



J. Loran Mercer - Religion and Education

Only "The Chief," J. Loran Mercer, would dare to dream that a small high school band from a Wheeling neighborhood could become one of only five high school bands chosen from 600 entries to travel to Philadelphia, all expenses paid, to perform on the nationwide Paul Whiteman television program in 1951.

Mercer, the music educator whose 29 years from 1936 to 1964 at Warwood High School established a longevity record for Ohio County public schools' band directors, also was the first music supervisor for Ohio County to begin a strings program in the schools.

Mercer's Warwood High band set the standard and he was the band director to emulate. He led the Warwood High musicians to national recognition, with many individual students and groups of his students earning superior ratings in both regional and state contests and winning numerous scholarships and All-State Band positions. Especially from 1940 to 1954, the Warwood band competed with larger local bands and often won top awards. Mercer himself was recognized in April 1956 as one of the outstanding music directors in the nation. In 1958, the Warwood band performed with the Wheeling Symphony and also placed 10th out of 72 bands at the International Lions Convention in Chicago. The band performed at the Mid-East Band Clinic in Pittsburgh in 1963, the only West Virginia high school band ever to have performed in that event. In 1964, the state music educators elected Mercer to serve as director of the West Virginia All-State Band for the World's Fair concerts in New York City.

When Mercer was recommended for posthumous induction into the West Virginia Music Educators Association Hall of Fame in 1994, he was described as "a robust and vigorous worker" who "always took time to care about people, their personal needs and feelings. Loran never showed an angry or threatening side, probably because he didn't have one. Rather, he showed compassion and provided inspiration to all who knew him. Whether he was on a football field, a tennis court, in a rehearsal room, or on the street, he emitted a comfortable aura of fatherly love which everyone respected. Long ago, he was affectionately nicknamed 'The Chief' and, like a true chief, he influenced many with his exemplary life."

Mercer was born April 5, 1913, in Monaca, Pa., the second of the two sons of the late Joseph W. and Matilda Swartzwalder Mercer. His older brother, Harold, also is deceased. The family had moved to Wheeling in 1928 when Mercer's father purchased the Lincoln Theater in Warwood. Mercer was one of the city's first disc jockeys, running two turntables in the theater dubbing music to go with the silent films.

During his days at Central Catholic High School, Mercer pounded out martial tunes on a piano twice a day to provide accompaniment for lines of fellow students entering the school. His playing was the extent of the music program at Central; he took piano lessons from a nun who taught next door at the girls' school, St. Joseph's Academy. At that teacher's encouragement, Mercer went off to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh to become a concert pianist.

He worked his way through the music school by being the janitor, hitchhiking to Wheeling each weekend to operate the projectors and sell popcorn at the Lincoln Theater. The Depression took its toll financially, and he learned he could get a partial scholarship by playing in the school band. So, after six lessons on the baritone horn, Mercer was on his way to a music education career that he said included "about a thousand miles of walking up and down football fields". He received his bachelor's degree from Duquesne in 1935, and was appointed director of the Warwood band. He earned his master's degree in 1954 from Marshall University.

Mercer married his first wife, Wilma Dauber, in 1936 and became parents of a son, Donald W., before Wilma died in 1944. Wilma's oldest sister, Helen, was a U.S. Navy nurse during World War II when Wilma died. After her discharge, Helen returned to Wheeling. She and Mercer married and had a son, William. Mercer died Dec. 23, 1983, and Helen in 1995. Surviving are his sons and daughters-in-law, Donald and Beth and William and Gigi; seven grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

In the 1970s, Mercer and his son Donald were one of the top-rated father-son tennis double teams in the Middle Atlantic Region. His tennis career included serving as tennis coach at Warwood High School and at Wheeling College. He was inducted into the Wheeling-Oglebay Tennis Club Hall of Fame in 1989.

In Warwood, Mercer was a member of Corpus Christi Catholic Church where he was choir director for 27 years, choir director and organist for 15 years at Warwood Methodist Church and was the last charter member of the Warwood Lions. He served as glee club director at Wheeling College from 1961-64 and as choral director for OVGH School of Nursing in 1967-69. He was appointed director of the diocesan all-star band in 1978. Mercer composed the alma mater songs for Wheeling Park High School and for Wheeling College and he served as coordinator for the Region V Band Festival from 1970 to 1983. He was a guest conductor with numerous local bands and choruses in addition to the Wheeling Symphony and also performed and assisted with band concerts in local parks. He was a private piano teacher, dean of the American Guild of Organists, president of the Ohio Valley Music Educators Society and Regional Bandmasters Association, vice president of the West Virginia Bandmasters Association and chairman of the Oglebay Institute music committee. He was president of the Ohio County Retired Teachers Association and was a member of the Wheeling Hall of Fame Board.