

A Profile of Piper Sandy MacPhee

(Pipers of North America, *researched and written by P/M Scott Williams, is an ongoing series in Celtic Heritage and CelticLife magazines.*)



Sandy MacPhee and his collection of piping awards.

Alexander Uist “Sandy” MacPhee was born in Detroit, Michigan, in April 1932. His mother, Alexandrina Edmonston, was born in Western Ross, Scotland. She was a cook and a baker, and also a housewife after she married Donald MacPhee, of South Uist. Their first language was Gaelic. All of Sandy’s MacPhee uncles were pipers.



“Uncle Michael was the piper for the Marquis of Bute,” he remembers. “Archie was a boxer in World War I who later bought a bar/pub in Greenock and was a very good friend of P.M. Hamilton Workman. Angus and John were the bachelors of the family and they remained on the family homestead in Geirnish, South Uist. My father, Donald immigrated to America, and he

was the only son that had a child that kept up with the piping. One of his sisters who moved to Vancouver, B.C., had daughters who play in the Vancouver Ladies' Pipe Band. They were called the 'MacAulay Girls'."

All the MacPhee brothers played on the right shoulder except Donald. Donald played on the left shoulder but his son Sandy played on the right shoulder. Sandy's son Donald plays on the left, the same side as his grandfather.

"The Marquis of Bute bought my uncle Michael a set of full silver Henderson pipes," recalls Sandy. "My father bought the sister set and they were passed on to me. Now my son Donald plays those pipes."

Sandy's father, Donald emigrated to Canada in 1927 as a farm hand. "He was the top player in the country at that time," says Sandy, "and early on he played for a brief time with the Essex Scottish Pipe Band of Windsor under the direction of Pipe Major Jock Copeland."

Donald was then solicited by the Ford Motor Car Company to come to Detroit and work for them and play in the Ford Motor Pipe Band under Pipe Major Hector MacInnes, another transplanted Scot who was born and raised in Stonehouse, Scotland. The band had been formed in the mid 1920s.

"The connection between Henry Ford and Pipe Major MacInnes was through Ford's chauffeur, Alex Adams, who married MacInnes' sister," says Sandy in that typical Highland fashion of linking everyone up. "Adams was the band's first Drum Major." The Ford Motor Pipe Band became famous for their outstanding ability, and traveled all over the continent.



Sandy with the Detroit Highlanders Band

"When I was a youngster," Sandy reminisces, "I travelled with my Dad and the band up until 1945. I remember that year I played with the band at Kennywood Park, Pittsburgh, and also at

the Hamilton Highland Games. We played “Lord Alexander Kennedy”, Arniston Castle”, and “The Gray Bob”, and that was about the band’s last competitive performance. After the war, the band broke up.”

“I won my first solo prize in 1944 at Kennywood Park,’ continues Sandy. “In the days when I was competing, there weren’t as many levels as we have today. Back in the ‘Olde Days’, as they say, if you won a prize in the Open you had to play for the Highland Dancing competition. When I played in the Detroit Highlanders Pipe Band we were always in the prize list.”

After graduating from High School, Sandy served his country in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War. When he came home from the service, he joined the Dearborn Police Department and married Cathy, his wife of more than 50 years. He joined the Masonic Lodge and is a 32nd degree Mason and a Shriner. He started the Shrine Pipe Band in Detroit. Sandy is also a member of the American Legion. During his successful solo career, Sandy was the Pipe Sgt. of the St Thomas (Ontario) Pipe Band and this is where Sandy found his calling – teaching. About half of the band’s pipers were his students. Not only was the band successful but Sandy's students also excelled in solo competitions.

“My son Donald was born in 1966. I had a baby, a two- year-old and a nine-year-old, and a wife with a cardiac condition. Because of this, I couldn’t practice enough to continue as a competitive piper and I did not have time to play in a band. I was immediately put on the judging panel of the Pipers Society of Ontario and judged pretty much from 1966 to 1977.

“My wife had her first heart surgery in 1971. In 1977 I was advised to leave Michigan and go to a warmer climate for my wife’s health. I taught three bands in the city of Dunedin, Florida, and after two years helped to arrange for Sandy Keith to come and teach. The highlight of my time in Florida was meeting Mike Cusack who was already an accomplished Piobaireachd player, but his light music left a lot to be desired. I also had an opportunity teach my son Donald and I taught a girl named Liz Payne who is a premier teacher in California today. I continued to judge in Nova Scotia, Medicine Hat (Alberta), Regina (Saskatchewan), Ontario and in the United States.



Sandy and his students ca. 1975.

“In 1999 my wife and I moved to Houston Texas because we thought she might need more surgery and to be closer to our two daughters. Our family is very important to us. My wife’s name is Mary Ann Catherine MacLean MacPhee. She was named after her two grandmothers. At the age of four, Cathy spent 10 months on the Island of Lewis. She went over speaking no Gaelic and came back to Detroit speaking hardly any English. She loves the Gaelic songs and attended the Gaelic Mod up in Stornaway as a spectator in 1989, 2001 and 2005.

“Our children are all involved in the Scottish arts,” Sandy continues. “I was my son Donald’s primary teacher but he also went to Andrew Wright for Piobaireachd. Donald is a Gold medal piper and member of the World Champion Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band. His wife Christine Lacey is a six-time world champion Highland dancer as well as an examiner for the British Association of Teachers of Dance (BATD) and Chairman of the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (Highland dancing's world governing body). Our daughters, Diane (Krugh) and Donna (Cusack) are examiners for the BATD and they both teach Highland Dancing at St. Thomas Episcopal School in Texas.

Between them, they have produced many U.S. and several World Champion Highland Dancers. Our son-in-law, Michael Cusack (See Celtic Heritage, Jan/Feb, 2004) is also a Gold Medalist and a winner of both the Clasp and the Senior Piobaireachd. Our oldest grandson plays the drums, our granddaughter is a Highland dancer and our youngest grandson is following in his father’s footsteps and plays the pipes. My wife, our children and our children’s spouses appreciate and have a great love for piping.

“When I was growing up in Detroit, my father was my bagpipe teacher. He was a perfectionist when it came to the bagpipe and bagpipe music. Needless to say, he did not have too many students, as the easy way out was less of a challenge for them. My father taught me light music and, when he felt I was ready for Piobaireachd, he sent me to Donald MacMillan from South Uist who lived in Windsor, Ontario.

“In those years, piping schools and workshops were non existent. There were concerts, however, and the organizers brought people like the late John D. Burgess over from Scotland. John was 17 when I saw him first and we were the same age. We became very close friends through our piping connections. John was a great player and the piping world lost a great piper when he died.”

Sandy’s first pipe band was the Ford Motors Pipe Band, but he also played with the Detroit Highlanders Pipe Band, the Aylmer Legion Pipe Band, the St. Thomas Legion Pipe Band, the Moslem Temple Pipe Band, and the Chrysler Highlanders Pipe Band.



Ford Motor Pipe Band

“During the years that I was in the Ford Motors Pipe Band,” says Sandy, “George Duncan was asked to come and work at Ford and he soon became a member of the band. When he came to Detroit first, he lived with us. He was a pupil of the renowned teacher and composer, Roddy Campbell, a man who was very special to my father. I learned a lot about Roddy Campbell’s style of teaching from George. George Duncan had a great influence on me, as he became the Pipe Major of the Detroit Highlanders Pipe Band.”

Sandy sat his judge’s exams in Scotland at Pitlochry, Shotts and Cowal along with P.M. Bob Hardie, P.M. John Weatherston, and P.M. Angus MacDonald of the Glasgow Police. He was a charter member of the Pipers and Pipe Band Society of Ontario and was instrumental in starting the Detroit/Windsor Branch of the Society.

Sandy was a music teacher and head of the Scottish Arts Program in the Dunedin School system. He has been an active judge and workshop teacher in the southern United States.

“I taught many pipers privately as well as teaching in the Pinellas County School System,” says Sandy. “I taught the Junior High School, Senior High School and Dunedin City Pipe Bands.”

Sandy MacPhee is a teacher’s teacher. His students read as a literal ‘Who’s Who’ of American Bagpiping.

“Just to name a few, there were my son Donald, my son-in-law Mike Cusack, Donald Forgan, Scott MacAulay, Ed Neigh, Archie Oakes, Bill Grant, Ian Forrester, John Noble, Bruce Burt, George and Ian Killen, and Lars Sloan.” Most of his students are active successful teachers today giving back to the piping and Scottish community. “Proper teaching is so important in the piping world,” says Sandy.

When Sandy and Cathy moved to Houston, Sandy continued to teach and does so to this day, helping want-to-be pipers become better pipers, competitors, and musicians.

“My son Donald was the only student that came up through the Pinellas School system who continued his piping career. Liz Payne Steuber of California was a product of the Pinellas School System but I did not teach her piping in the School. I just polished her off and also helped her with passing on her piping knowledge.

“Years ago,” he adds, “when I was judging, I often did workshops after the games. Also many years ago, I wrote articles for the piping magazine called the North American Scotsman.”

(Watch for Scott Williams' next installment of Pipers of North America in the Winter 2009 issue of CelticLife magazine. Also check out some of his previous articles in our Archives.)