

Kake man enjoyed playing in the band

By BILL HESS
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Inside a warmly furnished room in Sitka, a very old man lovingly removes a baritone horn from its case. Nearby there is a small lamp with a flexible neck. With long fingers that are still strong,

the man twists the lamp until its beam falls directly onto some very old sheet music. "Cheerful Voices." "The Golden Stairs."

"I can still play them," the man nods toward the music. He puts the horn's mouthpiece to his lips and begins to blow.

Time has taken its toll. At 90, Walter Williams, Sr., a Tlingit born and raised in Kake, cannot hear so good. If a person raises his voice to a near yell, he will begin to hear it. Although he speaks excellent English and in fact served as a court interpreter in younger years, if anyone addressing Williams really wants to be understood, they should speak Tlingit to him, or speak through an interpreter.

He can answer in English, just fine, but with little hearing, that language is hard to understand. His lung power has diminished also. So, the casual listener might not find Williams' playing that impressive. Yet, when one listens closely, he can hear a melody trying to put itself together in the notes which weakly escape from the horn's polished mouth.

Yet, inside this man's head, deep within his brain and soul, he does not suffer the frailties of the outer body. In there, every note sounds out clear and beautiful.

"It's a long story," Williams says of his musical career, remembering when he was one of the best around. "I started at school right here, in 1909, at Sheldon Jackson. There were 50 boys and 30 girls." From there, Williams moved on to Che-

mawa, Ore., to the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school there. He played in the band, and was quickly recognized as one of the best musicians in the school.

He learned from several band masters, and helped teach others. Shortly after Williams got out of school, World War I broke out. "I joined the Navy. I went to San Francisco. There I went into the U.S. Navy band. That's where I really learned, that's where I got what was good, and found what music means.

"There were educated men. They taught a lot of things, and I could hear what they were talking about. It was not like today. I can't hear things now."

After the war, during which Williams had been made a First Class Petty Officer, he eventually started a Salvation Army band in Kake. Williams had become accustomed to traveling during his days with the Navy band and now, on occasion, he would take his group of musicians from Kake to places they had never been before.

"In 1931 we came to Vancouver with a 30-piece band. Some of these people had never been away from Alaska before. I teach them how to play. Then every year the Salvation Army has its congress, at a different place. We always

go. President Harding came up here. We met his ship when it arrived, and played for him. He seemed to be a little bit afraid of us Indians.

"We played all over. We had a wonderful time. People treat us very good." Thanks to Williams' mother-in-law, the band looked sharp. She made uniforms for everybody, modeling them somewhat after the outfits the Indian police of the time were wearing.

"I was showing some of my music to my son. Beautiful pieces the Salvation Army had. It was wonderful music they played! Pieces such as 'The Glorious Fountain,' 'Love's Glad Song,' 'The Joyful Pilgrim' 'Very Pretty Thing!' - and 'Wondrous Love' - I was going to play this one time in the congress. Very beautiful piece!"

Williams still has great respect for the musicians with whom he worked. "It was surprising, how the old Indians could all play. Some were really good, really professional. Compared to today, they were better! People are supposed to be more educated today.

"I guess there are other things. Radio. TV."

If the musicians were good, then Walter Williams, Sr., bandmaster, was one of the best. "I tell you, I hear something. A man played on his instru-
(Continued on Page Fifteen)



Walter Williams Sr. and his baritone

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