger ones, fancy dancin' earlier in the night, but when these old guys come out, that is the treat of the night—before Medicaid gets'em.

Spirit of '76

My entire life has been the spirit of '76, so I've had a long wait for it. I hit seventy-six in February. Most people would celebrate their fifty, sixty, seventy, whatever, but [with me] being the Spirit of '76 all my life, Barbara [Barbara Dabinett, Jack's friend and fellow Spirit of Liberty musician] invited a few guests, a surprise birthday. It was only supposed to be my two sons coming over to her place. About one o'clock she said, "Put on your jacket." I said, "There's nobody here." I got a little fidgety. She said, "Now before we go, we've got a couple of blocks here. I want you to do me a favor. We have one special guest. I want to blind-fold you." My sister wasn't feeling good, but we have the same birthday. I said, "I know who this guest is. They've got my sister, Jean, in from P.A. What a surprise." They had it in the VFW hall, out in Morris Plains.

So I get inside, and I hear, "One, two, three, surprise!" One-hundred-twelve people from my past. Fife and drum people from New York, Baltimore. I taught Chinatown, twelve-year-old kids, who



Jean O'Brien (third from left) at Pershing Field, Jersey City, ca. 1949.

were a bit more now. My other girls, from "OLPH," who are all in their late forties or fifties. They had appropriate music—about a seventeen-piece fife and drum corps, with big drums.

Two special guests from out of my past. Grace Stenlake ran everything for the Jersey City Lassies and the North Hudson Girls. Grace is eighty-six, I'm seventy-six, a ten-year difference. But when I was a fourteen-year-old kid, in line, and she was the inspector, the judge—"Are you standing straight?"—scared the hell out of us, you know? But we always kept in with Grace. She brought her sister, who is ninety-seven, and they brought their glockenspiels. And there they were.

I rant and rave, but these are the people you meet in these things. Over 200 cards on the birthday. I got one from a doctor. He was a rotten little kid in Brooklyn—Javier Morales—twelve or thirteen years old. "Hey, keep away from my girl's line!" "Okay, okay." All of a sudden Javier's going to school. "Yeah, reform school." No, no. He's going to medical school. We are so proud of him. He's still parading. So he comes out in the middle of the parade, while we're

passing by, he takes his drumstick and hits me on the pacemaker. "Okay, it's good for another mile!" He just gave O'Brien a physical in the middle of the street parade.

Who would think? Little kids, growing up. Then, of course, you meet some security guard, about 300 pounds. "Hey, Mr. O'Brien?" "Yeah. Boy am I glad I didn't kick you in the can when you were a kid!" So it has been so rewarding.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent “vanishing” of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s, and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken’s industrial base relocated over the 1970s and ’80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the

1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as anonymous, modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of Cultural Affairs in the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited seven oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. During 2002 and 2004, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities provided support for publication of three chapbooks; two more were published in 2004 and 2005 with New Jersey Historical Commission support.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely-heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also pro-

duced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the Vanishing Hoboken series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the “manners and morals” of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

A Project of The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library
and the Hoboken Historical Museum