

Reminiscences of the 1968 Alma Games

The facts surrounding the birth and development of a project are often lost in a sea of myths and fancy. And if the history of the 1968 games is not recorded now, it too will soon move into the never-never land of myth. So, for one and all, this is how I remember the origin of the 1968 Alma Highland Festival and Games.

It is said that nothing is really new and this is true of the Alma Games. The original idea came to me at the games held in Boston in 1962. It did not take a genius attending those games to see the potential of having similar games in Michigan. Having once heard massed pipe bands, one feels this must be heard by the rest of the world.

The idea for the games remained dormant until we returned to Michigan in 1966. Early in 1967 preliminary discussions were held with Guile Graham (Graham of Montrose) at Alma College. The college, with its Scottish traditions and affiliation with the Presbyterian Church and its Scottish heritage, seemed a likely place to begin.

Mr. Graham enthusiastically supported the idea and suggested that a city organization was needed. He recommended that the Chamber of Commerce of Alma should be brought into the picture.

Prior to meeting with the Chamber of Commerce, it was evident that additional support, particularly in the technical area of organization was needed. Kenneth Jones (MacNeill of Barra) of Okemos, Michigan was contacted and he too, enthusiastically supported the idea.

The first preliminary meeting was held in the office of Guile Graham at Alma College early in November, 1967. The participants Graham, Jones and MacKenzie, agreed that the idea of the games should be immediately presented to the Chamber of Commerce.

We set to work preparing our case for the Chamber. Anticipated questions, problems and objections from the Chamber were considered and answers prepared. On November 10, 1967 we presented the games idea to a select group from the Chamber of Commerce. We had no opportunity to use our carefully prepared answers to problems and objections. There were none. On November 13 the Chamber of Commerce voted unanimously to establish the Alma Highland Festival and Games on May 25, 1968.

Now the real work began. Donald Godfrey was named chairman and regular meetings began in January of 1968. Mr. Jones provided the plan of organi-

zation and estimated that the games would draw ten to fifteen pipe bands, two hundred competitors and 5000 spectators. There were many skeptics, but they gradually came around as time went by. Many problems arose but they were all solved by game time.

The day of the games opened in brilliant sunshine and warm temperatures. The stadium on the grounds of Alma College was in its best condition, awaiting the crowds. Competitors began arriving and the skirl of bagpipes and the drumming of dancing feet was soon heard. Judges took their places and the games started.

Into the college stadium they all came. They came from Colorado in the west, Florida in the south and New York to the east. The largest single group from outside the state was our neighbors to the north and when they left, they took with them to Canada many of the important trophies and medals.

At noon a recess was called and a huge parade of bands, floats and dignitaries wound its way through the city's downtown area. The Alma College Kiltie Band led the way followed by Governor George Romney and the city officials.

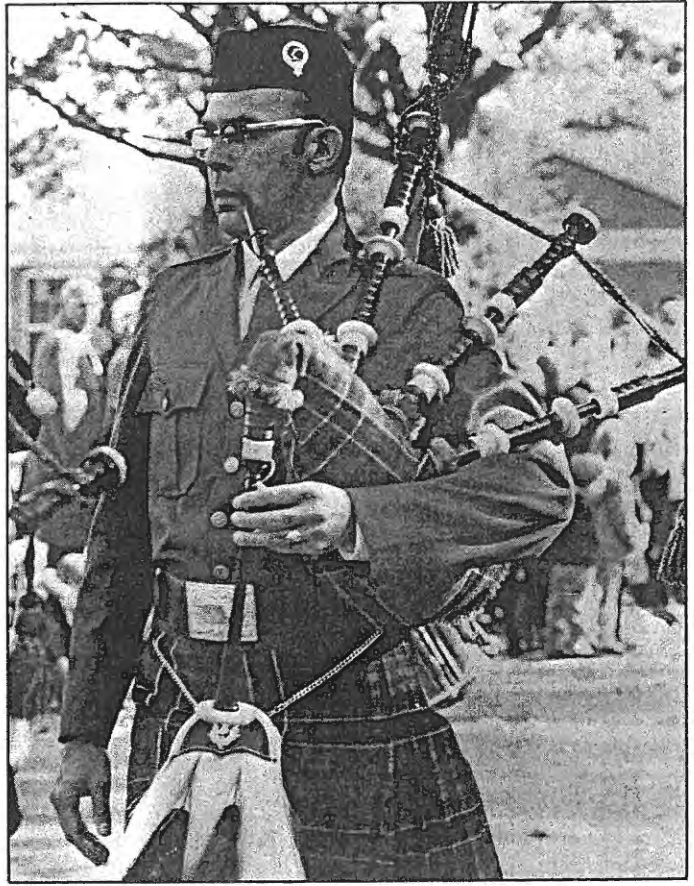
During the opening ceremonies, Governor Romney spoke of the time he walked through the highlands of Scotland as a young missionary of the Mormon faith. Soon the spoken word faded and the sound of pipes was heard again. This time it was the massed bands, the sound that all had come to hear. The sound rose and swelled and was reflected off the Michigan pines bordering the field. It is during such times as this that Scots are reborn for another year.

Throughout the afternoon the bands marched and counter-marched and the judges listened intently. Championship bands were selected and in the closing ceremonies the trophies were awarded by Win Schuler, Chairman of Michigan Week activities. But too soon it was over and the last piper put away his pipes, the last dancer removed her dancing shoes. The spectators went away with the sound of the bagpipes still ringing in their ears; not to be stilled for another year. A few committee people spoke among themselves of the great things and little things that happened that day. And they spoke of the next games for 1969. But that is another story. Let someone else speak of these 1969 games. My story of the 1968 games is finished.

David E. MacKenzie



GEORGE ROMNEY: "You can make this the chief Scottish Highland Festival on the North American continent."



DAVID MacKENZIE marches in the 1968 festival parade. Alma's Highland Festival was his idea.

Alma's Popular Festival

16 Years Ago It Was Just a Dream

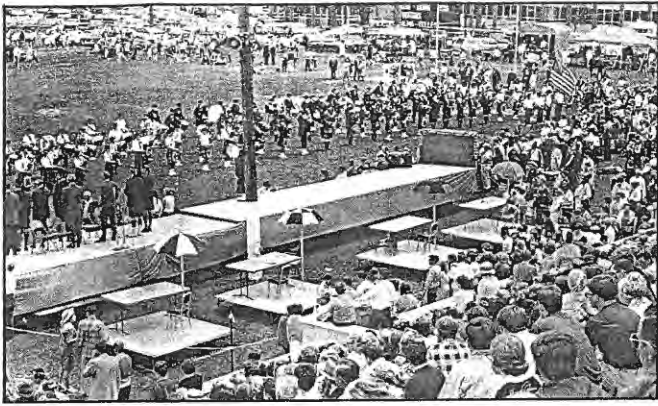
The thrills, color, and inspiring sound of the Alma Highland Festival have made this annual event one of the most popular of America's ethnic celebrations and one of the largest gatherings of Scots in North America. But less than two decades ago the festival was nothing more than a dream in the mind of David E. MacKenzie.

It was in 1967 that MacKenzie, an Alma College alumnus and an accomplished piper from Farmington, Michigan, came back to the college to suggest that a Scottish festival be staged on the campus. With Alma College's Scottish heritage, a product of its affiliation with the Presbyterian Church, this seemed to MacKenzie to be a likely place for such an event. For years the college's athletic teams had been known as Scots; its marching band was attired in kilts of Royal MacPherson tartan, and a group of dancers, the Kiltie Lassies, had acquainted students and friends of the college with Scottish dances.

College officials shared MacKenzie's en-

thusiasm about the festival and suggested that he consult the Alma Chamber of Commerce about his idea. This he did on November 10, 1967, taking with him to the meeting with Chamber representatives Kenneth Jones, pipe major of a Lansing area band. Three days later the Chamber of Commerce voted unanimously to establish the Alma Highland Festival, and May 25, 1968, was selected as the date for the first festival. Jones and MacKenzie made frequent trips to Alma to assist an energetic group of local volunteers in planning and preparing for the event.

Addressing the crowd in Alma College's stadium that day, then-governor George Romney predicted that "if you persist, you can make this the chief Scottish Highland Festival on the North American continent." Helping to fulfill that prophecy have been the thousands of talented dancers, pipers, drummers, and athletes who have made the Alma festival such a crowd-pleasing event.



The first massed band at Alma



Too pooped to pipe

1968



Drum competitors



U. S. Air Force Pipe Band

1969

Alma's is a Photogenic Festival

The bright colors and the pleasant setting – coupled with the action of pipers, drummers, dancers, and athletes – make the Alma Highland Festival a most photogenic event. It has been that way right from the beginning back in 1968. Thousands of camera carriers, amateur and professional alike, have captured the beauty and the

thrills of the Alma festival on film during the past 15 years. Thousands more will do so in 1983. On these pages are a sample of the kinds of scenes that have made the Alma festival an especially popular attraction for photographers through the years.



Tiny dancers

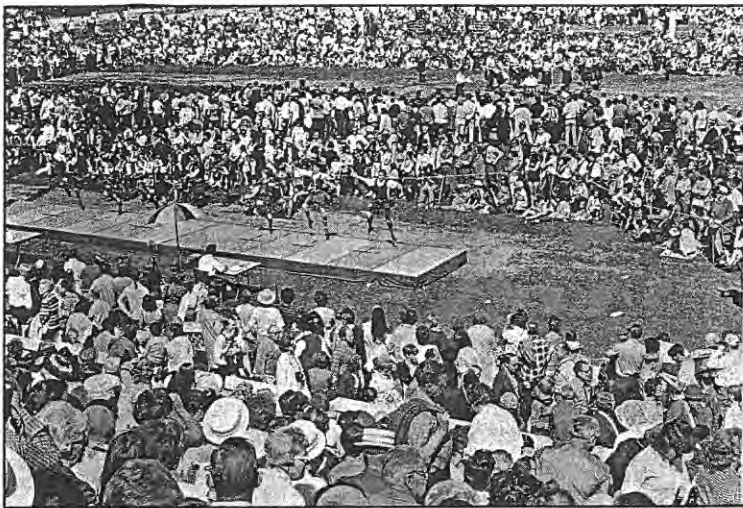


Pipes and drums



Caber toss action

1970



Competitors, spectators fill the field.



Dancers . . .



. . . and accompanist

1971



Sword dance



Awaiting her turn



Rugged rugby



Pipe dreamers

1972



Drum competition



Heywood Hale Broun, Norman MacKenzie

1973



The massed band

1974



Serenade



The Governor

1975



Friends at festival's Collie show

1976



The festival parade

1977



Tuning up

1978



Performers from Guelph

1979



Capturing sights and sounds

1980



Paraders

1981



Massed bandsmen perform.

1982

Music in a Bag

The Pipes



Alma's pipers provide pleasant sights and sounds.

Although bagpipes originated in ancient times and one was even said to have been played by Nero, though probably not while Rome burned, the Scottish Highland bagpipe is the kind that is most familiar throughout the world today.

It is not certain when the first pipes were taken to Scotland, but they had become popular there by the 15th century. And today whenever anyone hears the music of the pipes, he or she thinks of Scotland.

The Scottish Highland bagpipe, the instrument that is played by competitors at the Alma Highland Festival, consists of a leather bag and five pipes. Through one of these pipes the piper blows air into the bag. With pressure on the bag from his arm, he forces the air out through the other four, providing the music.

The valved tube through which the piper forces the air into the bag is called the blowpipe. One of the tubes through which the air exhausts has eight openings on which the melody is played by the piper, using his fingers to cover and uncover the holes. This pipe is called the chanter.

The range of the chanter is just nine notes - - from G in the treble clef to A above it - - and they don't correspond exactly to the notes played on most instruments. If you find that it takes a while to get used to pipe music, this is probably the reason.

The other three pipes each produce a single note and are called drones. The note produced by each of the two shorter drones is in unison with the lower A on the chanter and that of the longer one is an octave lower. The drones are tuned by lengthening or shortening them.

When playing the pipes, the piper puts the drones over the left shoulder and places the bag beneath the left arm. The blowpipe is placed in the mouth and the chanter is held with the fingers. Usually the piper walks back and forth while playing.

To articulate the melody and reiterate notes, pipers employ the technique called gracing. This involves rapidly interpolating notes outside the melody to give the effect of detached notes.

Bagpipes are often used as solo instruments, but they are also used in bands, accompanied by tenor and bass drums. Visitors to the Alma Highland Festival see them used in both ways.

Basically, there are two kinds of bagpipe music: Piobaireachd (Pibroch) or Great Music and (2) Ceol Beag or Little Music, which includes the familiar marches, jigs, strathspeys and reels. The Piobaireachd is the classical music of the bagpipe and is descriptive of events of joy, sorrow, or triumph. It tells a story and could, for example, describe the birth of an heir or the death of a clan chief. Piobaireachd is difficult music to play with its groundwork and variations and can only be accomplished by pipers with considerable experience, great skill, and the right temperament.

Exciting and Enjoyable

This is Highland Dancing

Highland dancing is an exciting and enjoyable activity. The scores of dancers competing at the Alma Highland Festival will assure you of that. And they'll also tell you that it's hard work. Their efforts in preparation for the Alma festival and several similar, though smaller, events in the United States and Canada this summer, have been going on for several weeks.

Although most of the Scottish dancers in North America are girls, the competition is not limited to the fairer sex and some of the top dancers at Alma have been men. In Scotland, women had for many years been excluded from dancing competition, but the rules prohibiting their participation have been relaxed at most Scottish Highland games.

The basic movements in Highland dancing are a series of kicking and beating steps. The kicking steps involve extension of the free leg, and the beating steps constitute the accented placement of the free foot in relation to the leg supporting body weight. Combined with jumps and turns, they provide numerous variations.

The steps of the Highland dances are light, but exact and quick. The body is erect, the supporting leg straight, and toes are pointed at all times. Hand and arm positions are precise with fists at the hips or arms curved overhead with the thumb and third finger touching.

Among the best known Highland dances are the Fling, Sword Dance, Shean Trews, and the Strathspey and Reel.

The Highland Fling was inspired by the graceful movements of deer on a hillside, and the arms of the dancers held over their heads symbolize the antlers of the stag. Many years ago soldiers dancing the Highland Fling did so on their battle shields, and it is for this reason that the Highland Fling is danced in a small area.

The Sword Dance, known to the Scots as Ghillie Callum, dates back to the eighth or ninth century. It is performed over two swords placed in a crossed position. The dancer steps nimbly around them, placing the feet intricately between the blades, rising in the air and executing cutting movements that require years of practice to perfect. If the swords are touched, the sequence of the dance is broken; and there is a superstition among dancers that to carry on the dance after the swords are touched brings bad luck.

The Shean Trews, or Seann Truibhas, was
(continued on page 27)



Precise movements and colorful swirling kilts are Highland dancing trademarks.



Most exciting of the Scottish athletic contests is the caber toss.

Sports of the Brawny Scots

Of the many athletic contests enjoyed for centuries by Scots at their Highland games, the caber toss is one of the most thrilling for competitors and spectators alike.

It takes not only a great deal of skill but a good bit of agility and preciseness as well to loft the heavy log and have it fall anywhere near the position that it is supposed to.

The caber itself is a long, heavy log -- 15 to 20 feet in length and weighing about a hundred pounds. At some games several cabers of varying weights and lengths are used.

In preparing to toss the caber, the athlete raises it to a perpendicular position with the wider end at the top. Holding the narrower end in his hands and with the caber resting against his left shoulder to steady it, he has control of only about two feet of the log. Considerable strength and expert judgment are necessary to keep the caber balanced.

With the caber in this upright position, the competitor begins to run forward with it, gathering momentum and straining to keep the log from falling prematurely. He stops suddenly. At that moment the caber swings forward from his shoulder and the heavy top end begins to plummet toward the ground. Simultaneously, the athlete lifts the bottom end in an effort to flip the caber so that when the upper end strikes the sod the narrower

end that he had held in his hands will fall at a point farthest from him.

The best toss is not the one that goes farthest, but rather is the one that is the straightest. In other words, the idea is to toss the caber so that the narrower bottom end lands as nearly as possible in a 12 o'clock position. This can be visualized by imagining the caber to be the hour hand of a clock with its thick end at the center of the clock face and the athlete throwing from the 6 o'clock mark.

Through the years the Scots have tested their strength in many other athletic events during their Highland games. Among these are hill races, putting the stone, tossing the sheaf, throwing the hammer, tug of war, throwing a weight for distance, throwing a weight over a bar, pole vaulting, and other track and field events. And, as visitors to the Alma Highland Festival know, dancing and piping are also important competitive aspects of the traditional Highland games.

The games originated centuries ago as impromptu competitions at clan gatherings called by chiefs for hunting, military exercises, and conducting general clan business. The breakup of clan organization after the Jacobite uprising of 1745 brought these gatherings to an end. The first of the modern Highland games were held about 90 years later at Braemar and Strathdon.

Here's What The Judges Are Looking For

Among the many non-Scottish spectators at Alma's Highland Festival each year are some who aren't sure just what the judges are looking for when they evaluate competitors in the various events. For them, this page is intended to be a helpful companion, explaining briefly what is important in the eye -- and ear -- of the judge.

Dancers - When the dancers are on the platform, the judges' attention is directed principally at the feet of the competitors. Regardless of the skill of the dancer in other aspects, bad positioning of the feet mars the performance. Judges also observe, of course, the hand movements and posture. Basically, they rate the competitors on their technique, timing, and general deportment.

Solo Pipers - - In judging solo pipers, the judges are primarily concerned with three things: (1) the technical playing of the tune, particularly the fingering; (2) the tuning of the pipes, noting whether the chanter is tuned to perfection to the key of B flat with the drones tuned to the chanter; and (3) the tempo and musical performance.

Solo Drummers - - Since the purpose of the drums in Scottish music is to enhance the pipes, judges of individual drummers are concerned with not only the technical requirements of the beats but also how the performance blends with the pipes. Thus, individual drummers are always accompanied by pipers in competition.

Pipe Bands - - Pipe bands are rated by three observers - - two pipe judges and a drum judge. Their functions are much the same as in judging individual pipers and drummers. In rating the bands, however, they are particularly concerned with the identical tuning of all instruments in the group. All chanters must be tuned to B flat and drones tuned to the chanter. Bass drums must be tuned to the bass drones of the pipes and snare drums to the tenor drones. Of course, all members of the band should start at the same time and stay together throughout the tune. A properly tuned band performing precisely sounds as if it were one piper playing. Competing pipe bands are grouped according to grades - - I, II, III, and IV. As a band becomes more experienced it is placed in a higher grade and plays more difficult tunes. The top grade is I, the next highest II, etc.



Footwork gets the most attention of festival dancing judges.