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Malcolm Heslip and his wife, Doris, go over some of the memorabilia of Malcolm's days as a flautist and piccolo player with the famous March King, John Philip Sousa.

Memories of Sousa

Leisure Worlder marched to the King's baton

By Cheryl Walker
The News

There probably isn't a marching band in the United States, from elementary school to the Marine Corps, that doesn't play a Sousa march.

The music of America's March King is probably the most recognizable.

But When Leisure World resident Malcolm Heslip hears a Sousa march it brings back special memories of the seven months he played under the baton of the remarkable John Philip Sousa and the privilege of introducing to the world the popular "United States Field Artillery March."

The 94-year-old Heslip has worn several hats in his long career, but the glory days were just after the outbreak of World War I when the St. Louis-born piccolo and flute player played in the Navy Recruit Band.

Heslip has authored two books one of which, "Nostalgic Happenings in the Three Bands of John Philip Sousa," expands on those seven months.

The year was 1917 and Heslip was an 18-year-old U.S. naval recruit when the 63-year-old Sousa left his civilian band and entered the Navy for active wartime duty.

Heslip had been with the Naval Band at Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois for nearly a month when Sousa swept into the school to recruit musicians whose main job would be providing shipboard music.

Heslip recalls the composer/conductor demanded superlative sight-reading skills of his band members, a task he (Heslip) was up to being a veteran of both school and youth bands.

Heslip says Sousa was a "jovial, friendly but determined" bandmaster who rehearsed his band relentlessly to achieve a professional edge — a goal made difficult by the fact that the group was in constant flux due to war assignments.

Sousa, says Heslip, got what he wanted out of his recruits and soon took his band on the road to give public appearances in parades, ceremonies, Red Cross and recruiting drives and other functions all over the country.

Heslip recalls the Liberty Bond drives in particular were "terrific money getters" for the war effort.

The experience was heady especially for a young man barely out of high school. "Everything Sousa did was exciting . . . he was probably the top entertainer of his time.

"A real showman, he had all kinds of tricks — like starting up an encore when people were still clapping for something we'd just played."

Heslip says his idol believed in encores.

He might play as many as 35 keeping concerts going for hours to please his audiences' insatiable love of music — until, says Heslip, they literally "staggered out."

"Sousa took his music to the small towns and no one had ever done that before, people just loved him. I can't think of a person who doesn't love his music."

One of Heslip's singular Sousa experiences surrounded the inaugural playing of a new Sousa march.

According to Heslip, Sousa told his Recruit Band that since he didn't use a musical instrument while composing, he and they would hear it aloud for the very first time together!

Sousa distributed hand-written manuscripts to the young musicians and told them not to play a note, urging them to let their ears "be the first to hear the strains of the new composition."

Five minutes later, Sousa stepped to his podium and commanded his troops to give him their best, noting that no matter what happened, they were not to quit until the last note was sounded.

The musicians did as asked, recalls Heslip and finally the master broke the tension by thanking them all and offering the critique that the outcome was "exactly" how he wanted it to be.

Heslip says Sousa published the piece just as they'd played it and the first public concert of the "United States Field Artillery March" took place a month later at the Hippodrome in New York City.

Although Heslip was deployed to the Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, Sousa continued with his Recruit Band until the armistice ended the war and he revitalized his civilian band.

Although Heslip went on to fight in another world war, taught on the university level in Illinois and later California, retired to Leisure World and served in more than a half dozen clubs and community organizations, claimed Leisure Worlder of the Month honors in 1988, and authored books, the Sousa sojourn still retains a unique place in his heart.

Heslip collects the master's memorabilia, notes he's been privileged to know four generations of Sousas and states that his favorite marches are "Stars and Stripes" and the "Washington Post."

Perhaps the reason the memories linger on is that Sousa in spite of his genius, never lost the common touch.

Heslip says no matter where Sousa's band played there always was a parade but in spite of the conductor's age or weather conditions, Sousa never wavered at the cheering crowds from the backseat of a convertible — "he chose to march with the members of his band."