

## Lady Brass Series

### Donna-Mae Baldenecker Burr Smith, the U.S. Military's First Female Bugler



Photo by Robin Loznak/The News-Review

By Christina M. Cavitt

The day in 1933 when the house burned down started out normally. Thirteen year old Donna-Mae, the second of Walter and Florence Baldenecker's three daughters, rose early to avoid squabbling with her sisters over bathroom time. Walter was home on layover from his job as an engineer for the Rock Island Railroad, but he wisely kept safe distance from the girls' morning preparations. Florence was already up, busily putting breakfast on the table.

#### Save the Instruments!

After eating, Donna-Mae slung her well-used cornet over her shoulder and bounded out the back door to walk to school. She was a superior student—her best subject was band. Donna-Mae was tall for her age—she'd eventually reach 5 feet 11 inches. She was also a tomboy whose years of softball, running, and climbing trees helped her develop exceptional physical strength. Speeding toward school without a worry in the world, she couldn't have known by that day's end that her life perspective would change forever.

Just after 4 p.m., Donna-Mae jogged into the kitchen for an after school snack. Her father was taking a break from his home chores to relax at the kitchen table. "Hi Dad!" she called cheerfully as she dropped her cornet at the door and headed for the Frigidaire. Suddenly, her little sister, Mary Lou, skidded in on roller skates.

"Hey there, young lady, no skating in the house," Walter admonished. "But Daddy," she cried, "the house is on fire!" He ran upstairs and saw the upper level in flames.

"Run outside," he barked at his daughters and then hollered to his wife to get out of the house. On her way out, Donna-Mae picked up the family's heavy cathedral-style radio (remember she was an exceptionally strong girl). Somehow, the family piano got dragged to the neighbor's lawn. Donna-Mae's cornet and her sister's woodwind instruments were rescued too. Nobody was hurt, but the house burned to the ground.

As she huddled with her family to gaze at the smoldering mass that had been their home, Donna-Mae considered the fragility of life. She realized she could decide to live in fear, or she could boldly grab life by the horns (no pun intended!). Luckily, she chose the latter.

#### Background Music

Donna-Mae was born January 3, 1920 in Manly, Iowa. She was 13 when her family relocated to St. Paul Park, Minnesota. In her earliest memories, there was always music.

"Dad couldn't carry a tune in a basket," she chuckled. "But Mom was very musical. She sang and played the piano. And we had the radio on all the time, listening to all kinds of shows, including the Paul Whiteman classical programs. I also loved the big band hits."

"I also sang in the church choir," she continued. "Our 8th grade music teacher, L.L. Whittbecker (former trumpet player with the Sousa Band), traveled from school to school, renting out instruments, giving lessons and directing the bands. I admired him so much that I picked trumpet to play in band. It cost \$3 rent a month." The fact that the rest of the brass section was male didn't inhibit her one bit.

In addition to the school band, every Saturday found her bussing 12 miles to St. Paul for the Dyer's Music Company Band practice. Saturday nights during the summer, she sat in with the concert band at a nearby village's outdoor gazebo.

"That was a lot of fun," she said. "Mr. Whittbecker also directed the band, so he drove several of us to the concerts. Afterwards, we'd get an ice cream cone for our pay. That was fine with us. We were just happy to play."

In high school, the young trumpeter was recruited into the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M) company band. From 1935 to 1938, Donna-Mae played in the Payne Avenue and Brown & Bigelow Drum & Bugle Corps. Most of the brass players were male, but she performed well on her part and the boys accepted her. She remembers marching in the scorching heat of the Minneapolis Aquatennial Grand Day Parade in July and the frigid St. Paul Winter Carnival Parade in January.

"We held our mouthpieces in our hands so the metal wouldn't stick to our lips in the cold, and we drenched rubbing alcohol on the valves so they wouldn't freeze," she said.

#### Sugar Blues

Sugar Blues (popularized by Clyde McCoy's wa-wa sound effect) inspired Donna-Mae to buy a wa-wa mute so she could squeeze out her unique rendition of the tune. Today, she keeps that old mute on a shelf in her home as a treasured memento of the happy hours she spent shaping songs with it.

Donna-Mae wasn't aware of any financial difficulties her parents had during the Great Depression. Nevertheless, after she graduated from high school in 1938, they were pleased that their middle daughter won a singing contest and was awarded a scholarship to the Minneapolis College of Music.

When World War II began, she took a job inspecting 30 caliber cartridges at a nearby munitions plant. She didn't like the work and found the noise nerve-racking. She was still playing trumpet, but only at home, "for my own amazement," she joked. Then she saw the newspaper ad that changed everything.

"The United States Army wanted females to play in their Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) Band," Donna-Mae said. She sent an application right away and a few days later, the Army sent a telegram advising her to report immediately! When she didn't respond that day, they sent her another one the next day.

#### A Band of Their Own

"I was excited to report to the Army," she said. "They loaded us onto a train heading for Des Moines, Iowa. There, we were inducted at the old cavalry post, where everything smelled of horses, including our new uniforms!"

"The pay wasn't so good, the food was forgettable and there was absolutely no privacy in the barracks," she said. "But, I didn't care. I was going to get to play my trumpet all day, everyday." Indeed, the Army filled their days with music. Band members didn't have to go through recruit training because they were still just auxiliary and their superior officers were afraid they'd injure themselves."

Male musicians were steadily being shipped to overseas assignments. Some of the remaining men resented the influx of women, but it wasn't long before the entire band was female. The trumpet section had eight players. Donna-Mae was assigned first chair.

"There were two other ladies who were as good as I," Donna-Mae said. Fortunately, for the second and third chairs, whenever the warrant officer was absent, Donna-Mae led the band and they took over first chair.

The WAAC musicians marched a lot of parades and trumpets were always on deck for bugle calls. They played trumpets, rather than bugles, into a megaphone that directed the sound to different areas on base. She knew the soldiers didn't exactly appreciate her daybreak intonations.

"I was not very popular," she said smiling. But she was proud to signal each day's beginning.

The band also traveled throughout the Midwest to march in parades and recruit more women into the Army, which was evolving into the Women's Army Corps (WACs).

#### 366 Reveilles

Donna-Mae married fellow soldier Robert Burr in January 1943. Because the former women's auxiliary was now regular Army, and the Army didn't allow married women at the time, she could no longer serve. She'd been a soldier one year and one day. Those 366 days remain among the best memories of her life.

Robert, on the other hand, didn't have the option to quit. So she followed him to his military assignments and they welcomed a baby boy in March 1944. When Robert left the Army in 1945, they built a home in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Shortly after that, Donna-Mae got a call from Jay Hormel of the Hormel Packing Company in Austin, Minnesota.

#### Spamettes All-Girl Drum & Bugle Corps

"He invited me down to talk with him about leading Hormel's All-Girl Drum & Bugle Corps for the American Legion Nationals Parade in New York City. I accepted and it was a wild ride! I was a combination band director and house mother to 65 girls." The band achieved an impressive second place against scores of other marching units.

"After I got home, Mr. Hormel called me a second time to ask me to go on the road again with the band, this time to distribute Hormel chili samples during a big advertising push. 'I have a child,' I told him. 'We'll get you a nanny and pay all your expenses,' he replied.

"Robert and I decided this was a great opportunity. I took the job and we toured with the Spamettes (as the group became known) throughout the southern states"

Donna-Mae, Robert, and little Craig stayed at hotels (all expenses paid), plus she was bringing home \$50 a week. In 1946, that was good money. According to Donna-Mae their time on the road was "a blast!" By Thanksgiving, Donna-Mae was pregnant again. They decided to settle down back in Minneapolis. The couple welcomed another son in 1948, Kevin, who died of leukemia when he was seven. By 1951, the Burrs made a fresh start in Southern California, settling in the San Fernando Valley.

#### Trumpet Comfort

In 1961, Donna-Mae landed a job as a financial manager with the Los Angeles Board of Education. A couple of years later, Robert came down with inoperable cancer. After a long illness, he died in January 1964. Donna-

**"I'm always absolutely connected with the trumpet."**

Mae, though extremely saddened by this, was a survivor and kept moving forward. Every once in a while she pulled out her trumpet. The familiarity of grasping the case with her left hand, oiling the valves, warming up with a few scales and reading through her sheet music was as comforting as visiting with an old friend. Playing always made her feel better. "I think a lady should play as long as her lip holds out," she said.

As time passed, Donna-Mae met Edgar Smith in Los Angeles, California. "I guess we caught one another's eye," she remarked, smiling wryly. They married in December 1964. She became the mother to four stepchildren.

In 1970, the family moved to Northern California and then to Nevada in 1973. That's where Donna-Mae's artistic nature found a new outlet. Until then, she'd always expressed her creativity through music. In Nevada, she discovered her talent for porcelain painting. Nevertheless, she still kept up her playing and occasionally played at memorials.

In 1992, the Smiths retired to Oregon. Donna-Mae taught trumpet lessons to local children and continued painting. Later on, she attended a funeral and heard "Taps." She decided to volunteer as a bugler for military memorials. "After that, I played many funerals until about two years ago," she said. "I had to stop because I could no longer stand erect and I didn't want to play my trumpet into the ground. It's been very difficult to give up these last couple of years."

Donna-Mae was widowed in 1996. She was inducted into the Bugler's Hall of Fame in June 2009. Her musical legacy continued in her grandson, who played bugle in the United States Air Force.

"I'm a mother first and foremost, but I'm always absolutely connected with the trumpet," she said.

Please visit [www.buglershalloffame.com](http://www.buglershalloffame.com) for more information on the organization.

*This the first in a series of interviews featuring women who have made a positive impact on brass players.*