

On the Baritone Horn
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I played the baritone horn in the Monroe High School band. A baritone horn looks like a small tuba and sits on your lap. I suppose a baritone horn is like a baritone singing voice, not the highest or the lowest, but sort of low, or lower than the middle, or something like that, I never thought about it until now.

I played the baritone horn because Mr. Blood, the Monroe High School band director—Elsworth Blood, there's a name for you--said that would be a good instrument for me to play, though he didn't say why and I didn't ask, and he said that I could use it free as long as I was in school. My parents had no concern one way or the other, so it was just Mr. Blood and me that made the decision that I would play the baritone horn, although really it was just him, because, now that I think about it, he needed a baritone horn player to flesh out his band.

I don't remember Mr. Blood ever giving me lessons on how to play the baritone, but it wasn't complicated, only three valves to push down and just seven notes in the scale to learn--you know, do-re-me-fa-sol and so on. I figured out for myself how to read music, or sort of, I never really got the hang of it. I never practiced; I just played in school with the rest of the band. I stored the baritone behind the curtain at the back of the stage in the school auditorium.

All four years of high school, every day Monday through Friday, first hour, eight a.m. in the morning, there I was on the stage of the Monroe High School auditorium sitting on a metal folding chair along with the other members of the band playing songs under the direction of Mr. Blood, who stood in front of us looking very serious and waving his arms up and down and turning the pages of the sheet music on the stand in front of him. As far as I can remember, in the four years Mr. Blood never spoke to me, not once.

Next to me in the last of the three rows sat Steve Diedrich—"Died Rich," Steve informed me—who played the bass horn, which is like a tuba only even bigger. I don't know why Steve played the bass, I never thought to ask him. On the other side sat Roger Ellison, the other baritone player, who was much better playing the baritone than I

was, but that only stood to reason because Roger was on a higher plane of existence than I was, we both understood that, his father being a doctor and him going on vacations in the summer to Estes Park, which was somewhere outside of Minnesota where I was living in Saint Paul, and for sure Roger was on his way to college while I was going to sign up for the army right after high school, which I did.

Once a year in the spring, we did a band concert, and the parents came. Mine didn't come, but I didn't really think about it, that's just the way it was. Though I do remember being a tick disappointed that they didn't attend the band concert my senior year when I played a solo of "Jupiter Polka." There I stood center stage in front of the band, the audience out there in the dark though I could see their silhouettes, doing my best with "Jupiter Polka" knowing there were parts of it that I never got right and that I'd have to bear up with that in front of the parents in the audience and my fellow band members. But the people in the audience applauded politely at the end of my attempt at "Jupiter Polka," and then in the silence I walked to the side of the stage and back to my folding chair next to Steve (Roger had graduated), who didn't look at me.

Actually, there was one exception to only playing on the auditorium stage. The band played at the Friday night football games, the Monroe Green Wave, our colors were green and white. The band uniforms were green and white too. My family didn't own a car and I didn't have anybody to go the games with, so I took the bus—one transfer—to the football field at Central High School where we played our games. There I'd be, dark out in the fall, by myself in my band uniform, lugging the baritone in its case up the stairs of the bus and into a seat, me at the window and the baritone on the seat next to me. The other passengers basically ignored me, but a few snickered.

At the game, under the lights, the rest of the band and I sat on the wood benches about ten rows up from the field, with Mr. Blood standing in front us pumping his arms up and down as he did, very serious as he always was, his arm-pumping especially vigorous, have to keep the energy up at the football game. We played the Monroe fight song as it was called when our team scored a touchdown. During halftime. we went out on the field and formed the letter "M" (for Monroe) and played a march written by John Philip Souza, who I guess

wrote really good marches. I can't imagine anybody in the stands paying attention to us, but there we were anyway out on the field. It was the fall and kind of cold and a lot of times the field was muddy.

After the game was over, I'd catch a bus and, one transfer, go back home. I got in my pajamas and watched some TV by myself—my parents went to bed early--and munched on some potato chips and drank a Coke until I decided it was time to go to sleep.

It's all these years later, and if I had to play the baritone horn at a football game I wouldn't have anyone to go to the game with now either, but I have a car, so I wouldn't have to take the bus to the game. It's late at night and I'm sitting here alone and I'd really to watch some TV and munch on potato chips and have a shot or two of whiskey but I'm not going to, and right now if I could cry I would.