

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Martha Roberts Oral History Interview

Dana Channell, Interviewer

Alton Police Department Offices, Alton, Illinois

October 11 and 17, 2018

Please note: Initial audio recording on October 11 malfunctioned and recorded only the last portion of the interview. The interviewer recorded the first portion of the interview again on October 17. This document is a transcript of the interview recorded on October 11, 2018. Please see the other transcript for the interview recorded on October 17, 2018.

Dana Channell (DC): So, we were talking about the demographics of the audience and everything.

Martha Roberts (MR): Yeah, we have a lot of people who are just neighbors of the parks, but we have a following of people who come over St. Louis, especially on the Thursday nights up at Riverview Park. We've had several people come over from St. Louis. So, the tricky thing this summer is we've had a lot of bad weather. We've had several cancellations because of the rain. Um, and, they would call-- I've had maybe three calls this year, which is kind of unusual, um, but I couldn't tell them whether we were going to have the concert or not because we don't cancel unless unless there's 100% chance of rain for the whole rest of the evening. We don't cancel until concert time, so we all show up and if we can't do the concert, if there's lightning in the area or rain in the area, um, we generally have to call the concert.\

DC: Um, what about the demographics of your—

MR: Sorry, I kind of drifted off, didn't I? Um, we have a wide variety of people. Uh, we have single people who come, and we have um, older couples, retired couples who come, and uh, we have more families at Haskell Park than we do at Riverview Park, but uh. It's mostly, mostly represents the demographics of the neighborhood, so both of the neighborhoods are, you know, a little bit wealthier. I'd like to play in some of the other parks in the area and, you know, play for different neighborhoods. But these two neighborhoods are just really well-established, historical neighborhoods, so that's where a lot of the city support is and everything. So, I'd like to see us branch out and, like you were talking about, playing for other opportunities and things. That's something that's near and dear to my heart.

DC: So, you mentioned some of your audience members come from St. Louis. Do any of your— like, where do your band members come from?

MR: Our band members are, um, they come from the whole greater St. Louis area. We have some that drive across the river from Missouri and play, and some like I talked about a French horn player who comes from Swansea down by Belleville. And we've had people in Jerseyville, and just uh, the whole area, you know. It's been pretty neat. We have some Edwardsville people. Edwardsville has a municipal band also, and they play one concert a week on Thursday nights, so they conflict with us, so you can't do both. Wood River had a municipal band um, 2017 was the first year it hasn't played. I think the mayor

was wanting to get it reinstated but I don't think it got reinstated. So, we were able to get some players who had played in Wood River Municipal Band, but I would love to see them start their municipal band back up. They played on Wednesday nights I believe, and so you could do both too, so that was fun for the musicians getting to play. And ah, I just think of it as such a special thing to go, take your family out, and sit at the concert. You can eat your own snacks, and we had a concessions truck this year for the first time. And they probably didn't do much business because people weren't used to having it there and didn't really know about it, but I think if we promoted it more we might get a little more traffic. Um, but here you can be out there with your kids and grandkids and extended family members and people even bring their dogs. And it's people being outside together and enjoying, you know, a little bit of culture, and not being on video games, you know? Really connecting - you can have conversations with people. Up at Riverview Park, the sunset over the river is often spectacular, and even on our hottest days there's usually a breeze off the river which is really nice. And they've done a lot of fixing up, up at Riverview Park. They've done some major improvements up there, so it's really nice. And it's even more handicap accessible now. They've got a concrete pad down um, so if you're in a wheelchair you can come and sit right next to the benches that are installed there. So, it's just kind of a neat thing, I just love that park.

DC: So, you mentioned other municipal bands in the area. Have you collaborated with them at all?

MR: Um, no we haven't. Uh, I haven't really had any connections with anybody. I have had somebody connect with me from a municipal band, like, upstate near Chicago one time, but they were wanting to borrow some music and I think, um, it was music that we didn't have. I mean, it was something that didn't work out. But, um, I was glad that at least they thought about connecting with somebody else. So, I think that would be a really neat thing to do, maybe you know, encourage at least an ensemble to come and represent another municipal band. Um, Springfield, Illinois has a municipal band and I think they took a break a few years ago because of - when I say a few years ago, it was probably about ten years ago, I think that was when...

DC: Okay, yeah

MR: ...everything was falling apart.

DC: [laughs]

MR: Um, but they had to take a break for a while and they were reinstated. I think maybe it was just one season they had to cut back. Yeah. I just think it's a great investment. It's, it's something... like this gentleman who played 75 years, that's what we were talking about before the break I think. He played 75 seasons with the band. He started when he was 15 and he played in 2017 and he just passed away a few weeks ago. And, when you think of that, playing 75 years. Now if you played sports in high school, you don't say, "When I'm 90, I'm gonna be playing this sport!"

DC: Right!

MR: You might be able to watch it, but you're not gonna be participating. When you take up a musical instrument, there's a very good chance that you could still be playing, you know, in your 80s and 90s. And, um, in fact the-- Jim Reinhardt's funeral, um, Bud Shultz who is I believe around 80, played his clarinet for the funeral and it was beautiful. And you think, he has played, you know, most of his life and

he's still doing that. And I just think that's really cool, it's something that we can just keep, keep doing and multiple generations. When I look at that municipal band, we've had 15 year old, 16 year old kids playing there and they're playing with these older people and working together and creating something together. And I just think that's really cool.

DC: What is the dynamic of your band like outside of the actual like music-making? You know, with different generations...

MR: Oh, every section is different, and you probably know that from being a French horn player. Um, different, different sections have different ways of communicating with each other. Um, you can tell some sections are more friendly than others, um, uh. I think the friendlier sections are great when it comes to welcoming you know, new players and just kind of taking people under their wings. And it's really fun. Our French horn section has been a favorite of mine for years. They sound fabulous all the time, to me. You know, I just love that sound. And they're always funny, you know? And we like a little bit of humor interjected in rehearsals and stuff. We don't want too much gabbing at the concerts because it, it all gets picked up and the audience hears too much of it. But as far as rehearsals go, we try to get our work done but an occasional funny comment, you know, playful comment and stuff is good. An occasional laugh. Um, we try to work together pretty well. You know, I think there are some things that are more challenging, and you can tell that a little bit of humor can make some of the challenging stuff a little more bearable. [laughs] But we've had, we've had some kids who play in St. Louis Youth Symphony Orchestra, play with our band and I think that's great too. Here, they're getting a chance to-- you know, it's not a whole lot of money but it's, it's a little summer job where they're actually getting to hone their skills and get more practice sight reading and all that fun stuff.

DC: Hmm... so, so what are some of your duties as band manager? Going back to that a little bit.

MR: Ahh...I, I should probably sit down and create a good document about that, cause I really - there are a lot of things I could do better. I, I really want to, and I consider it my responsibility to promote the band. To try to publicize and make sure the citizens of Alton - this is one of my goals. I've been going to this uh, um, social entrepreneurship training and that's one of the things, you have to decide what your goals are, you know, and see what the end picture is and that would be: I would like everybody in the city of Alton to know about our concerts. It doesn't matter to me so much whether they come or not, but just to know that we're out there playing, and that it's free, and they can come and enjoy these concerts and get away from the TV or get away from you know, the house or whatever, and just come out and sit in the park. Or play in the park. We've got a playground at Haskell Park for the kids to play on. And just come out and relax and enjoy these concerts. And enjoy their neighbors, you know. That's my one big goal. My responsibilities: I help coordinate things and uh, really there are a bunch of us that have to work together. We have a board now, which is new, and I'm not used to having a board to do everything with, so I'm used to making decisions like "here's the flier I want, I want this many of 'em" and you know, it gets taken care of. But now everything goes through the board um, so there's more communication than we had before. But then we decide how many musicians we can have in each section, and we try to find them. Like, we would love to have a good bass clarinet player and we've had a tough time. We had a really fantastic one and he was able to come back a few times this summer but, um, he lives elsewhere so that wasn't possible to have him play the whole season. Um, so part of it is just getting the word out, and I know I need to do a better job at that. I need to contact all the local high schools. Sometimes it's helping

find soloists. The previous managers used to find, well, Jim Reinhardt would find the soloists and just schedule them, and then the band directors would take it from there. But I really like the band directors to find their own soloists because they have access to more people than I do, you know? They know who's out there. And sometimes, when they're having trouble finding a soloist we can put some more feelers out because we've got a lot of music educators, um, that we're in contact with. And several of them, like I said, are in the band, so they know, they know more people out and about. So, if it, if...if we relied on me to find the soloists, we would probably not have nearly as good of concerts, because I don't have access to those same musicians.

DC: Yeah, it's a different type of networking.

MR: Absolutely, absolutely. So, uh, discipline is one of the things I take care of, uh. There can be issues with interpersonal things, or there can be issues with behaviors that need to be taken care of. Um, sometimes I'm better at that than others, but I'm the kind of person that I don't like conflict, but I'd rather do it sooner and get it over with and take care of it. I don't want it festering. And sometimes you can see where I've missed the perfect opportunity that's gone a little too long, and then it's hard to backtrack, you know? But for the most part it's a great bunch of people, and I think even some of the discipline things are sometimes because people have such strong feelings about the band and expect it to be a certain way, you know? So, you know, some of it is different ideas about what the band should be, what the experience should be. Like if you have somebody thinking they can cut up, you know, and be funny the whole rehearsal, then that means we aren't getting our job done for learning the music. But if you have somebody thinking that nobody can ever say anything in the rehearsals, then you've got a whole other issue of people aren't having a good time, and it's hard to relax and play good music, you know? We've gotta find that happy place where people are working hard but still getting a chance to enjoy themselves. Other than that, I don't know what my responsibilities are [laughs].

DC: So, so there's you, there's, you know, band directors - what other kinds of people make up the band itself? Even like the members, the musicians, like what are their day jobs, I guess?

MR: Right. We, uh, we have a wide variety. Um, whew, you know, and I don't know enough about, even just the board members, I don't know what their main jobs are. I know a couple of them are band directors. Um, one is in the medical field, and is ah, I, I'd be embarrassed to start talking about him cause I'm not sure exactly what he does but he's really good at whatever it is he does, cause he just got promoted to a really great job! Um, but we have retired people in the band, we have office workers, we have some college students. Boy, I'm trying to think of how many band directors we actually have. We probably have like 10 band directors in there, which for you know, 45 people, that's a big portion, you know? And we do have a lot of retired people. That would be a really good thing for me to find out! I need to get to know my band better! [laughs]

DC: Uh, gosh I just had a question, it was right there.

MR: Sorry!

DC: No, no worries! Um, hmm...So you rehearse, rehearse an hour and a half, you know, during the summer.

MR: Actually, I take that back! We get two hours in, 7:30 - 9:30, I think. So, a two hour rehearsal for a one hour concert.

DC: Neve...

MR: Sorry! I interrupted you again.

DC: No, no. You're good, you're good. Um, so what does a typical rehearsal look like for someone who is not from a band, the band world?

MR: Okay, well we all get there, we get our instruments out, we warm up on our own. Um, so you should, we should be there five minutes or so ahead of time. And then when the conductor gets up, they have us do a warm-up routine where we're all doing scales and stuff like that together. And then we just dive right in and start reading music down. And they might have, you know, five more pieces than we can fit in a concert, and they may be trying to figure out how best to program them. There might be one or two that just are not usable. Like, we'll try them and then they'll go "eww," and they'll say, "let's put that one away" and we won't play it all season. But they need to do that, you know? Even new music sometimes, it isn't what you're expecting it to be. And it might just be that particular group that's there that night, because you know people have vacations and work commitments and illness, you know, all through the summer just like any other time. So, if we don't have the clarinet section there, which we had a couple concerts where we were very short on clarinet players, we can't do a clarinet feature. You know, it just wouldn't make sense. So sometimes they get there for rehearsal and it's like, "ugh, we can't do this number cause it has a really good trombone part, or a really good trumpet part, and we're short on people." So, it's kind of, you know, it's kind of tricky to do that because different music has different requirements, and like I said, you know not know ahead of time who your people are going to be. So...

DC: Is that on a week-to-week basis?

MR: Yes! We're trying to come up with some solutions for, you know, absenteeism and stuff, but for the most part people know what their vacation schedule is, so they can let us know that ahead of time. But we've had the tricky part is communicating it to everybody. Like, the band directors need to know. Even if I know and the person who's taking roll knows, that doesn't help if the band director doesn't know. So, we've gotta get a better system of communication. Now they've got all kinds of apps and stuff you can use, but we do have some older people who would have to have somebody else do the app thing for them [laughs].

DC: Um, so you said you had 45 members...

MR: Uh, roughly...

DC: ...roughly?

MR: Roughly, yes.

DC: Um, has it been the same...

MR: We used to run about upper 50's, I think. When we had those budget cuts um, through attrition just like every other thing, we've not been able to replace everybody. Um, we would love to have more of certain instruments. Like I said, we had a shortage of clarinets this year. If we don't have people come and audition, we can't expand the sections. We have four flute players, we could probably use five just, so we can go on vacation and stuff like that, you know? Um, we do get subs sometimes, 'cause we have lists of people that we know could come in and cover. But there are like key instruments, like we had one year where we had some concerts with like, two trumpets. Well, you know how it is missing trumpets, you know? You're missing a lot, a lot of good music if you're missing trumpets.

DC: But it's roughly stayed about the same in the double digits?

MR: Yeah, we've just kind of diminished. The original, I think the original, uh, city - they had it in their charter, for having a band. I mean, it goes way back, in the city, um, rules and laws. And I think it specifically stated some number, you know, 40-something. So, it had gotten bigger than that for a while which is more what we're used to for a concert band is having it in the like, 50's. So, we've been kinda running a little on the low side. I'd like to see more. We used to have four tuba players and we had one this summer, and it would be nice to at least have a couple.

DC: Do you guys have an upright bass?

MR: I would love to! We did, when we had four tubas, we had an upright bass too. Yes. Ooh, that would be great. I'd love to have an upright bass.

DC: I know sometimes that varies based on, you know, just the group and who's available, who's in town. Who auditions, yeah.

MR: Right, yeah. So, we do need to - it's really hard because once the season's over, it's kind of like we all get really busy with whatever our real lives are, and we don't really think a lot about in the spring, what are we gonna need. And you know sometimes we have college students who are playing who might find out in the spring that they aren't coming home for the summer. So then, you know, we are kind of scrambling to cover for them. You know? But we could, we know we need a bass clarinet, we could be contacting the high schools now. Which, this interview is good for this, cause it'll help me remember that I need to be contacting people and let them know "hey, here's a summer job." You know? What kid would rather flip burgers than come play with the band, you know? It's fun. We have a good time playing music together.

DC: So, what does your work look like in the off-season then, I guess?

MR: Well, I generally am just so relieved when band is over cause it's really busy and hectic 'cause it's three nights a week all summer, and so I'm usually relieved and just kind of forget about it. So, I need to, like I was saying, I need to stay on top of it and start contacting band directors and let them know. And I'd really like to get some small ensembles out to the schools. I hear it's hard to do that these days, um, they've got everything pretty structured um, but I think if we made the right contacts we could probably still do that and let kids know. You know, it's just like any other job, ah job, you know? If kids don't know those jobs exist, how would they know whether they were interested in them or not? And so, I think it would be good to let the music students know, "hey, you can get paid for playing your instrument" you

know? And you can have fun doing it too. Even if you go into something else like me going into business, I still was playing my instrument and still making money for playing my instrument, so.

DC: Yeah, let them know that it's still available to them.

MR: Absolutely, yeah.

DC: It's not a this-or-that choice.

MR: Right. Yep, yep.

DC: So, you said you recently got a board?

MR: Yes. Uh, last year we started with the board and some of it is really good because I don't have to make all the decisions by myself. 'Cause you know, there's a lot of pressure doing that too. Um, but other things it's just hard because with the Open Meetings Act, you have to plan everything ahead of time, you need to have an agenda and you need to do the minutes, and they have to be publicly posted. And, um, like paying bills - it has to be voted on at an official meeting. And so, sometimes when we have things we want to do, and we need the bills paid, we don't have a meeting right away, and you can't just call a meeting 'cause it needs to have 48 hours advance notice. And I'm not a very good advance notice kind of person! So, our next meeting is in December, and that last one we had was several weeks ago, but it was the only time we could get together. So, we put it on the calendar and we'll do our best to get everything covered, but if we forget to take care of the paying the bills, it would have to wait until the next meeting. And with the way city finances are, you submit payments, it's still a couple weeks before payments go out. So, everything's really delayed and because I, I didn't get all the paperwork in that I needed, the band didn't get paid until the end of September and we played our last concert in the middle of August. So, that was, uh, a mismanagement moment for me, but it's just one of those things that, you know, I was used to the way it was before and didn't realize there was a piece missing until I called and asked, and they said, "oh yeah, there's a piece missing!" [laughs] Okay, great! So, yeah.

DC: So, you said your minutes are posted, publicly posted.

MR: On the city website, yeah.

DC: Yeah, so tell me about the history of your online presence.

MR: It's not been good. Uh, um...

DC: Because I've been to the website now.

MR: The actual city website?

DC: Yeah.

MR: And all we have posted, I think, for, besides our agenda minutes, is uh, our flier. Like, we had a band flier. I think they had something like that up there.

DC: Mm-hmm.

MR: I would like to have it more interactive and have it - but, you know, everything through the city has to be, they need - everybody needs to be able to access everything for the city through Freedom of Information Act, so all the information should be publicly available. It's, um, it's difficult when you can't do stuff yourself. Like, I would have to give up dates to somebody else for them to be able to update things. Well the people who are updating are really extraordinarily busy and I really can't see this as a high priority. So, I think our Facebook page and stuff like that as our best way to get information out to people. And the more people are using Facebook, you know, the more people we can connect with. So as this generation, this younger generation, if we can connect with them electronically, I think we can get the word out better, you know, and get more people to attend the concerts. Um, and talking with, like in this social entrepreneurship training, I've connected with some small business owners in the area too. And we've been talking about ideas of connecting with the band concerts too, because um, there's a woman who does parties, and she has had some ideas of coming and maybe doing some things with the kids at the concerts. And that would be good for her, 'cause she could give certificates for her business or whatever and we'll have that benefit of connecting more with more kids. She'll have the benefit of having the audience there to connect with them. And so, it's a win-win thing for us, you know? Where we're spreading the word a little bit. And that's what the Small Business Revolution, their whole thing is, you don't want to be competing with everybody. You want to be supporting everybody. So, it's more of a network than it is a business competition, and I just love that attitude. Because now, when I go to a business and I, like let's say, State Street Market, it's a um, got a little restaurant and they've got this copper bar next door. The owners are wonderful, outgoing people, and they want Alton to succeed. So, if I have a place I want to go, I'll say I want to do business at State Street Market because they are encouraging. So, it's like, I want to spend money there to encourage them, because they are encouraging others.

DC: Yeah.

MR: And um, the Old Bakery Brewery, they have done a lot. They're the ones who initially got the ball rolling for the Small Business Revolution. Um, they are investing in the community.

They have all kinds of activities that they do at their business to promote small businesses, to promote Alton. And if we can be part of that network and all of us can benefit from it, and see the town blossom because of this, you know, encouraging each other, I just think that's just a wonderful thing. So, I'm excited about that.

DC: That's awesome.

MR: Yeah.

DC: Um, so things are looking really good, actually, for the...

MR: Yes.

DC: I was gonna ask, because I know the Wood River band is having that kind of lapse, but I think that might be more isolated economic issue. I know we've all felt the 2008, you know, downturn...

MR: Yeah.

DC: So, I guess I was going to ask if you foresee any economic struggles, but I guess you've kind of already talked about that a little bit.

MR: Yeah, because it's a part of the property taxes and it's just such a tiny, tiny portion, and it would require changing laws, because it's actually legally set up for us, the, uh, it would be a major ordeal to get rid of us. And the current mayor has no intentions, he has assured us, of getting rid of us because he likes what we're doing, you know, to unite those communities too. And uh, it's just, you know, you need to have cultural things in your community. Because if you don't, you lose, you lose that enticement for people coming. You know, the best towns are the ones that have the artistic things going on. We've got a lot more activities now than, than we used to. I know um, Main Street, Sarah McGibney has a lot of things going on with the Main Street Group and they're trying to revitalize downtown Alton, which is really cool. And, you know, its there's a lot of really positive things going on right now in Alton.

DC: That's awesome.

MR: Yeah.

DC: Uh, so what would you say - going back to the demographics of the band itself, and you know, community members and that sort of thing. How many would you say are like, professional musicians, versus, hmm not necessarily amateurs, that's kind of a loaded term.

MR: Yeah, I really don't know. 'Cause the band directors are considered professional musicians even though they might be playing something in the band that's not their main instrument even, I don't know. I haven't even asked. But, and I don't know how many people who have other jobs are playing elsewhere as professional musicians. You know, like, I've done that off and on in my life. Even though I had a full time job doing something else, I did the weekend gigging with a guitar player and stuff. So, I really don't know. Just, you know, I should ask all these people these questions next year! [laughs]

DC: Uh, so okay. Wrapping up a little bit, do you have any favorite memories of the band, any experiences? It could be, you know, anything, from any span of ...

MR: The whole time I've been there, one of my favorite things has been, consistently, Jojo the Clown. She is there, the kids love her, my--she helped me bring up my kids. Sometimes my babysitter wouldn't show up at the concerts and I'd have my three kids there, and Jojo would keep an eye on them for me. And uh, she is just, she is a gem. And she hands out little candies to the kids and leads them around the park in a parade on one of the songs. She even has said, about what a cool experience that is um, when the beginning of the season and the kids from the previous year come and recognize her and give her a hug and things like that. So, um, she's consistently been something really special about the bands. Uh, other than that you know, every year has got different special things about it. We've lost several members since I've been playing. Um, Allen Biggs was a French horn player, um, and he, he was there when I started. The flute player who sits next to me came to the band because of Allen, and then losing him was hard. Kathy Bowman, the one that had funded that extra week, she passed away um a little over a year ago, and you know, she was an important part of the band and we went way back. She, I think she and I started the same year, back in 1978. And just, it's been hard seeing people die. But you know, we get new players

and I know that like, these two gentlemen who just passed away who had those long histories with the band, they would be thrilled to see the band just keep going, you know? When I think of it starting in 1891, every year let's keep going for that much longer, you know, and let the next generation of kids experience this.

DC: That's really awesome, I like that. Um, so what does the Alton Municipal Band mean to the community, do you think?

MR: I think it's that, I think it means family entertainment. It means so place you can go and not worry about, you know, your general life. You know, you can go and be entertained and just forget about your troubles and just tap your foot and sing along, and just hang out together. And so, it's kind of, family. Yeah.

DC: What does it mean to you?

MR: Ah, it's a big part of me. ... It's, it's, you know, started my relationship with my husband, so it means something really important to me there! But also, the musician in me, it gives me that musical outlet, that gift that I have received that I get to share with others and I think we all have, we all have a desire to share that gift with others. So, yeah. It's just a neat, multi-generational experience, you know? A special art.

DC: Well, is there anything else you'd like to share?

MR: I can't think of anything. I think I've been talking forever [laughs].

DC: Well thank you so much.

MR: Thank you!