

LOCAL

ST. JOHNSBURY

Sounds Of Summer Play On At The Park

Experience A Relaxing Band Concert

BY PATRICK LOVETT
Staff Writer

Editor's note: We continue our series of stories about summertime destinations in our region. Reporter Patrick Lovett ventures to locations throughout the area this summer documenting his experiences and sharing his insights to help local people and visitors make plans to experience the summer.

Main Street bears a bulk of the town's traffic during the day, as cars and people constantly travel the roadway, to jobs and on errands. Noise accompanies the traffic, a general buzz of activity. Come Monday evening, Main Street slows down. Traffic grows scarce and the buzz gives way to a different sound—brass horns and snare drums, winds and cymbals.

In a park next to the courthouse, a crowd gathers listening to the St. Johnsbury Town Band, just as they have for the last 187 years. The central location is fitting. The band is a community staple; it is a part of St. Johnsbury that connects citizens to their past and one another. It's a timeless resource for family-friendly entertainment, offering free music and ice cream to the public.

Courthouse Park is on the corner of Eastern Avenue and Main Street. It is small, with flowers, several benches, and large trees scattered throughout. When I arrived, the audience had gathered on lawn chairs and grass, facing the band.

The musicians were assembled in the bandstand—a large gazebo, outfitted with chairs, music stands, and speakers. In the front, a green banner was hanging between an American and Vermont flag. It read, "St. Johnsbury Band 1830."

The band was warming up, tuning their instruments, while members of the audience settled in. Nearby, a line was forming at the ice cream station where volunteers were setting up. Different local businesses sponsor the ice cream social every week. There are two flavors that vary from week to week; I overheard that one was rocky road so I jumped in

line.

While I was enjoying the delicious concoction of chocolate, nuts, and marshmallows, the music started. They played a series of marches—songs with rolling drums and cyclical melodies. Less traditional music was also mixed in. Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther Theme," was a familiar tune for many, while several audience members sang along to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline." Each piece was preceded with description and followed by enthusiastic applause.

Members of the audience visited with one another during the concert. It appeared to be as much a social function as a performance. Murmured conversation filled the space between songs and kids played tag behind the main seating area.

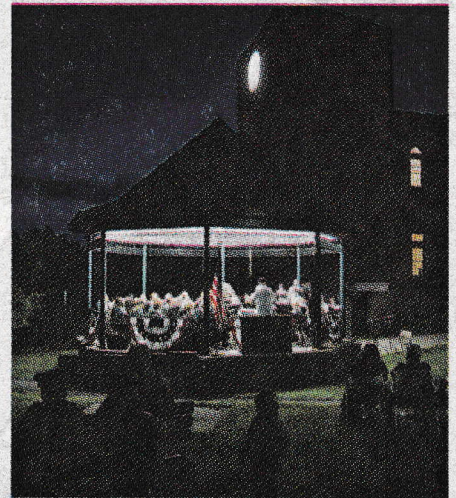
Underlying the performance—and every St. J Band performance—is a connection to the town's heritage. The band prides itself on being the third oldest continually performing band in the country. It has played in a number of venues across the northeast, for two presidents, and countless local residents.

Some of the most prominent attributes of Courthouse Park are Civil War-era fixtures; two cannons and a large memorial. They stand adjacent to the bandstand. Kids often sit and play on the cannons while listening to the performance.

In the 1860s, the band held performances to enlist men in the Union Army. Now they play next to a monument recognizing 80 citizen-soldiers lost. A seven-foot Italian marble statue sits on top of it, sculpted by Vermonter Larkin G. Mead. An inscription on the monument reads, "In Honor of the St. Johnsbury Volunteers Who Sacrificed Their Lives in Defense of the Union."

The band is made up of about 40 members, all volunteers, ranging from youth to 90 years old. They rehearse weekly, building a balanced set list of new music and historic pieces. Percussionist and Band Manager Dave Hare said they are lucky to have so many talented musicians.

Hare appreciates the connection that mu-



(FILE PHOTO)

The St. Johnsbury Band performs in an August 2016 concert at Courthouse Park.

sic creates between audience and performer. He said he enjoys when kids start to march around the bandstand to the music. He also said he appreciates the audience's participation during the "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"The last piece we play every concert is our National Anthem," said Hare. "I find it personally very moving to look out into the audience and see so many people with their hands over their hearts and see their lips moving as we play it."

According to Hare, his role in the band has gifted him with several rewarding experiences. He expects the same is true for those on the other side of the park.

"I think our summer concert series adds to the quality of life in St. Johnsbury," said Hare. "It is a great way to spend a casual summer evening."

Concerts typically run from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Mondays from mid-June to mid-August. Similar town band experiences in the Northeast Kingdom may be found in Lyndonville's Bandstand Park, Wednesdays at 7 p.m. and Newport's Gardner Park, Thursdays at 7:30 p.m.

What You'll Need When You Go:

(Tips from the author)

An early enough arrival to find a good spot • blanket or lawn chair • sweater or sweatshirt • bug spray (the bugs aren't bad but better to be safe than sorry) • an ice cream appetite