

Calling the Clans

Bagpipers at County Farm

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If thy neighbour offend thee, give each of his children bagpipes.

—Old Scottish proverb

Robert Droppleman and William Kincaid have heard their share of bagpipe jokes. Though they're proud Scots and longtime pipers, they don't mind telling a few themselves. "What's the definition of a gentleman?" Kincaid asks, as he assembles his pipes for an afternoon practice at County Farm Park. "Someone who knows how to play the bagpipes but doesn't." Droppleman smiles. "It is an unusual sound," he says. "And I'll admit that beginner pipers are not as . . ."—he pauses diplomatically—"easy to listen to as more advanced pipers." Then he blows into a mouthpiece to inflate his bagpipe, squeezes down with his arm, and sends a stirring snippet of "Scotland the Brave" echoing across the park. Kincaid nods happily: "You put fifteen of those things together behind some drums that are keeping a fairly heavy beat, and it really gets the blood curdling."

Droppleman and Kincaid are pipe major and manager, respectively, of Ann Arbor Pipes and Drums, the only bagpipe band in town. Comprising twenty-seven pipers and percussionists, the group got its start in 1993, when students of a local bagpipe teacher decided to form a band. Its size and reputation have grown since then, and it performs regularly at parades, festivals, and, yes, weddings throughout the Midwest. Since 1995 the group has also tested itself against other bagpipe bands in that most Scottish of settings, the Highland Games.

Held in cities around the world, Highland Games serve as outposts of Scottish culture and meeting places for Scots and their far-flung descendants. As Kincaid tells it, the games' bagpipe competitions grew out of the natural competitiveness of Scottish clans. "The chief of one clan would put his piper against the piper from another clan," he says, "and they would go back and forth until the local authority figure declared the winner."

Though its members are strictly amateurs, Ann Arbor Pipes and Drums has racked up an impressive record at these competitions, including first-place finishes in Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee. "We go to these competitions not only for the experience and the honor of the thing, but also because there's prize money involved," Kincaid says. But Droppleman shrugs. "In the grand scheme of things, it's really a trivial amount of money. It wouldn't even begin to cover band members' expenses."

He points to his bagpipe. "This is a good old set, probably from around World War I. An old set of pipes will cost anywhere from a thousand to thirteen thousand dollars. New sets are

about fifteen hundred to three thousand dollars. We don't pay band members, but the prize money helps them buy things like supplies and drumheads—and kilts. We like to have everybody in the same kilts.”

Which brings up a touchy question—do they ever feel uncomfortable wearing something that, let's face it, looks like a skirt? Droppleman shakes his head. “I've been wearing one since I was seven years old. I'd feel stranger in a suit than I do in a kilt.” He adds wryly, “Do you know why they call it a kilt? Because kilt is what you'll get if you call it a skirt.”

Frequent appearances around town have made Ann Arbor Pipes and Drums into local ambassadors of sorts for Scottish culture. “People come up and tell you about their Scottish background, and there are all sorts of interesting questions about the uniform, about the pipes. The kids like it particularly,” Kincaid says. “It's claimed there are five hundred thousand people of Scottish descent in southeast Michigan alone, and I've always felt that there's not an awareness of this Scottish connection here. It's not like the Japanese or Arab community, where you know it if you belong to it. We're so ethnically absorbed that our Scottish consciousness has disappeared. “That's what piping is all about, to preserve that sense of unique cultural identity—to tell people who we are.”