

History of the bagpipes in the fire service

Contrary to popular belief, the bagpipes are not of Scottish or Irish origin. The first version of the instrument can be traced back to the Middle East several centuries before the birth of Christ. It was most likely a rather crude instrument comprised of reeds stuck into a goatskin bag. As civilisation spread throughout the Middle East and into the Mediterranean lands, the people brought along their music.

It is generally believed that village musicians used the pipes along with drums for entertainment in an effort to brighten an otherwise drab existence. The instruments also contributed to other facets of community life, such as the burying of the dead.

Some of their instruments were adaptations of the early bagpipe. Instrument sophistication grew with time, as reeds were replaced with the hollowed leg bones of small grazing animals. Holes drilled into the bones allowed the musicians to vary tones and pitch.

Along with their trumpets and drums, the Romans carried with them their pipes. The legions spread the popularity of the instrument throughout Europe, eventually ending up in the British Isles.

It was in the evergreen landscapes of Scotland and Ireland that the pipes reached their highest level of popularity. During the 14th century, the bagpipes could be found in nearly every village. Over the years, the bagpipes grew in sophistication. More pipes were added, enabling the musician to reach a wider range of notes.

Mournful tunes were frequently played over the pipes following the death of a warrior. Villagers would gather around the body of their dead compatriot while the piper stood a distance away. It was said that the music was a sign to God that a brave and loyal subject was on his way to sit at 'the steps of the throne'.

The bagpipe was introduced to the New World during the great migration westward. British soldiers were led into battle by pipers and drummers. As the battle began, the musicians swung off to the side, encouraging the soldiers to fight on. Songs of victories past wafted over the battlefield, reminding the soldiers of their heroic legacies.

During the great Irish potato famine of the 1840's, hundreds of thousands of sons and daughters of Ireland left their homes for the promise of a better life in America. During the terrible voyage across the Northern Atlantic, the only respite was their music.

Bagpipes, flutes and drums brought back memories of their heritage and when they could, they sang and danced to the tunes. Their music also mourned fellow travellers who fell sick and died along the way.

The tradition of bagpipes played at fire department and police department funerals in the United States goes back over one hundred fifty years. When the Irish and Scottish immigrated to the USA, they brought many of their traditions with them. One of these was the Great Highland Bagpipe, often played at Celtic weddings, funerals and ceilis (dances).

It wasn't until the great potato famine and massive Irish immigration to the East Coast of the United States, that the tradition of the bagpipes really took hold in the fire department. In the 1800's, Irish immigrants faced massive discrimination. Factories and shops had signs reading 'NINA' - No Irish Need Apply. The only jobs they could get were the ones no one else wanted, jobs that were dirty, dangerous or both, fire fighters and police officers. It was not an uncommon event to have several fire fighters killed at a working fire. The Irish fire fighters' funerals were typical of all Irish funerals - the pipes were played. It was somehow okay for a hardened fire fighter to cry at the sound of bagpipes when his dignity would not let him weep for a fallen comrade.



Those who have attended a funeral where bagpipes were played know how haunting and mournful the sound of the pipes can be. The most famous song played at fire and police funerals is Amazing Grace. It wasn't too long before families and friends of non-Irish fire fighters began asking for the bagpipes to be played for fallen heroes. The bagpipes add a special air and dignity to this solemn occasion.

Bagpipe bands represent both fire and police often have more than 60 uniformed playing members. They are also traditionally known as Emerald Societies after Ireland, the Emerald Isle. Many bands wear traditional Scottish dress while others wear the simpler Irish uniform. All members wear the kilt and tunic, whether it is a Scottish clan tartan or Irish single colour kilt.

Bagpipe making was once a craft that produced instruments in many distinctive local traditional styles. Today, the world's biggest producer of the instrument is Pakistan, where the industry was worth \$6.8 million in 2010. In the late 20th century, various models of electronic bagpipes were invented. The first custom-built MIDI bagpipes were developed by the Asturian piper known as Hevia (José Ángel Hevia Velasco).

Today, the tradition is universal and not just for the Irish or Scottish. The bagpipes have become a distinguishing feature of a fallen hero's funeral.

Sources: Excerpted from Ohio Fire Chief, July 1997 and www.west-point.org/taps/Taps.html 🔥