

Oriental Band Biography

In 1939 the National organizer for the Association of Shriners of Oriental Bands was Monte Ferdon from Antioch Temple, Dayton, Ohio. At the invitation of the Past Potentate, Joe Perry, Monte was invited to Charleston, West Virginia. An invitation was issued to the general nobility that the National Organizer for the Oriental Band would be in Charleston and those interested should attend this initial meeting. Some of those attending were Vaughan McKnight, Cy Silling, Press Skyles, Squire Lowery, Tal McClure, Bill Cline, N. D. Boggs, Frank (Doc) Lilly, Charlie Koehn and Harry Davison. Monte said, "If a man can count to eight and play a victrola he is eligible for the Oriental Band, but musicians need not apply."

From these ten men the nucleus was formed of what is now the Beni Kedem Oriental Band. An election was held and Vaughan McKnight was elected President and Harry Davison was appointed Director of the band. Meetings were and continue to be scheduled each Thursday night at the Shrine Mosque on Capitol Street. The next few years from 1939 to 1945 was a primitive time for the Oriental Band because of the numerous personnel changes due to lack of recognition. The Oriental Band was under the directorship of Paul Joachim.

The tom-tom's and musettes were ordered from a Chinese importer in San Francisco. The uniforms were cast-offs from other units. In 1945, with Earl Townsend as Potentate, the Oriental Band application as a Temple unit was accepted. New uniforms were ordered and the band as an official unit was permitted to take part in parades and other Temple activities.

The band was beginning to roll in "high gear" with approximately thirty members which brought acclaim and recognition to the Temple. Competition within the band was keen because a Temple ruling limited the number of band members permitted on Temple pilgrimages. Twenty members, including the director, were all that were permitted to take part. Until the early fifties the band's activity was limited to national conventions without competition.

In 1955 Temples were assigned regions by the National Shrine Association. The Beni Kedem Oriental Band requested a meeting of representatives of other oriental bands assigned to the Mid-Atlantic Association. A meeting was held at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. As a result of this meeting, the Middle Atlantic Shrine of Oriental Bands Association (MASOBA) was formed. Over the years our band had three (3) bandsmen, Nobles Bill Briscoe, Amiel Michael and Lewis "Lew" Hatcher served as presidents of the MASOBA.

In 1976 Beni Kedem joined the South Atlantic Shrine Oriental Band Association (SASOBA) and the Oriental Band made their first parade that year in the Association. At one time the band had fifty-two (52) bandsmen in the parade under the direction of Jess Kitchen and was the biggest ever put on the street. Our band has won numerous association first place big band (unlimited), best drum major, and best overall band trophies. Over the years our band has had four (4) bandsmen, Nobles Amiel Michael, Harold Moore PP, R. L. "Rusty" Johnson and Hurford Bolyard become presidents of SASOBA. Noble R. F. "Bob" Johnson was Secretary/Treasurer for nine (9) years and the band now has Noble John Lowe as the Sergeant-at-Arms.

Several very successful association jamborees have been held in Charleston, WV. The first being held in 1965 and the last one were held in 2002 in conjunction with Southeast Association of Shrine Oriental Bands Hoedown and the Association of Shrine Oriental Bands of North America mid-winter meeting. Several bands visited with us from the Southeast, Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and Great Lakes Associations to play the sweetest music this side of heaven. The Oriental Band knows how and does lay out the red carpet filled with a lot of friendly southern hospitality and camaraderie.

Through the years the Oriental Band has developed a friendship both inside and outside the unit. The Hella Oriental Band was brought to life by one of our members, Noble Burns who relocated in Dallas, TX and Noble Guy Wiles helped start up AZAN in Melbourne, FL with old uniforms and instruments furnish from our band. They have traveled to the four corners of North America to compete in competition with other oriental band units. The Oriental Band has had their share of trophies as one can attest by looking at the trophy cases in the Band Room. Currently, the Oriental Band has 48 members and with the infamous Jess Kitchen as Director, they have won Imperial Competitions for the Unlimited Class in 1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2003 and 2006 as well as numerous Best Director Awards.

The Oriental Band has also had some other members of recognition; Noble Andrew Coleman was Most Worthy Grand Master for the State of West Virginia during 1995-1997 (deceased), Past Potentates include Basil E. Whittington 1982, Chester V. Roberts 1986 (deceased), Glenn A. Summers 1988, Harold D. Moore 1995, James E. White 2000 and M. Stephen Strickland 2006, Beni Kedem Recorder, and emeritus Oriental Bandsman, Harold Ranson was the 2001-2002 President of the International Recorders Association, and R. F. "Bob" Johnson was the 2001-2002 President of the Association of Shrine Oriental Bands of North America.