

OSCAR STOVER: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS CAREER FROM COFFEYVILLE, KANSAS TO MICHIGAN STATE AND FINALLY TO ALVA, OKLAHOMA

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Highlights from an interview conducted by George McDow in 1985 for the archives of the Oklahoma Music Educators Association.

Note: GM stands for George McDow and OS stands for Oscar Stover. This edition is abbreviated from the original as necessary for this presentation.

GM Mr. Stover could you relate your musical training and background?

OS I started playing instruments when I guess I was six years old. My aunt was a music teacher in Coffeyville, Kansas, where I was born and raised. And they tried to start me on piano but I was one of those who didn't take to well to the piano so they got me a drum. And I took to the drum very well but that wasn't what I always wanted to do. But I stayed with the drum until I got to be about a junior in high school and then I was able to get hold of a trumpet so on my own I started playing trumpet. And learned some very bad things from myself I might add. But anyway I went through high school in Coffeyville, Kansas and I played in the bands from the time that I was in the 6th grade. I played in the boys band and then I went to Emporia Teachers College.

GM Was there a high school band where you were at?

OS Yes. There was a high school band. We met Monday nights.

GM And this was a boy's band?

OS A boy's band, yes. And the director was Albert Weatherly who we're going to talk about later I understand. And he picked from the whole town, I mean it didn't make any difference. We had people in there from the sixth grade on up through junior college. But he picked what he considered to be the best band that he could and I was very very fortunate to have had that experience because it stayed with me. Anyway, after I graduated from high school and we had some rather unfortunate band directors after Mr. Weatherly left Coffeyville and so I didn't really get to do a lot of things that I would have liked to have done in high school. But I went to Emporia Teachers College. And I stayed there a year. And I didn't have enough money to go back there again. So I went to Coffeyville Junior College. I graduate from high school in 1930. 1930-31 I went to Emporia Teachers College and I studied under Frank Beach and some other prominent teachers.

GM Was George Wilson there that year?

OS George Wilson was on leave of absence that year and a peculiar thing Ozzie Petinski was the trumpet teacher there and Tony Gerra was the orchestra director . . . I went back to Coffeyville and went to junior college until I graduated because I didn't have money enough to go any place else. And I couldn't get jobs. This was during the 1932-33 years. In 1934, I finally put together enough money that I could go to Pittsburg Teachers College. And I was real fortunate there because Dr. Walter McCray sort of took me under his wing and he taught me cornet. He'd come into the room where I was working on NYA. I was the orchestra librarian and we were on this NYA bit. \$15 a month. And I was living on that. My room cost me \$5 well never mind that but then he'd come into this orchestra library room and he'd say "Oscar I feel like I need to play some duets." So he'd go get that old Holton cornet of his and we'd go up to a practice room and we'd play ... duets and these were my cornet lessons. He was a pupil of Bellstedt so I learned some good things. So I didn't graduate from there until later because in 1935 again I was sitting in my room over at Pittsburg during the summer time and I was wondering just where in the world I was going to get money to go to school the next fall because I was playing dances and that was all there was to do. We were getting maybe three dollars a night and maybe we weren't. The telephone rang and it was my junior high school principal in Coffeyville and he said "Oscar we have a job over here for a vocal director and I think I would like to have you apply for it. Can you come over for an interview?" And I went over and got the job. And I taught vocal music in Coffeyville, Kansas, from 1935 to 1942 and meanwhile I got my degree. And you could do that then. Get a provisional certificate and teach until you got your degree. I finally got my degree in about 1940 I think it was. But by then I already had five years of experience.

In 1942, Walter McCray called me in the summer time and he said "Oscar, I have a band job here at the college and I think I'd like to have you take it." He was head of the department still. I said, "Walter, you're crazy. I have been teaching vocal for seven years." He said, "That makes no difference. Music is music." So I said, "Well, I'd like to try it." Because I was always more interested in the instrumental end than I was the vocal end. As it turns out I got the job and I jumped from a junior high vocal job to a college band job all in one great leap.

And then we struggled. Because in 1942 they were taking people out ... finally in 1943 I got drafted. And I went into service and was lucky and got into a band and I played in the band for 2 and one half years and we wound up as the 82nd airborne division band and I have 27 glider flights to my credit. I didn't fly the gliders I just flew in them. But anyway it was a good experience so far as the band work was concerned. So then I went back to Pittsburg and then I had the opportunity to . . . get my masters degree while I was there . . .

I had the opportunity to go over back to my hometown as junior college band director and supervisor over the whole [music] system. So I thought that would be a good time to get some administrative experience.

About 1949, I decided that I'd better start working on a Doctor's degree and I had my GI bill then. And I chose Michigan State because of two or three people that were there that I wanted to study under. One of them was Mr. Falcone and one of them was Keith Stein who was a friend of mine, had grown up with me in Coffeyville, and the other was Dr. Bill Serve who was at one time president of the Music Educators Conference in the whole United States. So I went there and during the summer times and then [in] 1952 I decided to take my years leave of absence and go back and establish my residency so I could get my degree. I told Mr. Falcone, whom I knew pretty well by that time, because I had been in the College Band Directors National Association with him. I told him that I would like to play in the band. I had never played in that kind of a band and so he asked me to come in and play an audition for him and I did. And he said, "Well, Oscar you play alright. Your playing is OK but I think you're too old to march the way we're going to march. Because we're changing over from the ROTC uniforms this year and we're going to march 220 steps a minute." I said, "Mr. Falcone, I just came out of service. I believe I can do anything these kids can do." Well as it turned out I could but then another thing happened. In April of that year the trumpet teacher walked out and left the second band and all the trumpet students without a teacher. Dr. Underwood just told me "I tell you what. We're going to put you in as the trumpet teacher and then next fall you'll be the assistant band director to Mr. Falcone and you'll do all the marching band and things like that. So that's the way it worked out. And I taught there from 1953 until 1960 when I came to Oklahoma to Northwestern Oklahoma State University.

There I met two of my former friends. One was Andy Clark, who used to be band director at Nowata, Oklahoma, when I was in Coffeyville and we would put our bands together for big half time shows. And the other was Dr. J. W. Martin who was President of Northwestern at that time and was superintendent of schools at Nowata when Andy was there. I got the job. And they did not have much in the way of a band. At the first band rehearsal I was a little bit upset because I didn't know what to put out. Thirteen people showed up. And I put the Star Spangled Banner out for them to play and did not recognize it even when I was conducting it. Some of the people who were there have since done very very well as they took teaching very well and they were eager to learn. And so it made my job so easy. Because they were so easy to teach. And so I think that over the years we kept building and kept building and we got a little farther along each year.

GM You retired in 1976?

OS Yes. I kept teaching part time until just two years ago [1983]. I did most of the trumpets and the percussion and the humanities and things like that. I like to teach.

THE FALCONE LEGEND . . . as remembered by Oscar Stover

Stover notes: This is a “manuscript of a tape recording made at the request of Gary Wakenhut on my remembrances of Mr. Falcone.”

First acquaintance: 1947 College B.D.N.A. Chicago

Michigan State 1949 (summer)

Falcone

Stein

Sur

Leave of Absence 1952 (Fall)

Don Jackson’s changing jobs – Oscar was chosen to take his place.

Full Time – Fall 1953 – Assistant Director of Bands. Teacher of Percussion and some classes – Youth Music Program.

When you work with a person as closely as we worked, you learn many things about him. As the years pass the individual incidents tend to get lost as you spend the next 20 years or so trying to build in a completely new and different situation. More important than these incidents are the philosophies, the methods, the psychology (which he would probably deny) and the *meticulousness of the man himself* [emphasis by Stover]. He had a philosophy. In my opinion this philosophy would permit nothing to become more important than the music. If it were a marching band show and a choice had to be made between music and movement, the music won out every time.

The Band

His methods were constant. He knew exactly how a marching show or a concert were to be prepared and executed. I think the band members actually felt a security in this constancy.

I said that he would probably deny any knowledge of or the use of psychology. Not true! I have seen him use 45 of the 50 minutes allocated to the first concert band rehearsal for tuning. You can believe it never had to happen again. I believe his many stops in a rehearsal were a spin-off of his psychology. The players kept trying harder to get by a given point without stopping and I really believe they felt he might stop them at a concert.

He was meticulous. I have heard him keep players on page 13 of the Arban book for their first 3 lessons just because of an occasional missed attack. He was the same in concert band and with the marching itself – including uniform dress. There is an airplane view hanging on my wall of an MSC formation. It is practically perfect – but when he saw it he did not look at the bandsmen (they were only dots) he looked at the slanting shadows to see proper spacing and alignment.

His students were exposed to all of this for only 4 years. I was exposed to it for over 10 years of actual study. Many times I have caught myself repeating phrases and solving problems in rehearsals when I would think – “Good Grief. I sound just like Leonard Falcone.”

I will relate only two incidents. The first is told by Mr. Stan Finn who was a clarinet teacher at State. It seems that Stan and Mr. Falcone were going to judge a contest in Mr. Falcone’s old Chevy. They had a flat. As they got out and looked the situation over, Mr. Finn suggested that if Mr. Falcone would show him where the tools were that he – Mr. Finn – would get the tire changed and they could be on their way. Mr. Finn swears that the rest of this story is true. Mr. Falcone walked slowly around the car with a puzzled look on his face, opened the right front door, opened the glove compartment, took out a screwdriver and a pair of pliers and handed them to Mr. Finn. Now don’t confuse this with ignorance. I firmly believe that mechanical things were of absolutely no interest to him. Not that he couldn’t have learned – but because he didn’t want his mind and his body mixed up in things that had no artistic implications. Let the mechanical things be the concerns of the mechanics – he was a musician.

The second story is – in a way – somewhat similar. We were travelling to the Rose Bowl on our beautiful fourteen-car train – furnished by Oldsmobile. At some point along the way, the heating system in our car ceased to function properly. At the next stop where we had a performance we were told to leave everything in our bedrooms exactly as they were and a new car would be moved into our train and our belongings would be transferred to the new car. We were in uniform. Mr. Falcone did precisely what he was told. He left all of his trousers and coats hanging – behind the bathroom door. So – it was 2 days before his clothes caught up with him again. He appeared in uniform at all functions. Again, the point here is that he did exactly as he was told and the operation itself was completely out of his realm of authority. He did just what he would have expected anyone else to do had he given the orders.

The music you hear in the background is from our 1954 and 1956 Rose Bowl shows. Jack Kimmel did not always write easy and most of the time he did write long. Mr. Falcone had to make cuts because of time but he never compromised the composer’s written notes. If it were high – the players played high – If it were fast – the players played fast. This is a part of the meticulousness of Leonard Falcone the musician.

For whatever it has been worth and for whatever I have been able to accomplish, my life has been greatly influence by five men – one of those was Leonard Falcone.

For more information on Oscar Stover, please visit www.drobnakbrass.com
and click on “The Oscar Stover Archives.”

Pictures, newspaper articles, programs, marching band charting, recordings and
other memorabilia have been posted chronologically.

1913-1942 Coffeyville, Kansas
1942-1943 Pittsburg, Kansas
1943-1946 U.S. Army
1946-1947 Pittsburg, Kansas

1947-1952 Coffeyville, Kansas
1952-1960 Michigan State
1960-1976 Northwestern State College
1976-1989 Retirement