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Muskogee's Music Man Left a Lasting Legacy

*By Jonita Mullins**

"Other than my own mother, I think Tony Goetz had more influence on my life than anyone," stated Paul Hanna in a 1993 interview about his former band teacher, Anton "Tony" Goetz.¹ His words and sentiments are echoed by dozens of other former band members who remember Goetz with fondness. Few Muskogee citizens had such an influence on a generation of young people as the director of Muskogee's Central High School Marching Band.

Anton Goetz, a native of Hungary, came to Muskogee in 1922 after retiring from a military career with the U.S. Army.² He arrived in Oklahoma's "River City" at a time when marching bands were very popular. This was due, in part, to "the March King," John Philip Sousa, who had made the military-style marching band a cultural phenomenon. In addition, Brigadier General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, under whom Goetz had served, had recently taken a strong interest in developing the U.S. Army Band to rival those he had encountered in Europe during World War I.³

Band music was popular on the radio, and attending a band concert was a common American pastime. Goetz brought this American phenomenon to Muskogee with all the enthusiasm of the fictional "Professor Harold Hill" of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*. For more than twenty-five years Goetz would epitomize the community pride to be found in the stirring music of an all-boy marching band.

Goetz's early life has an almost storybook quality. He was born March 3, 1884, in Hungary to Anton and Catherine Goetz. The senior Goetz was a well-to-do wine importer and exporter. Young Tony, as he was called throughout his life, showed musical acumen at an early age. His father entered him into the Beethoven Conser-

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Anton "Tony" Goetz (Courtesy Goetz Elementary School, Muskogee, Oklahoma).

vatory of Music in Budapest in 1889. The five-year-old boy would have to pass a six-month probationary period before he would be admitted as a full-time student.⁴

Goetz completed the probation and began his studies at age six. His family paid the equivalent of a five-thousand-dollar deposit for his schooling. The money would be refunded with interest if he graduated. If he failed, the money would be forfeited to the school. This must have been a source of pressure on the young scholar, for he applied himself to his studies with a discipline that is astonishing, even for the times.

School was rigorous—a six-days-a-week, nine-hours-a-day schedule with only Sundays for church, relaxation, and family visits. Musical training was a daily part of the curriculum, along with regular

studies. Students could work at their own pace, having to pass tough examinations before advancement. Goetz studied hard because “it kept the homesickness away.”⁵

Goetz graduated from the conservatory at age eleven. His graduation exercise consisted of directing the entire opera *Il Trovatore* (*The Troubadour*) by Giuseppe Verdi in a public performance. The young student continued his education with an eight-month course at Prague, and then his schooling was complete at age twelve.

The strict, some might even say harsh, discipline of Goetz’s educational exercises would influence him for the rest of his life. Yet he tried hard not to impose such harshness on his own music students in Muskogee. He said, “I tried to give them the music I learned in Budapest without the iron strictness of the schedule I learned it under.”⁶

The Budapest conservatory guaranteed job placements for its graduates, and soon the school found work for Goetz in an orchestra in Germany. He was a virtuoso on the cornet (his favorite instrument) and could play the flute, French horn, oboe, and bassoon. For a youth, who had lived away from his family since age five, it was not difficult to begin a life-long career in music in a foreign country just as he entered his teen years. Here again can be seen the discipline he had learned at the Budapest conservatory.

During his teen years Goetz played for a number of orchestras and bands throughout Europe. By age seventeen he was conducting the Imperial Hussars band for King Oscar II of Sweden. He toured Europe with the Hussars and even made a brief visit to the United States in 1899, playing at theaters and amusement parks. While his visit to America was short, it made a definite impression upon him. He later said, “I’d seen just enough of it to want to live there.”⁷

However, before Goetz could fulfill his desire to immigrate, he was called into military service. He entered the Austro-Hungarian army at age eighteen and played in the band. It is possible his conductor may have been the noted composer Franz Lehár, best known for his opera *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*). Goetz attributed his abilities in composition to his study under Lehár.⁸

When his military obligations were completed, Goetz went to Germany and from there came to New York. He took a job as a bakery deliveryman and slept on a park bench during his first few weeks in America. The hardship was worth it to him. “Freedom means a lot to a fellow who comes from a country which didn’t have any,” he said.⁹ The love of freedom would be a constant theme in his music and in his lectures to his Muskogee band students.

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After two weeks of delivering bread, Goetz took a position in the band of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He did not stay long with this, however, quickly finding work on the theater circuit. By 1906 he was conducting his own sixty-four-piece orchestra at amusement parks around the country, including Chicago's White City.¹⁰

In 1909 Goetz's band was performing in Portland, Oregon. He was driving to Vancouver to meet friends when he was involved in an automobile accident and found himself in a military hospital. At some point in his stay at Vancouver he met his future wife, Emma Seitz. They were married in November 1909.¹¹

When his military doctor learned that Goetz had prior military experience, he recruited him to join the U.S. Army. He entered the First Infantry as a solo cornetist and principal musician and played with regimental bands at bases throughout the western United States. While serving in the army, Goetz gained his naturalization papers, and he became a U.S. citizen in November 1915. He expressed his elation at becoming an American, saying that "I felt I was really a part of this great, free country." He transferred to General Pershing's regiment, the Twentieth Infantry. The regiment was kept on the move along the Mexican border, constantly in pursuit of Pancho Villa.¹²

Whether Pershing took any note of Goetz as a band member is unknown, but Pershing's interest in the military band itself is well documented. He pushed Congress for more funding of the military bands and made sure that bandleaders were promoted to lieutenant. Goetz made second lieutenant in September 1918. He was awaiting transport to Europe with his regiment when the armistice was declared, and he did not go overseas.¹³

While serving at Camp Davis near San Antonio, Texas, Goetz was first made aware of the city of Muskogee. That year, 1921, the city of San Antonio played host to a large Kiwanis International Convention, and Goetz's unit served as the host band of the event. Here he met the Kiwanis delegates from Muskogee. When he expressed his desire to retire from the U.S. Army and to settle in one place for a change, they urged him to consider coming to their Oklahoma town.

Goetz did correspond with the Muskogee schools about a position as director of instrumental music. But he was still undecided about the job when the Goetz family made a trip to Omaha, Nebraska, in April 1922. By chance, their automobile broke down in Muskogee, and they had to stay four days at a local tourist camp. The family

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liked what they saw of Muskogee, and Goetz decided to take the school job.¹⁴

He immediately went to work to organize the school's all-boy marching band. Most bands of that time were made up of boys only, because marching and carrying heavy instruments were considered too strenuous for girls. Reflecting this attitude, Muskogee musician R. L. Updike stated, "It takes some strength to carry a bass drum or to sit back and fill up the sound of a trumpet."¹⁵ Bands were also viewed as a positive and productive means of keeping boys occupied and out of trouble—out of the pool halls and bowling alleys that were common in most cities. Girls, however, were included in the orchestra and in the school chorus, also conducted by Tony Goetz.

Former band member and Muskogee attorney Forney Sandlin remembered the schedule that Goetz kept as band director. He would teach music at the elementary schools throughout the week. (In those days of segregated schools, Goetz worked within the white schools only.) Then on Saturdays the elementary students met at Central High School for group practice. If a student excelled at music, he could be part of the high school band even if he was in the fifth or sixth grade. In keeping with his personal school experience in Budapest, the teacher allowed each of his students to advance at his own pace.¹⁶

Goetz brought the military discipline he had learned in school and while serving in the army to the bands that he led. Without exception, when former band members speak of Tony Goetz, they use the same words to describe him: strict but fair.¹⁷ Members of a Goetz band would stand at attention and pass inspection before a concert or a parade. The military-style uniforms, personally designed by the the director, were to be in "spit-and-polish" condition. A band member would receive demerits for a less-than-acceptable appearance.¹⁸

James Gibson, another Muskogee attorney who played in Goetz's Shrine band, recalled in a 1993 interview that Goetz would remove a student from the concert stage if he was talking or moving about when the bandleader raised his baton. The boys of the band learned quickly that their director demanded their very best, and they willingly gave it.¹⁹ Despite the strict discipline, or perhaps because of it, "Tony's boys," as the band members were called, loved their leader. "I held Tony Goetz in awe," stated Paul Hanna, who started in the band in 1932. "He was dearly loved by everyone in the community."²⁰ Forney Sandlin added, "He taught his students as much about character as he did about music."²¹

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Tony Goetz eagerly joined in the life of his adopted community. He organized a Shrine band, a community orchestra, and a community chorus, and he also led a band at the Oklahoma School for the Blind in Muskogee. The Central High School band performed at every civic event in the city for the twenty-five years that Goetz conducted. A summer tradition was a Thursday night concert given by the high school band and the Shrine band at Muskogee's Spaulding Park. On Christmas Eve the youth group would give a concert at the Veterans' Hospital. As a veteran, Goetz wanted to be sure that Oklahoma's servicemen were never forgotten. The band would also be a part of every parade in town and took part in Memorial Day ceremonies and Easter sunrise services.

In recognition of Goetz's contribution to the life of the community, in 1929 citizens of Muskogee selected him Muskogee's Most Valuable Citizen. Among other accomplishments and contributions, he was recognized for "going beyond the ordinary limits of his job, setting a wholesome example for boys and girls and being an impelling influence for good."²²

During World War II Goetz threw himself passionately into supporting the war effort with his boys. His patriotism and love of his adopted homeland were never more evident than during the war years. The Central High School Marching Band was awarded "The Minute Men of Music" Award by the Music War Council on May 27, 1944. His was the only band in Oklahoma so honored. Goetz also wanted to honor his band members who served in the armed forces during the war. He created a memorial banner that listed all of them who had served their country in World War II.²³ Originally enshrined in Central High School, this banner is now held in the collections of the Three Rivers Museum in Muskogee.

In an odd twist of fate that stunned the community, Goetz was forced to resign his position at Central High School in 1946. A new school board had hired a new superintendent, who for unknown reasons disliked the band director. Claiming he was lax in filling out required paperwork, the administrator pressured him into the resignation, and the board reluctantly accepted it.²⁴

An overflow crowd of Muskogeeans turned out for a farewell concert at the Ritz Theater on January 17, 1946. Theater owners George Procter and Hugh Marsh were good friends with Goetz and gave him a gala retirement party. The band and orchestra played several numbers, and then the band president, William "Clu" Gulager (later an actor in Hollywood), made a farewell presenta-

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tion to their beloved leader. However, Goetz was reinstated to his school position within a year.

In the early days of 1948 Goetz's boys were preparing to march in a parade on a cold winter day. Forney Sandlin recalled that the weather was so cold that the band boys were invited into a nearby auto dealership to await the start of the parade. The director moved among the young men, looking them over and speaking his usual words of encouragement. When he came to young Sandlin, he said, "I'm expecting you to be a leader in the band this year. I want you to be an example to the younger boys."²⁵ Sandlin never forgot those words.

None of the young musicians knew that that Goetz was dealing with cancer. Within a few months he died from the disease. His funeral, held at Muskogee's Masonic Temple, was attended by hundreds of former students. He was interred with military honors in Fort Gibson National Cemetery.

Band members came in their uniforms and stood at attention at the grave site while four former bandsmen played "Taps." The haunting melody echoed from the four corners of the cemetery.²⁶ The musical salute was a fitting farewell to a man who had brought music to Oklahoma's River City. Today, Goetz Elementary School at 2412 Haskell Boulevard in Muskogee bears the bandleader's name.

ENDNOTES

* Jonita Mullins is a freelance writer and has published columns about Oklahoma's Three Forks area in the *Muskogee Phoenix*.

¹ Paul Hanna, "Tony Goetz: His Legacy in Muskogee Music," videotaped interview conducted by C. W. West, ca. March 1993, tape in possession of the author.

² *Muskogee (Oklahoma) Phoenix*, January 17, 1946.

³ U.S. Army Bands: Serving the Nation Through Music, <http://bands.army.mil/history>, viewed February 26, 2007.

⁴ *Muskogee Phoenix*, January 17, 1946.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ U.S. Army Bands: Serving the Nation Through Music, <http://bands.army.mil/history>, viewed February 26, 2007; *Muskogee Phoenix*, January 17, 1946.

¹⁴ *Muskogee Phoenix*, January 17, 1946.

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¹⁵ R. L. Updike, in “Tony Goetz: His Legacy in Muskogee Music,” videotaped interview conducted by C. W. West, ca. March 1993, tape in possession of the author.

¹⁶ Forney Sandlin, interview by Jonita Mullins, Muskogee, Oklahoma, August 22, 2005, notes in possession of author.

¹⁷ R. L. Updike, Minnie Landers, Paul Hanna, and James Gibson, in “Tony Goetz: His Legacy in Muskogee Music,” videotaped interview conducted by C. W. West, ca. March 1993, tape in possession of the author.

¹⁸ Forney Sandlin interview.

¹⁹ James Gibson, in “Tony Goetz: His Legacy in Muskogee Music,” videotaped interview conducted by C. W. West, ca. March 1993, tape in possession of the author.

²⁰ Paul Hanna, “Tony Goetz: His Legacy in Muskogee Music,” videotaped interview conducted by C. W. West, ca. March 1993, tape in possession of the author.

²¹ *Muskogee Phoenix*, August 23, 2005.

²² *Ibid.*, January 17, 1946.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Forney Sandlin interview.

²⁶ *Ibid.*