

A BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA MCCHESENEY WITH EMPHASIS ON HER ROLE AS A
FEMALE SCHOOL BAND DIRECTOR IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA FROM 1930-1964

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to write a biography of Virginia McChesney with emphasis on her role as a female school band director in Southwest Virginia from 1930-1964. McChesney was a music educator responsible for not only creating school band programs in Wise County Public Schools, Wise County, Virginia, but also for helping to sustain a viable school band program during World War II. McChesney was honored by Women Band Directors International as probably being the “first career high school woman band director.” Primary sources included articles gathered from newspapers local to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, (*Big Stone Gap Post, Kingsport Times, Bristol Herald Courier, Virginia-Tennessean*), concert programs, high school yearbooks, school newspapers, and other artifacts from local museums. These sources were gathered from the Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Center, the Bristol Public Library, Virginia Intermont College, the Wise County Historical Society, the C. Bascom Slep Memorial Library, the Southwest Virginia Museum, Ancestry.com, and the AccessNewspaperARCHIVE database. Secondary sources were obtained through OHIOlink, interlibrary loan, the University of Findlay, and Kent State University. Suggestions for further research include investigating the lives and careers of Helen May Butler and Gladys S. Wright as well as investigating the careers of other female band directors who taught early in the school band movement in the United States.

DEDICATION

To Dad –
You did good.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally, much love and thanks goes to my husband, Weston Kincade, who not only willingly contributed his time and expertise to proofreading this document, but has been supportive beyond belief during the past two years. Although no longer living, I will always be grateful to my grandmother, Lois Croskey, who gave unselfishly so I could follow my dreams and also helped me realize how special that opportunity is.

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PREFACE

In 2007, I was hired as a band director in Wise County, Virginia, which is in Central Appalachia, close to the borders of Tennessee and Kentucky. Although the school I taught at had an average enrollment of slightly under two hundred students, it was expected that the twenty-member marching band would participate in the two band festivals hosted in the county. So, dutifully, each of the four years I taught there, my students participated in the McChesney Band Festival along with other bands from Tennessee, Kentucky, and Southwest Virginia. Every year before the awards ceremony, the announcer would begin by saying, “The McChesney Festival is held in memory of a grand lady, Mrs. Virginia McChesney . . .,” and then proceed to give a short biography. It was obvious that Mrs. McChesney meant a great deal to many people and that starting bands in Wise County was a labor of love for her.

In 2007, a looming high school consolidation and many other factors meant teaching band in many ways was still a labor of love in Wise County. It was obvious though, both through my experience and that of my colleagues, that the school band programs in Wise County had an immeasurable impact on many of our students. Although I left Wise County in order to start my graduate studies in music education, the story of Mrs. McChesney’s dedication to music education and the bands in Wise County made an enormous impression on me, too.

I initially began researching Mrs. McChesney for a class assignment. As I started to learn more about the history of music education in the United States, it became clear that female band directors like Mrs. McChesney, who taught before World War II, were exceptionally uncommon. I chose to research her because I needed to know if her story was really true. It seemed unlikely

that an Appalachian woman in the 1930s, who did not receive a salary for over half of her career, could or would start a band program that would later receive superior ratings from highly esteemed adjudicators such as Cliffe Bainum and Paul Yoder. This document is the tangible result of my research, which is an account of the life of one of the first career woman school band directors in the United States. What is lost in an academic paper but became increasingly clear as I met her former students is that Mrs. McChesney's true importance does not come from being an example of a woman in a male-dominated career, or from the success of her ensembles, but rather from the many lives that she touched.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Every year since 1980, on a Saturday in early October, high school marching bands from Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and Eastern Tennessee have gathered in the small town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, to participate in the McChesney Band Festival. This festival is a tribute to Virginia McChesney (1896-1992), who was the first band director at Big Stone Gap High School. Mrs. McChesney, a native of Big Stone Gap, was a trained violinist who taught private lessons in her home until the age of ninety-four. In a time when many places did not allow girls to even participate in band, she created orchestras and bands for school students in Wise County Public Schools. Mrs. McChesney was responsible not only for starting these instrumental music programs during the Depression but also for helping propel them through the hardship created by World War II. For many years she worked without compensation and created successful performing ensembles with little available resources. In the heart of Central Appalachia, her programs were some of the first of their kind. During the 1936-37 school year, there were only seven orchestras in Southwest Virginia high schools, and two of those were McChesney's. The nearest band program was over fifty miles away in Bristol, Virginia.¹

While not the first woman school band director in the United States, her career is very unusual because during the 1930s bands were still dominated by male directors. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women did form bands that, similar to men's groups, performed for a variety of functions. One of the most famous examples of a woman bandleader is Helen May Butler, who, just like John Philip Sousa, toured the country with her band for many years.²

At the beginning of the school band movement, school bands were all male or separated according to gender. The Joliet (Illinois) Township High School Band, an all-boy band under the direction of A.R. McAllister, was founded in 1912 and won first place at four national band contests. The success of this band helped shape not only standard band instrumentation, but also was a model for many other school bands.³ John W. Wainwright, whose all-boy band won the first national band contest, also directed an all-girl band at Fostoria High School.⁴ One rare example of a girls' school band that began independently of a boys' band was the highly successful Lincoln Junior High Girls' Band (1923-1940) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that was led for a time by a female director.⁵

Attitudes toward women's participation in bands did change slowly over time, and opportunities for women increased during World War II when qualified male band members and teachers were occupied with war efforts.⁶ Two well-known female school band directors were Gladys Wright and Barbara Buehlman, both of whom started teaching after McChesney. Both women were very successful school band directors. Gladys Wright was the first female member of the American Bandmasters Association as well as the first woman inducted into the National Band Association Hall of Fame. Barbara Buehlman was the long-time Executive Administrator for the Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic.⁷

Need for the Study

Although McChesney did not achieve the same level of national success and recognition as Gladys Wright or Barbara Buehlman, her story still provides important insight into the career of an early female instrumental music educator. A study of this nature is needed because there is a small amount of research concerning women instrumental music educators. The research that has been done relates to the importance of role models and

female college band directors.⁸ When researching for his dissertation about Barbara Buehlman, Timothy Anderson could not identify any biographies of female band directors.⁹ Sondra Howe stated that in current histories discussing instrumental music education “women are minimized because they did not participate in band until recently.” She goes on to assert that “in analyzing the contributions of women in music education, it is important to look not only at the female leaders, but also at the invisible women.”¹⁰

Jere T. Humphreys and Carolyn Livingston both conducted research that explored the representation of women in music education history texts. Humphreys examined two common texts with the purpose of analyzing trends in representation of sex and geography. Out of sixteen people mentioned ten or more times between both books, Frances Elliot Clark was the only woman.¹¹ In an approach similar to Humphreys’, Carolyn Livingston surveyed five histories of music education in order to analyze the number of times women’s names were mentioned. None of the women mentioned were instrumental music teachers. Livingston, in response to these results, calls for research to be conducted that “deals with the lives and careers of relatively unknown women.”¹²

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to write a biography of Virginia McChesney with emphasis on her role as a female school band director in Southwest Virginia from 1930-1964.

NOTES

¹ Richman, “The Status of Music Education in the Public Schools of Virginia,” 115-120.

² Sullivan, “A Century of Women’s Bands in America,” 33-40.

³ Hash, “A. R. McAllister and the Joliet Township High School Band: 1912-1926,” 33-52.

⁴ Keene, *History of Music Education in the United States*, 331.

⁵ Hamann, “Music at Lincoln Junior High (Minneapolis) and the Lincoln Junior High Girls’ Band: 1923—1940,” 55-74.

⁶ McCarrell, “The Impact of World War II upon the College Band,” 118-125.

⁷ Conway, “Instrumental Education,” 304-307.

⁸ Examples of this research include: Denise Elizabeth Grant, “The Impact of Mentoring and Gender-Specific Role Models on Women College Band Directors at Four Different Career Stages” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2000); Elizabeth Suzanne Gould, “Initial Involvements and Continuity of Women College Band Directors: The Presence of Gender-Specific Occupational Role Models” (D.M.A. diss., University of Oregon, 1996), *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 146 (Fall 2000): 80-88; Carol Ann Feathers, “Women Band Directors in Higher Education,” *School Musician Director & Teacher* (April 1979): 64.

⁹ Anderson, “Barbara Buehlman: A Study of Her Career in Music Education and as a Pioneer of the Female Band Director Movement,” 75.

¹⁰ Howe, “Reconstructing the History of Music Education from a Feminist Perspective,” 96-106.

¹¹ Humphreys, “Sex and Geographic Representation in Two Music Education History Books,” 67-86.

¹² Livingston, “Women in Music Education in the United States: Names Mentioned in History Books,” 130-144.

CHAPTER II: PROCEDURE

In the preliminary stages of research, I used the biography of McChesney found on the Women Band Directors International website as a starting point. I then visited Wise County, Virginia, to locate potential sources of information about McChesney and her band program using the dates in the biography to guide my search. An audiotaped interview of McChesney was found at the Southwest Virginia Museum in Big Stone Gap, Virginia; although this was the only artifact in their collection pertaining to her.

At the Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Center in Big Stone Gap, I located school yearbooks and newspapers from Appalachia, Big Stone Gap, and Powell Valley High Schools. The collection also contains an assortment of materials pertaining to music education in Wise County Public Schools, including information and memorabilia relating to McChesney as well as other music educators. Through this museum I found concert programs, pictures, and a copy of the Selmer *Bandwagon* article about McChesney. I also visited the Wise County Historical Society in Wise, Virginia where I was given a copy of genealogical resources pertaining to the Beverly and McChesney families and located two books that contained histories of Wise County Public Schools. Information about McChesney's education was obtained by visiting the Bristol Public Library and the library at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Virginia. I also contacted the Archives and Rare Books Library at the University of Cincinnati about records of McChesney's attendance at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. In an effort to possibly obtain primary sources not found in Wise County, I contacted Sammie McChesney Lea, Mrs. McChesney's granddaughter, in regards to any documents she might have in her possession, but Mrs. Lea did not possess any sources beyond what I had already acquired.

Relevant newspaper articles were collected from a variety of sources. The *Big Stone Gap Post* from 1890-1920 was viewed online through the Library of Congress website. For issues after this date, I visited the C. Bascom Slemp Memorial Library in Big Stone Gap where the paper can be found on microfilm. Articles from *The Coalfield Progress* were collected at the Wise County Public Library in Wise, Virginia. The *Kingsport Times* and the *Bristol Herald Courier*, although outside of Wise County, are newspapers that also publish news from Southwest Virginia. In order to access the *Bristol Herald Courier*, I visited the Bristol Public Library in Bristol, Virginia. The *Kingsport Times* was retrieved through the AccessNewspaperARCHIVE database.

In order to retrieve any material published about McChesney in nationally circulated periodicals, I searched JSTOR, Music Index Online, Academic Search Complete, and Project MUSE. Through Music Index Online I discovered one article about McChesney published in *The School Musician* in 1973 that I requested through interlibrary loan. After receiving this article, I discovered that this periodical regularly published articles and organizational information from the Women Band Directors National Association (WBDA), which is currently called Women Band Directors International (WBDI). In order to browse older issues of this periodical and to learn more about WBDA and its recognition of McChesney, I visited the libraries of the University of Findlay and Kent State University.

CHAPTER III: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the 1930s when Virginia McChesney began her career, the band movement in America was still relatively young. Much of what she accomplished gains meaning from the consideration of a variety of related factors. In order to understand McChesney's career in relation to larger trends in music education in the United States during the same period of time, it is essential to first examine the development of school band programs, the role of women in school band programs, and the history of instrumental music education in Virginia.

Development of School Band Programs

Frank L. Battisti, Michael L. Mark and Charles L. Gary, and James A. Keene each provide accounts of the genesis of instrumental music in American public schools. These authors agree that the school band movement in the United States was born out of a mix of sociological factors and historical events that created not only an interest in instrumental music, but also the means to offer instruction to school students. Some of the major catalysts for the establishment and success of the school band movement were the popularity of town bands and touring professional bands at the turn of the twentieth century, the large number of bandmen trained specifically for military bands during World War I, and the need for band instrument manufacturers to find a new customer base.¹

The earliest example of a band in a school is cited by Keene as the Farm and Trades School Band in Boston in 1857, but he makes a point to mention that the instrumentation consisted of non-standard instruments and strings.² The school band movement started around 1910 as a push towards allowing students to experience an activity like playing in a town band. In the early twentieth century, instrumental music in public schools was a growing trend; however, the ensembles were mostly orchestras.³ Battisti cites a 1919-20 U.S.

Bureau of Education report that shows “orchestras outnumbered bands in every state, and that Central states were the areas where instrumental music programs were the strongest.”⁴ Momentum for the growth of bands in public schools came from the popularity of touring professional concert bands such as the groups lead by Patrick Gilmore and John Philip Sousa during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The popularity of these ensembles prompted the growth and development of town bands.⁵

With the start of World War I, the need for military bandsmen and band instruments increased, as did the sense of importance of instrumental music education in contributions to patriotic efforts. After the war, some of these former servicemen used their specialized training to teach music.⁶ The end of the war marked a change for the instrument manufactures since they no longer were selling instruments for use in the military bands. Also by the 1920s, professional concert bands had lost popularity, which meant less instrument sales. However, what had not gone unnoticed by the instrument manufacturers was that school bands were gaining popularity and being called upon by towns to play for special functions. The instrument companies seized the opportunity to promote school bands and create new sales by hosting contests, which were extremely popular and helped create a quickly spreading interest in school bands. Eventually the contests were taken over by music educators associations to keep the focus on music rather than selling instruments.⁷

Battisti uses Dr. William D. Revelli’s Hobart High School Band as an example of the role of school bands in relationship to their home communities.⁸ Dr. Revelli was first hired as a music supervisor in Hobart, Indiana, in 1925, and at the time, there was no instrumental music program in the schools. After being employed for only a short time, he had created a band program in spite of having no budget, no supplies, and no room to rehearse in.⁹ In 1930,

his high school band won the National Band Contest. The community took tremendous pride in the accomplishments of the band and, even during the Depression, provided monetary support to help maintain the program. When the schools closed because of a lack of funding, Dr. Revelli continued to rehearse in preparation for contests.¹⁰ Mark and Gary explain that “community support for the band was at such a high level that the community was able to raise funds for the band to buy uniforms and travel during the Great Depression. [...] The intensity of Hobart’s pride in its high school band was echoed in communities throughout the country, and school bands came to represent their communities far beyond the borders of their towns.”¹¹

While Mark and Gary as well as Keene conclude their discussion of the history of school bands with events in the late 1930s, Battisti goes on to explain that by 1938 the national band contest had expanded to the point that it was too large to manage and was replaced by regional contests. Sources credit the popularity of the school band contests with raising the standards for school bands as well as helping the programs gain popularity that enabled the number of school bands to grow. A total of 436 bands participated in regional festivals in 1940. Battisti states that “competition festivals remained popular until World War II, when war-time travel restrictions curtailed travel to such activities. When the war was over, most contest festival activity was confined within each state.”¹²

Edward Bailey Birge’s *History of Public School Music in the United States*, which was originally published in 1928, provides many of the same details about the history of the school band movement as the other sources. Because Birge wrote this book when the school band movement was a new phenomenon and had not yet reached its peak, his writing provides a unique point of view.¹³ According to Birge, instrumental music was late to appear

due to an early prejudice against it, the lack of instrumental music performances available, and the fact that most music teachers and supervisors in the early twentieth century were not instrumentalists. Also, school principals were less likely to allow instrumental music because it was not part of schools anywhere even in Europe. Instrumental music gained acceptance as a legitimate activity in American education not only because of its popularity, but also because educational reform gave the potential for it to be included in the curriculum.

Birge indicates that initially instrumental music in schools appeared as orchestras, and instrumentation was uneven and consisted of whatever instruments were available. School orchestras were comprised of students who had prior experience, usually through lessons. In contrast, instrumentalists in school bands were beginners. This led to the development of group instruction and also beginner, or junior groups, to provide a consistent source of trained musicians. He also reports two detailed accounts of school bands that were formed early in the school band movement. It is worth noting that Birge's text indicates that boys and girls were chosen to play in school orchestras, but he does not mention girls as participating in band, and the examples of school bands that he gives were specifically targeted to boys.¹⁴

Role of Women in School Band Programs

Very little has been written about women's involvement in bands, and only a small portion of that research highlights women as school band directors. The change in attitudes toward women's participation in bands and involvement as instrumental music teachers is demonstrated through articles published in periodicals in the 1930s and 1940s. The few available accounts of the careers of female band directors are important because they highlight the experiences of women who sought to enter a male-dominated field.

Early in the school band movement, participation was restricted to boys with male directors. If girls participated, they would do so in girls-only ensembles. The shift in this practice can be seen in a 1930 article published in *The School Musician*, which defends the right and ability of girls to participate in school bands without being detrimental to the overall ensemble. The author acknowledges stereotypes held by some male high school band directors at the time such as “girls ruin the appearance of a band” and “girls do not learn wind instruments as well as boys.” He goes on to argue the fairness of current practices in relationship to the current educational trends, the small importance uniformity plays in comparison to the music, and the ability of girls to learn instruments based on his personal experience. The author concludes by stating “GIVE THE GIRLS A CHANCE --- they are entitled to it.”¹⁵

In a 1943 issue of *Etude*, Dr. William D. Revelli wrote in support of women teaching instrumental music, which was something exceptionally rare at this time. The article is a reaction to the shortage of qualified, male teachers as a result of World War II. Dr. Revelli discusses how even though previously girls were denied the opportunity to participate in instrumental music, they were now being trained in large numbers and even playing in major symphony orchestras. He reports, “A majority of girls in our concert band are majoring in public school instrumental music. They are preparing to teach instrumental music and to conduct school bands and orchestras.” He calls these women “excellent performers” and “splendid teachers.” He thoroughly endorses these students as having the potential to be successful instrumental music teachers to fill gaps left by men. He goes on to explain that “a larger percent are . . . more adapted to the teaching of beginning and elementary programs than to the high school. [. . .] However the need is for more competent teaching at the

elementary and junior high school levels; so it is here that our women can and will make their outstanding contribution to the instrumental program.”¹⁶

Jill M. Sullivan has extensively researched women’s military bands in the United States, publishing writings about the history of women’s bands and women’s military bands during World War II. In two of her articles, she describes two women who were band directors in the public school before or after their service in U.S. women’s military bands. One of these women was Charlotte Plummer, who served as the first conductor of the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve (MCWR) Band. Plummer had been the band director at several schools before enlisting. She left the last position she held in 1943 because the program had shrunk considerably due to the war. Because of her teaching career, Plummer had the appropriate experience to become the leader of the MCWR Band. She said in an interview with Sullivan that “there weren’t many women at that time that had had any experience directing bands. So it was [that] I was in the right place at the right time.”¹⁷

Sullivan also interviewed Joan A. Lamb, who held a number of music positions in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). Born in 1918, Lamb was a native of Northeastern Ohio who had participated in both the school band and orchestra. She majored in music education at Baldwin Wallace College and graduated in 1940. Twice she attempted to gain employment as an instrumental music teacher in towns near Cleveland, and in both instances she was assigned to teach other subjects as part of her position after being hired to teach instrumental music. This was due to lack of money and administrative support for the programs, as well as the need for teachers that was created when men left for the service. Because of her dissatisfaction and the drafting of her fiancé, she enrolled in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. Eventually she was sent to the Army Music School in Fort Myer, Virginia, to train to

be a bandleader. Later on she served as bandleader of the 400th WAC Band and also started an all-African-American women's band in the WAC. Upon being discharged from the Army in 1945, Lamb was hired in Los Angeles to teach junior high instrumental music. The five music teachers who had held the job before her had all left the position shortly after starting, but due to the mentorship of another female instrumental music teacher, she was able to succeed and continued to work as a music educator and administrator for thirty years.¹⁸

Barbara Buehlman was one of the first female band directors to rise to national prominence. Most notable for serving as Executive Administrator of the Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic, Buehlman was also a highly successful school band director in Round Lake, Illinois. During her career she also wrote and published band arrangements, some of which are still found on festival repertoire lists. Buehlman, who was born in Chicago in 1936, attended Northwestern University beginning in 1955.¹⁹ While an undergraduate, she was the only female member of John Paynter's Northwestern University Band Staff and served as secretary. Because of her gender, she was not allowed to participate in planning field shows for the all-male marching band or given a key to the music building so that she could work in the evenings like the male members of the staff. There were many other opportunities that she was also denied because of her gender.²⁰

Paynter was Buehlman's mentor and encouraged her during her difficult job search after graduation.²¹ When she finally did find a position, the principal who hired her jokingly said that it would be easier if he informed the board he had hired a male director. A few years later at the Mid-West International Band and Orchestra Clinic, when Buehlman's band was performing, the same principal told the audience that "he grudgingly only hired Buehlman after she convinced him she was qualified."²² In spite of the principal's attitude toward a

female director, she was moved from junior high school to high school, the band program grew to need five directors, and she eventually served as administrator for the district's fine arts programs.²³

History of Instrumental Music Education in Virginia

Research detailing the development of music education in Virginia before and during McChesney's career is extremely limited. Only two relevant sources could be identified. One is a doctoral dissertation written by Lewis Preston Hancock in 1962. *The History of Public School Music in Virginia* presents a description of the history of music education in Virginia with the intention of identifying and describing the individuals and events that led to the development of music education in Virginia as it existed when his research was completed. At the time, Hancock could not identify any previous examination of the history of music education in Virginia's public schools. He reviewed a large number of primary resources such as organization minutes, school publications, and related descriptive research conducted in the 1927-28, 1936-37, and 1960-61 school years focusing on all or part of music education in Virginia's public schools.²⁴

Hancock's research states that the ratification of Virginia's State Constitution in 1869 allowed for compulsory schooling for both blacks and whites. Before this point, education in Virginia was limited mostly to the upper class. Virginia's public school system was authorized by a bill passed by the General Assembly in 1870.²⁵ Instruction in vocal music was included in the curriculum of normal schools in Virginia. In 1899, the normal institute held to train teachers in the white schools focused on vocal music; however, the normal institute to train teachers for the black schools concentrated on instruction in instrumental music.²⁶ When the Virginia State Teachers' Association met for the first time in 1902, the

organization resolved to form a committee dedicated to exploring how to properly train music teachers so that it could be taught in the schools. In 1910, the Virginia Music Teachers' Association petitioned to join the Virginia State Teachers' Association Department of Grammar Grade Teachers, and later the name of Music Teachers' Section of Virginia State Teachers' Association was adopted.²⁷

According to Hancock, "The first two high school orchestras for which sources can be cited are the Maury High School Orchestra of Norfolk, organized in 1911, and the John Marshall High School Orchestra of Richmond, which was already organized by this year."²⁸ The first band mentioned by Hancock in Virginia was at E. C. Glass High School in Lynchburg and began in 1923. He also chronicles many other instrumental groups, mostly orchestras, that began around the same time, including an orchestra at Bristol High School in Bristol, Virginia, which was also organized in 1923.²⁹ In 1927, the Virginia Music Teachers' Association was granted approval for an exam to be given that would offer certification through the state board of education and allow high school credit to be given to students of certified private teachers.³⁰

From 1932 until 1936, a statewide band, orchestra, and chorus made up of school students performed at the Virginia Education Association (VEA) convention.³¹ After an organized effort by the Virginia Music Teachers' State Association to request music education leadership at the state level, Luther A. Richman was named the first Virginia State Supervisor of Music in 1936.³² Held in Richmond in 1937, The Virginia High School Competitive Music Festival brought together a total of ten bands, seven orchestras, and thirty-nine choruses.³³ In 1939, in response to the growing interest in instrumental music, the Virginia Band and Orchestra Association (VBOA) was formed.³⁴ The first festival hosted by

VBOA took place in 1940 at Granby High School in Norfolk and was very similar in form to modern state-hosted festivals in including group rehearsals with guest conductors, special performances by guest artists and groups, and a final concert. The same festival was repeated in 1941, and the first annual All-State Band and Band Clinic was held in 1942.³⁵ The Virginia State Music Festival also occurred in Virginia from 1933-1953 and was specifically for the students enrolled in Virginia's segregated black high schools.³⁶

By 1943, World War II and the travel restrictions that came with it hampered the ability for bands to travel and attend the festival, but it was held again in 1944. Programs also struggled due to the lack of qualified teachers because male band directors were called to military service. At the end of the war, life started to return to normal, and school music programs went back to functioning as usual.³⁷ In 1945, VBOA voted to divide the state into districts that would host festivals that would act as preliminaries for the state festival. Also in 1945, the Music Section of VEA separated and affiliated itself with the Music Educators National Conference, and the Virginia Music Education Association (VMEA) was formed in 1946.³⁸ In 1954, VMEA was redistricted into the seven districts that are still present today.³⁹ Finally in 1957, the organizations responsible for vocal, instrumental, and general music became connected to VMEA.⁴⁰

NOTES

¹ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 299-318; Keene, *History of Music Education*, 287-337; Birge, *History of Public School Music*, 176-209; Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 217-235.

² Keene, *History of Music Education*, 288.

³ Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 218; Keene, *History of Music Education*, 317-320; Birge, *History of Public School Music*, 186-187; Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 305.

⁴ Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 218.

⁵ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 299-318; Keene, *History of Music Education*, 287-337.

⁶ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 304; Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 218.

⁷ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 325; Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 218.

⁸ Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 219.

⁹ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 309.

¹⁰ Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 219; Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 310.

¹¹ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 310.

¹² Battisti, *Winds of Change*, 221.

¹³ Birge, *History of Public School Music*, 176-209.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lesinsky, "Give the Girls a Chance," 60-61.

¹⁶ Revelli, "Women Can Teach Instrumental Music," 345.

¹⁷ Sullivan, *Bands of Sisters*, 89-90.

¹⁸ Sullivan, “One Ohio Music Educator’s Contribution to World War II: Joan A. Lamb,” 27-51.

¹⁹ Anderson, “Barbara Buehlman: A Study of Her Career,” 75.

²⁰ Ibid., 80.

²¹ Ibid., 82.

²² Ibid., 88.

²³ Ibid., 89-90.

²⁴ Hancock, “The History of Public School Music in Virginia,” 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 65.

²⁶ Ibid., 66-70.

²⁷ Ibid., 73-74.

²⁸ Ibid., 75.

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Ibid., 91.

³¹ Ibid., 97-102.

³² Ibid., 103.

³³ Ibid., 106.

³⁴ Ibid., 109.

³⁵ Ibid., 110-118.

³⁶ Ibid., 96.

³⁷ Ibid., 120-123.

³⁸ Ibid., 127-128

³⁹ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

CHAPTER IV: EARLY CAREER, 1930-1941

Family and Educational Background

Virginia Eloise Beverly (McChesney) was born to William Sherman Beverly (Sherman Beverly) and Rosa Pennington Beverly on July 10, 1896 in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. Both of her parents were natives of Virginia.¹ Sherman Beverly was from Gate City, Virginia, and as a young man worked his way through business school. After graduating, he trained as a telegraph operator and moved to Big Stone Gap, where he benefited from the employment created by the economic boom from growth in sales of the area's natural resources. He also operated his own real-estate and insurance business for a time before being elected mayor of Big Stone Gap, an office he held for twenty years.² Rosa, on the other hand, was responsible for raising the children. The Beverly's also had one other child, William, who became an associate mathematics professor in Pennsylvania.³

The town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, was chartered in 1888 and grew quickly because of the discovery of coal and iron ore.⁴ In 1900, the town of Big Stone Gap had a population of 1,617, which made it the largest town in Wise County.⁵ A majority of the working population were laborers. The Beverly's lived in the same area as many of the town's wealthier residents and near the family of John Fox Jr.⁶ The *Big Stone Gap Post* frequently reported Virginia as attending social events hosted by her peers. Other guests at these gatherings included children from the Bullitt and Goodloe families, which are names recognizable to Big Stone Gap residents today.⁷

Virginia started to play the violin at the age of seven and appears in a picture of her with a group of other violin students and their teacher in Big Stone Gap.⁸ Soon after starting violin, she also began studying piano. Virginia, when reminiscing about practicing,

recollected that “my mother would fuss when the grating got on her nerves. But Dad would encourage me to keep on, and tell Mom to go to the neighbors for a visit if she didn’t like it!”⁹ She attended public school in town, and in May of 1911, the *Big Stone Gap Post* reported her, at the age of fourteen, as among the graduating class for that year. She also played violin solos during the week-long commencement exercises.¹⁰

After graduation she went on to study at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Virginia.¹¹ She originally wanted to become a mathematics teacher; however, her father discouraged her from pursuing this career since women did not teach mathematics at that time.¹² She instead focused on music. Virginia Intermont College advertised a music conservatory as part of its offerings, and Virginia studied violin there under the instruction of Rudolph Kratoch, who had studied at Vienna Conservatory. She is listed as a violin graduate in the 1915 Virginia Intermont College yearbook.¹³ Articles in the *Bristol Herald Courier* from around the time of her graduation list several solo performances before graduation, including the repertoire played and a review of her performance, as well as her selection as the “May Queen” for Virginia Intermont College’s May Day festivities.¹⁴ *The Intermont*, the college’s yearbook, indicates that she was involved in student organizations and served as associate editor for the 1915 yearbook. On May 26, 1915, the *Bristol Herald Courier* reported Virginia Beverly as one of thirty-four young ladies to graduate from Virginia Intermont College and lists her as the only violin graduate.¹⁵

After graduating from Virginia Intermont College, she returned to her parents’ home in Big Stone Gap. In early May of 1916, Virginia traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio, in order to attend a summer session at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. After returning to Big Stone Gap in late June, she advertised in the *The Post* that she was “organizing a violin class”

and that anyone who was interested should call her.¹⁶ In an interview with a representative from the Southwest Virginia Museum, Virginia indicated she left the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music because her future husband, Samuel (Sam) Hutton McChesney, had asked her to marry him, but she had to make a choice between continuing her training and returning to Big Stone Gap to accept his proposal.¹⁷

On June 18, 1917, Virginia Beverly and Sam McChesney were married at her parents' residence in Big Stone Gap. According to the report in the *Big Stone Gap Post* published the next week, Sam was an army lieutenant, and the wedding happened during a twenty-four-hour leave. Sam was stationed in Clinchport, Virginia, which is a town that lies between Big Stone Gap and Bristol, Virginia.¹⁸ Sam worked as a mining-equipment salesman after being released from military service, and the McChesney's moved to Lynch, Kentucky, where Virginia stated she played trombone in a dance band.¹⁹ McChesney taught in a small one-room schoolhouse when she first arrived in Lynch.²⁰ The couple had two children, Samuel (1918) and William (1919). By 1920, she was living with her parents in Big Stone Gap.²¹ Initially when Sam and she returned to Big Stone Gap, they lived with her two sons in a house beside Bullitt Park. The couple moved in with her parents because they were concerned about the safety of their daughter and her two young boys since drunks would wander near the park at night.²² Even though she had two small children, she continued to play violin and participate in the Music Study Club in Big Stone Gap.²³ In the summer of 1924, McChesney returned again to the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music for a summer session.²⁴ The 1930 census lists her as still living with her parents, but for the first time her occupation is listed as "teacher" and the industry as "music/violin."

While there is no written evidence that Virginia McChesney originally had intentions of teaching music, it seems highly likely that it was her goal since she started teaching violin lessons when she returned to Big Stone Gap from Cincinnati in 1916. Because her family was somewhat well to do, this decision was more likely to be made out of free will than forced by the need for income. Receiving more training to become a better teacher might have also served as motivation to leave her two young sons for several weeks to return to Cincinnati in 1924. During this same period of time, there was a large amount of growth in instrumental music education in Virginia and the rest of the nation that probably would not have gone unnoticed by McChesney.

McChesney was first responsible for school orchestras in both Big Stone Gap as well as Appalachia, Virginia, a town about fifteen miles away, during the 1930-31 school years. During this school year, while not listed as faculty in the yearbooks at these schools, she is listed among the faculty that was entertained at a bridge party hosted for Big Stone Gap High School Faculty and Superintendent Dr. J. J. Kelly in November 1930.²⁵ In May of 1931, the *Big Stone Gap Post* also advertised that the high school orchestra would perform as part of activities for the observance of National Music Week.²⁶ McChesney's orchestra at Appalachia High School had twenty-five students who played a variety of instruments, including violin, piano, saxophone, brass instruments, and the drum set.²⁷ A majority of these students played violin and were likely to have been private students of McChesney and the other private music instructors. Surprisingly, only five of the members of this orchestra were girls. The orchestra at Big Stone Gap was significantly smaller, with only nine members in 1932.²⁸

Music Education and Bands in Big Stone Gap

Music education in Wise County's schools before McChesney's orchestras was probably limited to glee clubs and occasional singing in the classroom led by teachers. Reports of this type of activity can be seen in the *Big Stone Gap Post*. In response to a 1936-37 school year survey by the state music supervisor, the school administration in Wise County reported that the county owned only seven pianos and one Victrola for 105 schools and that classroom teachers were responsible for most of the music instruction. Few music classes across the county were part of the regular schedule. The only instrumental groups listed were two orchestras, which would have been those led by McChesney.²⁹ Wise County was and still is very rural, and for a long time most of the school-aged children attended smaller schools rather than the larger ones in the surrounding towns.³⁰ In the 1936 survey, administrators reported that 82 of 135 teachers could "carry a tune," and only three of the thirty high school teachers could sing.³¹ At least in Big Stone Gap, music education was available from private instructors as shown by numerous published advertisements in the newspaper for recitals given by pupils of several women.

Much like other places in the United States, Big Stone Gap and the surrounding communities also were enamored with bands in the early 1900s. The *Big Stone Gap Post* is littered with news snippets about the organization of municipal or military bands, and between 1895 and the 1920s, there were several short-lived attempts to start bands in Big Stone Gap. There were also military bands in coal camps that provided entertainment for events, one of which was the Roda Band from the Roda coal camp, not far from Big Stone Gap, that traveled across the county to perform.³² In the early 1930s, there was a band at Wise High School in Wise, Virginia. This organization must have been relatively short lived

because, although it performed for teachers' meetings in 1931 and 1932, it is not reported in the 1936 survey or listed in accounts of nearby contests and festivals.³³

Beginning of Sustained Band Programs in Wise County

In September 1937, the Big Stone Gap Kiwanis Club proposed to “investigate the prospects of organizing a band in Appalachia and Big Stone Gap schools.” No follow-up to this proposition was published.³⁴ What exactly happened in 1937 that spurred the interest in school bands is not clear, but the catalyst appears to be Wilkes Bobbitt. Bobbitt was a longtime band director at East Tennessee State University and also one of the founders of the East Tennessee School Band and Orchestra Association (ETSBOA). This organization was founded in 1938 to encourage festivals and other activities for bands in Eastern Tennessee.³⁵ McChesney was a trained violinist and readily admitted that she did not have experience with wind instruments. However, she worked with an experienced band director to make sure she was teaching instruments correctly.³⁶

According to David Tipton, the band director who replaced McChesney when she retired, Bobbitt was the person who approached her about starting bands at Big Stone Gap and Appalachia high schools.³⁷ This statement is reinforced by references to Bobbitt as someone “from the state” who came to organize bands at both of these schools.³⁸ Bands were formed at both Appalachia High School and Big Stone Gap High School, presumably with some of the wind and percussion students from the existing orchestras participating. McChesney was in charge of the Big Stone Gap band, and Bobbitt worked with the students at Appalachia High School.

The first performance of the Big Stone Gap High School Band took place on the veranda of the Monte Vista Hotel in Big Stone Gap on May 8, 1938. The informal concert

was part of National Music Week, which was celebrated in local schools by the Big Stone Gap Music Club.³⁹ By August of 1938, McChesney was trying to raise funds for uniforms, and the *Big Stone Gap Post* published a plea to “those interested in the progress and welfare of the band, its members, and the town of Big Stone Gap” to contribute to the cause. In September of 1938, both the Appalachia and Big Stone Gap high school bands participated in a Labor Day parade in Appalachia. By this point McChesney’s band was comprised of thirty-four members.⁴⁰ Later that fall, the Big Stone Gap band performed fully uniformed at home football games.⁴¹

In 1938, when the communities of Appalachia and Big Stone Gap were eager to have school band programs, the school system was apparently experiencing financial difficulties. Dr. Kelly, the school system superintendent, indicated in an interview in 1959 that the school system was more prepared for the Depression than Wise County, but they still defaulted on bonds and found it difficult to pay salaries and keep schools open. In February 1938, the *Big Stone Gap Post* published an article outlining the salaries of male and female teachers at a variety of levels with different educational backgrounds and compared their salaries to teachers in Richmond, Virginia. Salaries had been cut 30 percent in 1932 due to a budget shortfall and had not risen since, which left Wise County elementary school educators making an average of about \$700 per year while elementary educators in Richmond earned about \$1,650.⁴²

The Big Stone Gap High School Band, which was started with funds provided by community members and civic organizations, received many donations from individuals and groups including a sousaphone that was donated by C. Bascom Slemph, a former congressman, presidential secretary to Calvin Coolidge, and philanthropist.⁴³ The school

purchased a bass drum, but other than this there is very little indication of the school providing any financial support for the Big Stone Gap band program until the 1960 consolidation of Big Stone Gap and East Stone Gap high schools.⁴⁴ The school system also did not provide a salary for McChesney. It is unclear if her male counterpart at Appalachia High School received a salary, but by September 1938 the Appalachia band had changed leadership three times.⁴⁵

Many fundraisers were used to support the Big Stone Gap band. McChesney reported in several interviews that she asked local businessmen to donate the excess money that had been returned to contributors because it was left over after the purchase and installation of lights for the football field. She was able to convince them to give the excess to the band since they did not expect to have money returned.⁴⁶ In an effort to pay off the remaining debt from the purchase of uniforms, the band held a dance as a fundraiser. A notable element of this event was that the “Black and White Orchestra,” a dance band of mixed-race membership, provided the music free of charge in order to assist the Big Stone Gap band.⁴⁷

The Big Stone Gap band traveled to school sporting events to play as early as May of 1939. Travel to these events was mostly done by car because the school system did not provide transportation.⁴⁸ The band even was present to play at some of the school’s baseball games in the spring.⁴⁹ Even though she was responsible for the band, McChesney also continued to teach orchestra. In March of 1939, the Big Stone Gap band and orchestra presented a concert that included not only pieces played by the ensembles, but also chamber music presented by students. Overall the groups must have been well received by the community since in 1939 McChesney’s students were treated to a matinee showing of a movie at the town’s theatre in gratitude for their service to the community.⁵⁰ The Kiwanis

Club also decided to honor the band by hosting a banquet for them, an honor also extended to the high school's football team.⁵¹

During the early 1940s, the Big Stone Gap High School Band continued to give regular concerts in both the fall and spring as well as appear at home and away football games. At the end of the 1940 football season, the school donated \$100 to the band out of profit from that year's ticket sales.⁵² McChesney also continued teaching violin, and her orchestras performed in concerts at both Appalachia and Big Stone Gap high schools.⁵³ The orchestra at Big Stone Gap and the fifty-member Big Stone Gap High School Band participated in the East Tennessee School Band and Orchestra Association contest in Johnson City, Tennessee, in 1940, which was adjudicated by Joseph Maddy who was the founder of the Interlochen Center for the Arts.⁵⁴ There is no mention of how well the band scored, but one of McChesney's violin students did receive a superior rating.

Although McChesney was not responsible for the Appalachia High School Band, she still probably influenced the group's success. The Appalachia High School Band was initially under the leadership of Wilkes Bobbitt. In 1938, Bobbitt left the band in the hands of Ray Wells, who directed the band until June and then turned it over to Sylvester T. Witt, a high school band director from Kingsport, Tennessee, with Blaine Gibbs Jr. providing some assistance.⁵⁵ Surprisingly, even with the turnover in leadership, the band had over seventy members. In 1939, Gibbs was completely responsible for the band.⁵⁶ Gibbs, a teacher at Appalachia High School at the time, would have most likely been one of the most qualified individuals in the area to lead the band. Gibbs had participated in McChesney's orchestra at Appalachia High School in the early 1930s. While attending Appalachia State Teacher's

College and majoring in history and science, he participated in the school's band and orchestra for four years.⁵⁷

Between 1937 and 1940 the Big Stone Gap High School Band had grown under McChesney's guidance. However, partway through the 1940-41 school year, she was forced to hand over control of the group due to illness.⁵⁸ A booster group was formed, and the school's principal, McChesney, and John Ray, the new director, participated in the transition between directors. Even though she was not directing the band, she continued to teach private lessons and orchestra in Big Stone Gap and Appalachia.⁵⁹ In 1941, an orchestra consisting of McChesney's students from Appalachia and Big Stone Gap, as well as some of the band students from Appalachia, participated in the East Tennessee State Band and Orchestra Association contest in Johnson City, Tennessee, and received a rating of II.⁶⁰ John Ray continued the band's participation in the usual regiment of activities such as the Tri-State Band Contest in Johnson City, Tennessee, the Dogwood Festival in Bristol, Virginia, as well as at football games, basketball games, parades, and county fairs.⁶¹

What ailment forced McChesney to relinquish her control of the band is not clear. However, it is documented that she suffered from focal dystonia. It is not documented when the first symptoms appeared, but while playing in church one Sunday her bow simply dropped out of her hand. McChesney stated, "I thought I'd had a stroke and quietly sat down in the first pew." She was not paralyzed in any way, but could not hold her bow. Her husband, Sam, took her to Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore where she was diagnosed with "violinist palsy."⁶² Because of how this would have impacted McChesney, it does seem likely that the appearance of her dystonia symptoms could have curtailed involvement with the band.

NOTES

¹ 1900 U.S. Census, William Beverly; “U.S. Social Security Death Index,” Ancestry.com database entry for Virginia B. McChesney, ssn 229-40-2483; Virginia McChesney, interview by Southwest Virginia Museum, 1989, Big Stone Gap, VA.

² “Mayor Beverly Retires From Post Held 20 Years,” *Kingsport Times-News* (Kingsport, TN), June 12, 1955.

³ “Death Notices: William Beverly,” *Kingsport Times-News*, July 28, 1950.

⁴ Addington, *Story of Wise County Virginia*, 176-79.

⁵ Kennedy, *Economic and Social Survey of Wise County*, 73.

⁶ 1900 U.S. Census, William Beverly; Virginia McChesney, interviewed by Southwest Virginia Museum representative, September 22, 1989, Southwest Virginia Museum, Big Stone Gap, VA. During this time Fox was married to Fritzi Scheff, an Austrian-born opera star, who lived with him in Big Stone Gap. One newspaper article states that Virginia met her and, at the age of seven, played violin for Scheff, who encouraged her to continue to study. Ida Holyfield, “Mrs. Mac One of First Women to Succeed in World of School Bands,” *The Post*, October 9, 1985.

⁷ Bullitt Park is the location of the high school football stadium as well as other recreation facilities, and a building at Mountain Empire Community College bears the Goodloe name.

⁸ Ewing, *Images of America*, 80.

⁹ “Virginia McChesney’s Credo: Musicians Must Work to Play,” *Big Stone Gap Post* (hereafter cited as *The Post*), October 5, 1988.

¹⁰ “Commencement Exercises,” *The Post*, May 24, 1911.

¹¹ Virginia Intermont was founded for the purpose of educating young girls in Southwest Virginia. Her attending probably was not so much like attending college now, but rather a way her parents could secure a more adequate education for her than was available in Wise County, Virginia. “History,” Virginia Intermont College, accessed January 16, 2013, <http://vic.edu/about-vi/history-traditions/>.

¹² McChesney, Southwest Virginia Museum interview.

¹³ Virginia Intermont College, *The Intermont 1915*; Virginia Intermont College, *The Intermont 1917*; “Violin Recital at Osser’s Success,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, April 19, 1915.

¹⁴ “Interesting Recital at Virginia Intermont,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, May 14, 1915; “May Fete is Held On V.I. College Campus,” and “Recital at Virginia Intermont Tonight,” May 15, 1915.

¹⁵ “34 Girls Graduated from V.I. College,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, May 26, 1915.

¹⁶ Big Stone Gap. *The Post*, May 10, 1916; Suzanne Maggard, e-mail message to author, March 21, 2013; In order to collect information about McChesney’s attendance at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, I contacted Suzanne Maggard, a Reference and Collections Librarian at the Archives and Rare Books Library of the University of Cincinnati, who located McChesney’s student record. The only available information was that McChesney attended summer sessions in 1916 and 1924.

¹⁷ McChesney, Southwest Virginia Museum interview.

¹⁸ “Beverly-McChesney Wedding,” *The Post*, July 25, 1917.

¹⁹ The story of her playing trombone in a dance band in Lynch, Kentucky, appears in many sources. It takes on a few slightly differing plotlines, some more grandiose than others. She is quoted in some places as saying that she did not know how to play wind instruments before starting the band, but then she also tells the story about playing trombone at other times.

²⁰ McChesney, Southwest Virginia Museum, interview.

²¹ 1920 US Census, William Beverly.

²² McChesney, Southwest Virginia Museum, interview.

²³ Music Study Club. *The Post*, March 30, 1921.

²⁴ Suzanne Maggard, e-mail message to author, March 21, 2013.

²⁵ “Entertain Faculty,” Society, *The Post*, November, 12, 1930; Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell 1931*; Appalachia High School, *Accolade 1931*.

²⁶ “Observance of National Music Week,” Society, *The Post*, May 6, 1931.

²⁷ Appalachia High School, *Accolade 1931*.

²⁸ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell 1931*.

²⁹ Richman, “Status of Music Education in Virginia Public Schools,” 90.

³⁰ Addington, *The Story of Wise County*, 135-52.

³¹ Richman, "Status of Music Education in Virginia Public Schools," 90.

³² *Looking Back: Wise County in the Early Years*, 117; *The Post*, issues from 1900-1920.

³³ Program of the Wise County Education Association, October 7, 1932; Program of the Wise County Education Association, September 25-26, 1931.

³⁴ "Kiwanis Goal for Membership Placed at 40," *The Post*, September 16, 1937.

³⁵ "Hall of Fame," East Tennessee School Band and Orchestra Association, accessed January 16, 2013, <http://etsboa.org/wp-content/uploads/bobbitt-wilkes.pdf>. Because of the length of Tennessee from east to west, it would have been very difficult for schools in the east to participate in the festivals held in the western part of the state. Bobbitt's biography states that he transported his band to a festival by train. My impression is that ETSBOA, for a time, had participants from Southwest Virginia because, like Eastern Tennessee, it is geographically isolated from the rest of the state.

³⁶ "The Band Mistress of Big Stone Gap," *Bandwagon*, 5-8.

³⁷ Ida Holyfield, "Mrs. Mac One of the First Women to Succeed in School Bands," *The Post*, October 9, 1985.

³⁸ "Appalachia Band Will Make First Appearance Friday," *The Post*, April 14, 1938; Appalachia High School, *1938 Accolade*; Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell 1938*.

³⁹ "Gap High School Band in Concert for First Time," *The Post*, May 12, 1938.

⁴⁰ "Gap Band was Organized February 1st," *The Post*, September 1, 1938.

⁴¹ "Twin Town Musical Concert Friday," *The Post*, March 23, 1939.

⁴² "Wise Co. Teachers Still in Throes of Depression Says Committee," *The Post*, February 24, 1938.

⁴³ After Slemple's death, part of his wealth was used to establish the Slemple Foundation, which provides financial support to worthy projects in Southwest Virginia and also scholarships. Money from this foundation is still helping provide financial support for major purchases in the county band programs.

⁴⁴ "Big Stone Band Grows from 13 to 77-Piece Body," *Kingsport Times*, September 19, 1954.

⁴⁵ “Appalachia High School Band is Largest Youngest Musical Organization in Virginia,” *The Post*, September 1, 1938; “Gap High School Band in Concert for First Time,” *The Post*, May 12, 1938.

⁴⁶ Supposedly only one businessman held out and refused to contribute the money; so a few weeks later, as the band marched past his business, they stopped and played “Beer Barrel Polka.” The next day he gave the money to the band. Holyfield, “Mrs. Mac One of the First Women to Succeed in School Bands,” *The Post*, October 9, 1985.

⁴⁷ Ewing, *Images of America: Big Stone Gap, Wise County, Virginia*, 110; “Make \$70.00 for High School Band,” *The Post*, November 3, 1938.

⁴⁸ Traveling with a band to away games in the 1930s is impressive since the roads in Wise County were not very good. Appalachia and Big Stone Gap are fairly close to each other, but the other schools were much further away. Today, on the four-lane highway it takes about thirty minutes to reach Coeburn from Big Stone Gap, but this route did not exist until the 1950s.

⁴⁹ “Rain Prevents Band Playing,” *The Post*, May 4, 1939.

⁵⁰ “Theatre Host to High School Band,” *The Post*, December 14, 1939.

⁵¹ “Club Plans to Entertain Band,” *The Post*, December 14, 1939.

⁵² “Season of 1940 Prosperous for Big Stone High,” *The Post*, January 9, 1941.

⁵³ “Good Program Arranged for Band Concert,” *The Post*, March 28, 1940; “Band Concert Friday Night,” *The Post*, April 4, 1940; “Appalachia Band Concert Friday,” *The Post*, April 11, 1940.

⁵⁴ “Good Program Arranged for Band Concert,” *The Post*, March 28, 1940.

⁵⁵ “Appalachia High School Band is Largest Youngest Musical Organization in Virginia,” *The Post*, September 1, 1938.

⁵⁶ “Appalachia High School Band to be Continued,” *The Post*, June 22, 1939.

⁵⁷ *The Rhododendron*, 1938 edition, 40.

⁵⁸ “Organization Perfected to Sponsor Band,” *The Post* January 30, 1941.

⁵⁹ “Organization Perfected to Sponsor Band,” *The Post* January 30, 1941; “Appalachia and Gap Orchestra Receive Ratings,” *The Post*, April 17, 1941.

⁶⁰ “Appalachia and Gap Orchestra Receive Ratings,” *The Post*, April 17, 1941.

⁶¹ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell 1941*; Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell 1942*.

⁶² “Virginia McChesney’s Credo,” *The Post*, October 5, 1988.

CHAPTER V: SUSTAINING BAND PROGRAMS IN WISE COUNTY, VIRGINIA

The Tri-Town Band

Like many of the band programs in the United States, the bands in Wise County experienced difficulties in the 1940s due to World War II. During the 1943-44 school year, McChesney returned after being ill to instruct the band at Big Stone Gap High School. However, not only had a large number of students left to serve in the army, but Blaine Gibbs, the director at Appalachia High School, had also enlisted.¹ This left McChesney with the dilemma of not having enough students at Big Stone Gap High School for a band, and the band at Appalachia was left with low student enrollment and without a director. McChesney's answer to this was to have the students from both schools form one ensemble. Even though travel restrictions made it difficult to hold joint rehearsals, the new group still performed after having only one rehearsal preceding each football game. The combined band had complete instrumentation and was significantly larger than the Big Stone Gap High School Band had been.²

The School Bell, Big Stone Gap High School's yearbook, indicates that the groups were combined again for the 1944-45 school year. Probably due to the financial restrictions and lack of a qualified band director at Appalachia High School, the bands remained combined until 1948 or 1949. This group also began to include students from nearby East Stone Gap High School, which did not have a large enough enrollment to have a band of its own. Since there was no transportation provided, students had to walk or ride bicycles to Big Stone Gap from East Stone Gap in order to participate.³ The combined band was known as the Tri-Town Band.

Originally students wore the band uniforms from their school, or in the case of students from East Stone Gap, an outfit consisting of their school colors.⁴ Later the band appeared in the Big Stone Gap yearbook wearing the band uniforms of Big Stone Gap High School, and in the 1947 *School Bell*, the band can be seen wearing brand new uniforms. This group also continued to give concerts and perform at football games just as the two bands had done before they were merged. The band also still depended on the generosity of community members to support operating expenses. For example, donations were asked for at one concert to cover the cost of chairs for the band, and someone donated their time to repair instruments.⁵

The Tri-Town Band not only performed at football games in Wise County, but was also invited in November 1947 to perform at the “Teen Bowl,” a football game held in Kingsport, Tennessee, at which Dobyns-Bennett High School of Kingsport played against Atlanta Marist High School of Atlanta, Georgia. Maintaining a functional ensemble must have been extremely difficult. In fact, in an article about the Tri-Town Band, McChesney indicated that out of a band of over eighty students, only about twelve had previously participated in band.⁶ In spite of this difficulty, the Tri-Town Band still participated in a state music contest in Radford, Virginia, in February of 1948.

The Coeburn High School Band

In 1948, McChesney was approached by the Coeburn Woman’s Club to start a band for Coeburn High School in Coeburn, Virginia. McChesney started the band at Coeburn while continuing to work with the Tri-Town Band in Big Stone Gap. Coeburn’s band was funded solely through public support, and the Woman’s Club raised a total of \$1,800 for the purchase of uniforms and instruments with the help of community members and

organizations. The Coeburn band performed for the first time in August of 1949 and continued by performing for football games and in concerts. In October of 1949, the band had sixty-five students participating and was fully uniformed.⁷ McChesney worked with the band until the spring of 1950. In February of that year, the Coeburn Women's Club asked the school board to fund a part-time band director, and by fall a director had been hired.⁸

Salary and Support of the School System

By 1949, McChesney had been teaching band for eleven years and had yet to receive any sort of salary from the school system. In October of 1949, the Big Stone Gap Band Mothers asked the town council to pay McChesney \$250 a month for her services to the band. The town council responded to this request by making a one-time donation of \$300 to the band for McChesney's salary.⁹ It is not clear exactly when she began receiving a salary from the school system. In 1952, the *Big Stone Gap Post* listed McChesney among the school faculty announced by Dr. Kelly, the school system superintendent, but only in a "one-half time" position.¹⁰ The *School Bell* does not list McChesney as being on the faculty until 1958, but she may have been receiving a full-time salary previous to this. McChesney and Joseph D. Flannary, who was then the band director at Appalachia High School, both took and passed the state teacher's examination in 1954, which earned them a "Special Purpose Certificate" that allowed them to teach band in Virginia.¹¹

It is not completely clear why the county school system took so long to adopt the band programs as part of the schools and start hiring band directors. Big Stone Gap High School occasionally provided financial assistance, but for the most part, the band was supported by the community. From the very start, Appalachia's band was in the same position. The only difference between the two bands was that the band booster organization

in Appalachia paid the director a salary.¹² The band at Coeburn High School was also created with the financial support of the community, but at this school the band boosters were successful in convincing the county to support their director.

Obviously the bands found support in their communities, or at least enough to function. It is not clear if Dr. Kelly directly supported instrumental music in the schools, but he did promote the inclusion of extra-curricular activities such as drama and debate and considered the strong community demand for successful athletic programs detrimental to achieving what he believed to be the mission of public education.¹³ McChesney was also teaching during a period of educational reform in Virginia that opened up the ability for students to receive academic credit for participating in band.¹⁴ Even though McChesney had one of the few bands in Southwest Virginia during the 1930s, there was a boom in the formation of school bands in the region during the late 1940s and early 1950s, which was almost a decade later than the boom that happened in the rest of the county.

Success of the Big Stone Gap High School Band

During the 1950s McChesney was able to build the, once again separate, Big Stone Gap High School Band into a large, successful ensemble that consistently participated in both marching band and concert band festivals. Before the disruption created by World War II, McChesney's band performed regularly, but also participated in festivals. After the travel restrictions caused by World War II, she was free to travel with her groups and participate in state festivals. Also at some point, a balcony in the Big Stone Gap High School auditorium was converted into a rehearsal space, which although very badly lit, provided a permanent location for rehearsals that was not previously available. The last decade of McChesney's

career was very different from previous years because of the opportunities available to her students as well as the success her students were able to achieve.

Two events that would have probably been very special for McChesney's students and also likely added momentum to the band program were hosting the Aurora High School Band from Aurora, Illinois, in 1951 and an invitation to perform in the Fireman's Parade during the Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester, Virginia, in 1952. In March of 1951, the Big Stone Gap High School Band hosted the West Aurora High School Band, which was under the direction of Warren A. Felts. The band members traveled to Big Stone Gap to play a concert for the Big Stone Gap High School students and the community. A small admission fee was charged, but the profits benefited the Big Stone Gap band. The sixty-seven students from Aurora stayed in the homes of Big Stone Gap band members. The Aurora Band performed a program of twelve pieces, many of which were standard band repertoire or orchestral transcriptions.¹⁵

In May of 1952, the Big Stone Gap Band performed for the Fireman's Parade during the Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival, which is a long-running festival that still occurs each year. The Fireman's Parade is one of several parades during the festival, but it also is competitive. Today, in order to compete in the parade, bands must submit a recording, and then from the recordings received, the committee selects the bands it will invite to perform. Not only was it an honor for the Big Stone Gap band to be invited to perform at this event, it was also the first time many of the students had traveled further away from home than Kingsport, Tennessee, or nearby towns in Kentucky.¹⁶

The band boosters and McChesney worked very hard to raise the money required to make the trip, which included traveling by chartered bus. After the invitation was received,

the *Big Stone Gap Post* regularly reported fundraising efforts as well as information about the festival for those traveling with the band. One article reported that \$600 was necessary to fund the trip. Unfortunately, the band's performance did not go well during the parade. A student in the band who wrote an article published in the *Big Stone Gap Post* indicated that there was confusion about which song was to be played in front of the judges' stand.¹⁷

Southeastern Band Festival

During the last decade of her career, McChesney's students were highly successful, both on the concert stage and football field. The success of her marching band is clearly demonstrated through the longtime participation and success at the Southeastern Band Festival. Hosted for the first time in 1951, the Southeastern Band Festival was a long-running band festival held in Bristol, Tennessee, that was sponsored by the Bristol Chamber of Commerce. From its humble beginnings with twenty-three participating bands from Tennessee and Virginia, it grew to an event that at its peak drew sixty bands from as far away as Florida. The festival was an event of epic proportions by today's standards. For one weekend a year, between five thousand and six thousand band students came to Bristol to perform in the festival. Bands that needed overnight accommodations were housed for the most part in volunteers' homes. Each band not only had their turn to perform in front of the adjudicators, but band students also participated in a mass band. Adjudicators were well-respected men and included Glenn Cliffe Bainum, Nilo Hovey, Henry Fillmore, Forrest L. McAllister, and Paul Yoder, who wrote "Bristol March" for the event.¹⁸

McChesney's band participated in the Southeastern Band Festival every year from its start in 1951 until she retired in 1964. In 1951, at the first festival, the Big Stone Gap High School Band was awarded second place of the twenty-three bands in attendance.¹⁹

McChesney was the only woman band director to participate. The band did not place the second year of the festival.²⁰ In 1953, the festival adopted a rating system rather than only giving awards to the top bands. A score of 95 to 100 percent was a rating of Division I, 87 to 94.9 percent a Division II, and below 86.9 percent was Division III.²¹ Under this new rating system, McChesney's band earned a Division I rating every year except for 1955 and 1961, when it received Division II ratings.

In the early 1950s, marching bands had themed shows and formed shapes associated with the theme or title of the song being played. An example of this was the show McChesney's band performed at the Southeastern Festival in 1953, which was "in the form of a baseball game complete with umpires." Another school during the same festival formed "the shape of a violin while a 'bow' moved across the strings."²² The popular style of marching soon changed to reflect military maneuvers. Albert Richard Casavant, who is known for developing this new style of marching known as Precision Drill, was a high school band director at Chattanooga High School, and like McChesney, he brought his band to the Southeastern Band Festival. Casavant's band debuted the Precision Drill style of marching in 1953, and it quickly became very popular because of the success of Casavant's band.²³ Seeing this ensemble and drill style is probably what prompted McChesney to enlist the help of her husband in teaching drill since he had served in the military.²⁴

McChesney's students also performed very well in concert festivals. During the 1950s, the band participated in the District VII Virginia Band and Orchestra Directors Association Concert Festival. While the results of each year are not known, it is known that in 1953, 1954, and 1955 the group received a superior ratings at the festival.²⁵ In 1959, the band played grade-six music for the first time and received a rating of excellent.²⁶

Transition to Powell Valley High School

During McChesney's career, the Wise County School Board slowly closed the large number of small schools in the county, consolidating the student population into more centrally located elementary and high schools. Big Stone Gap High School was one of the first high schools in the county, and in the mid-1950s, after three other new high schools opened in the county, Big Stone Gap High School and East Stone Gap High School were left in aging, inadequate facilities.²⁷ The plumbing and electrical systems in both of these school buildings were inadequate. They were also plagued with other issues, one of which was a lack of band rooms and adequate auditoriums. In 1956, the county began the process of funding a new building that would allow the consolidation of the two schools, and in 1959 Powell Valley High School opened.²⁸ For the first time McChesney was able to work in adequate facilities, which included a band room, storage, practice rooms, and an office.

McChesney's situation had changed considerably between 1937 and 1960 since she was now employed by the school system and had access to proper facilities. Even with both of these major changes, the school system still did not provide financial support for the band. Funding was still reliant upon the generosity of the community. The Big Stone Gap Kiwanis's Club sponsored a performance of the United States Marine Band at Powell Valley High School in 1960. School students from neighboring Lee and Dickenson counties were bussed in to see the concert, and McChesney worked to find donations to pay the one dollar student ticket price for each of her students.²⁹ McChesney's students also paid two dollars a month to participate in band, and the sousaphone donated by C. Bascom Slemph in 1937 was still being used, as well as other instruments such as metal clarinets, which were still present when McChesney retired in 1964.

McChesney's husband, Sam, had been supportive and actively involved with the band for many years. His involvement peaked after he retired from selling mining equipment.³⁰ Although two other men had also previously assisted, Sam became the primary drill instructor for the band.³¹ While it seems this arrangement worked well, there is at least one recorded instance when the couple disagreed vehemently over a drill. While the band was working on learning drill for the next week's football game, the students were having difficulty performing a maneuver. McChesney insisted that the drill should not be changed, but Sam thought that it could not be done properly. Eventually, after arguing about the drill, Sam left the field, and McChesney continued to work on the drill the rest of the week. The drill was learned in time for the game; however, McChesney was so focused on the drill that she neglected to teach the students how to get off the field at the end of the show. In need of a quick solution, she simply had the lights for the field turned off long enough for her students to run off the field.³² Along with being responsible for the band's drill, Sam also helped McChesney create an all-girl drill team called the Pixies in 1961. The Pixies were independent of the band, but still appeared with them in parades and football games. The purpose of this group was to help young girls "learn the art of self-reliance, mental and physical coordination, quick thinking and acting, as well as attaining poise and gracefulness."³³

Sam died in February of 1963 after an extended illness.³⁴ McChesney, who had taught thirty-three years at this point, continued to teach for one year after his death. In November 1963, during Powell Valley High School's homecoming game, she received a plaque in honor of her service as band director.³⁵ In May of 1964, she was featured in *The Bandwagon*, a publication by the Selmer company.³⁶ The 1964 Powell Valley High School

yearbook was dedicated to McChesney, and her retirement was announced in both the *Kingsport Times* and the *Big Stone Gap Post* in May of 1964. At her final concert with the Big Stone Gap High School Band, she was honored by the Wise County supervisor of education and by her students, who, in order to demonstrate their feelings for her, played “I Love You Truly.”³⁷

In June 1964, David Tipton was hired as band director for Powell Valley High School.³⁸ Tipton had taught band in a neighboring county, and McChesney, who had heard his band the previous year at a teachers’ meeting, recommended that he be hired.³⁹

McChesney received three considerable honors after her retirement. In 1972 she was recognized by the Women Band Directors National Association as a Pioneer Woman of the Podium, and in 1976 she received the Golden Rose Award.⁴⁰ Later in 1981, Noel Collins, then the band director at Powell Valley High School, started the annual McChesney Band Festival in her honor.⁴¹ Even though McChesney was no longer working as a band director, she continued to teach private violin and piano lessons in Big Stone Gap until the age of ninety-four.⁴² McChesney died in Big Stone Gap on February 14, 1992 at the age of ninety-five.⁴³

NOTES

¹ “Joint School Band Furnish Music to Fans,” *The Post*, November 25, 1943; United States, World War II Army Enlistment, William B. Gibbs Jr.

² “Joint School Band Furnish Music to Fans,” *The Post*, November 25, 1943.

³ “Virginia McChesney’s Credo,” *The Post*, October 5, 1988.

⁴ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell 1944*.

⁵ “Two Concerts Presented by Tri-Town Band,” *The Post*, May 29, 1947.

⁶ “Tri-Town School Band’s Story of Ambition, Work, Worry,” *Kingsport Times*, November 30, 1947.

⁷ A. A. Johnson, “Coeburn Band Presents First Performance,” *Kingsport Times*, August 21, 1949; Johnson, “Snappy Coeburn Band Will Celebrate a Birthday Sat.,” *Kingsport Times*, October 30, 1949.

⁸ “Asks Band Budget,” Virginia Briefs, *Kingsport Times*, February 17, 1950; “Band Instructor,” Virginia Briefs, *Kingsport Times*, September 17, 1950.

⁹ “Band Mothers Ask Raise for Big Stone Woman,” *Kingsport Times*, October 16, 1949.

¹⁰ “Complete List of Teachers is Given by Kelly,” *The Post*, July 31, 1952.

¹¹ “Big Stone High Band Grows From 13 to 77-Piece Body,” *Kingsport Times*, September 19, 1954.

¹² “Appalachia Band Club Disbanded,” *Kingsport Times*, October 19, 1941.

¹³ Porter, *School Bells from the Past*, 46-59.

¹⁴ Hancock, “The History of Public School Music in Virginia,” 88.

¹⁵ “Illinois Band to Appear at Gap School,” *The Post*, March 15, 1951; “Band Concert is Success,” *The Post*, March 29, 1951.

¹⁶ When I taught in Wise County, I had students who had never been out of the state before they traveled with the band, which seemed surprising since we were only forty-five minutes from Kentucky or Tennessee. Traveling almost to Washington D.C., especially for students in the 1950s, would have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for some of them.

¹⁷ “Prize Winning School Band to Parade May 1-2,” *The Post*, March 20, 1952; “Gap Band Parading in Winchester Apple Blossom Festival,” *The Post*, May 1, 1952; “Big Stone Gap Band Members Have Wonderful Experiences at Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester, Virginia,” *The Post*, May 8, 1952.

¹⁸ “Elizabethton, Big Stone, Roanoke Bands Take Top Honors in Festival,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, October 14, 1951; “Band Members to Arrive for Festival Saturday,” *Herald Courier*, October 11, 1952; Herbert M. Farlow, “Thousands View Local Band Festivities,” *Herald Courier*, October 11, 1953; “55 High School Bands Perform Here Today,” *Herald Courier*, October 13, 1955; Robert Loving, “Band Festival Thrills Record Crowd,” *Herald Courier*, October 14, 1956. Extensive newspaper coverage of this festival is available in the *Bristol Herald Courier* and the *Bristol Virginia-Tennessean*, which can be found on microfilm at the Bristol Public Library in Bristol, Virginia.

¹⁹ “Elizabethton, Big Stone, Roanoke Bands Take Top Honors in Festival,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, October 14, 1951.

²⁰ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell* 1952.

²¹ Southeastern Band Festival Program, Bristol, Virginia, 1957.

²² Herbert M. Farlow, “Thousands View Local Band Festivities,” *Herald Courier*, October 11, 1953; Ida Holyfield, “Mrs. Mac One of the First Women to Succeed in School Bands,” *The Post*, October 9, 1985

²³ Tennessee Bandmaster’s Association, “TBA Hall of Fame—Class of 2004.”

²⁴ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell* 1959.

²⁵ “Big Stone Band Wins High Festival Rating,” *Kingsport Times*, April 5, 1953.

²⁶ “Gap Band Receives ‘Excellent’ Rating at Regional Music Fete,” *The Post*, March 26, 1959.

²⁷ Addington, *The Story of Wise County*, 135-52.

²⁸ Wise County Public School, *Jolly Roger—Greenwave*, April 11, 1956; Powell Valley High School, *Valhalla* 1960.

²⁹ “Asks Donations for Children,” *The Post*, September 15, 1960.

³⁰ “Samuel H. McChesney,” Deaths, *Kingsport Times*, February 17, 1963.

³¹ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell* 1958 and 1959.

³² “Virginia McChesney’s Credo,” *The Post*, October 5, 1988; Ida Holyfield, “Mrs. Mac One of the First Women to Succeed in School Bands,” *The Post*, October 9, 1985.

³³ George Dalton, “Another ‘First’ at Big Stone Gap,” *Kingsport Times*, March 19, 1961.

³⁴ “‘Mr. Mac,’ High School Drill Master Dies,” *The Post*, February 21, 1963; “Samuel H. McChesney,” Deaths, *Kingsport Times*, February 17, 1963.

³⁵ “Appalachia Blasts Powell Valley, 26-0,” *Kingsport Times*, November 10, 1963.

³⁶ “Band Mistress of Big Stone Gap,” 5-8.

³⁷ “Big Stone Loses Band Director,” *Kingsport Times*, May 14, 1964; “Powell Valley Band Director to Retire July 1st,” *The Post*, May 7, 1964.

³⁸ “Powell Valley Appoints New Band Director,” *Kingsport Times*, June 12, 1964.

³⁹ Ida Holyfield, “Mrs. Mac One of the First Women to Succeed in School Bands,” *The Post*, October 9, 1985.

⁴⁰ “‘Mrs. Mac’ is Honored at National Meet,” *The Post*, December 30, 1976.

⁴¹ “Band Festival Here Sept. 19,” *The Post*, August 27, 1981.

⁴² Holyfield, Ida, and Bill Hendrick, “Residents Pay Tribute to Virginia McChesney,” *Coalfield Press*, Thursday February 20, 1992.

⁴³ “U.S. Social Security Death Index,” Ancestry.com database entry for Virginia B. McChesney, ssn 229-40-2483; Virginia McChesney, interview by Southwest Virginia Museum, 1989, Big Stone Gap, VA.

CHAPTER VI: RECOGNITION

Recognition by Women Band Directors National Association

After retiring, McChesney was recognized twice by the Women Band Directors National Association (WBDNA), which was chartered in 1968 with Gladys Wright as the founding president. At the start of her career, Wright was the only female band director in Oregon and was committed to locating other women band directors.¹ Kate Hawkins, director of the Daniel Boone Music Camp in Morehead, Kentucky, also shared this same passion.² Both women searched for female bandleaders and would share what they discovered. Eventually, other women started doing the same. WBDNA was created as a way to connect women band directors so that they could share information, best practices, and encourage each other.³

In 1972, McChesney was the first woman recognized as a Pioneer Woman of the Podium by WBDNA, and her biography was printed in the *School Musician Director and Teacher* in January of 1973. In order to be eligible to be a Pioneer Woman of the Podium, the woman needed to have participated in instrumental music education before 1940 and have taught successfully for ten years.⁴ Later in December of 1976, McChesney was honored by WBDNA with their Golden Rose Award. She was awarded this honor for being “probably the first career high school woman band director.”⁵ To accept this award, she traveled to the Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago with David Tipton, the band director who succeeded her at Powell Valley High School in 1964.

There is no written documentation concerning how WBDNA came to be aware of McChesney, who by the time the organization was founded had been retired for five years. Of all the charter members of the organization, Kate Hawkins was the person closest

geographically to Big Stone Gap.⁶ However, Al Wright, Gladys Wright's husband and director at Purdue University, was one of the guest conductors at Virginia's Western Division All-State Band in February of 1955. McChesney had seven students who participated in the group, and it is very possible that Al Wright could have become aware of McChesney through this event and shared this with his wife.⁷

McChesney Band Festival

McChesney was honored later in 1981 at the Southeastern Band Festival. She had taken her band to the contest every year since the festival's inception in 1951.⁸ In the same year, the Powell Valley Band Boosters and band director Noel Collins founded the McChesney Band Festival. The festival, named in honor of McChesney, is held at Bullit Park in Big Stone Gap, and is structured to allow smaller bands to experience success that they might not be able to achieve at larger festivals. Bands participate in a parade as well as perform their field show for the judges. Any profit from the festival supports the Powell Valley Band, and the initial year's profit was used to purchase new uniforms. At the first contest, McChesney distributed the awards to all of the participating bands.⁹

McChesney as a Teacher

How Virginia McChesney came to successfully start the first continuously functioning band programs in Wise County in a time when women were rarely band directors was probably due largely not only to her musical talent, but also her personality. She stated in an interview that creating the band was one of the most important things that happened in her life. She said very matter-of-factly that "I loved it, and I wanted band for this county."¹⁰ She was very personally invested in the band program from the very beginning. In addition to providing instruction for the group, she was personally responsible for finding monetary and

material support for her organization. At the start of the band, McChesney purchased used instruments from another band, and she was grateful her whole life for the tuba purchased by C. Bascom Slemph.¹¹ Noel Collins, one time band director at Powell Valley High School, related in an article after her death that McChesney “often secretly purchased instruments for students who could not afford them, then took great pleasure in watching the youngsters develop confidence and musical ability in the band.”¹²

McChesney was very dedicated to the band and her students. Sometimes this dedication made for difficult situations; for example, one day in the late 1950s this included taking on Burchell Stallard, the Big Stone Gap football coach, for time on the football field. Football practice had been changed because Stallard was having difficulty finding time on the field that was used by many groups. McChesney came to the field with the band to practice, and even though the football players were practicing, she refused to yield the space to the team. Stallard expressed to McChesney that in twenty-five minutes she could use the field, but McChesney refused to leave. Eventually her husband, Sam, convinced her that for the sake of safety she should take her students off the field and talk to the principal about the matter later.¹³

After McChesney’s retirement, she worked with David Tipton, the new band director at Powell Valley High School. McChesney helped Tipton during his first year as director and did so in a “kind and tactful manner.”¹⁴ Tipton made an effort to make sure McChesney approved of what he was doing as a band director, but it was difficult for him to acquire advice from her because she did not want to intrude. Even when the band received a rating of II at the Southeastern Band Festival during Tipton’s first year, McChesney was there to encourage him. Tipton stated that “after [the festival] was over, Mrs. Mac was right there,

giving me encouragement, telling everyone how we'd been robbed, and though I knew it was a lie, it was the best lie I'd ever heard!"¹⁵

Noel Collins, the band director who succeeded Tipton at Powell Valley High School, also had an amicable relationship with McChesney. He indicated in an article written after McChesney's death that "her wit, strong-willed dedication to purpose, and her zest for life singled her out among band directors, male and female. 'It took me some time to cement a relationship with her when I first came here. . . . Respect was something you earned from Mac.'"¹⁶ He also recounted that "I always sent flowers to her the Sunday after Valentine's Day because we had a running joke about my being late for everything, and Mac was such a stickler for deadlines."¹⁷

McChesney's Philosophy of Education

Although there is little written to account for McChesney's teaching philosophy, the article that appeared in *The Bandwagon* in 1964 does provide a glimpse into her beliefs. In a picture in the article of McChesney conducting, "Music Exalts Life" can be seen on the wall behind her, and beside this picture is the following text:

"I don't guess I can tell you why, but music is the whole world for me," she explains. "I know the children won't all feel that way, but every one of them absorbs something. That is why I never turn down anybody for lack of talent. If they come, they can stay, even if all they learn is to not play when they'd hurt the music."¹⁸

Also, in an interview for the Big Stone Gap High School newspaper in 1959, she told the student reporter, "I think that [music] provides an emotional outlet for everyone. Music tends to develop the aesthetics in a child."¹⁹ She also shared with Tipton and Collins that success was built not just on talent, but on the hard work and cooperation of the students.²⁰ Part of her teaching philosophy was also evident in her allowing students to perform solos and in small ensembles. At the 1939 spring concert, both the Big Stone Gap band and orchestra

played large ensemble pieces. These included a seven-member chamber ensemble and several solos performed by students.²¹ This concert programming arrangement continued into the 1960s.²²

McChesney's Character and Personality

By all accounts, McChesney was a very charismatic individual who cared deeply about music and her students. The admiration that her students held for her is evidenced in both of the yearbooks that were dedicated to her, the Big Stone Gap yearbook in 1946 and the Powell Valley yearbook in 1964. The 1946 Big Stone Gap yearbook text read, "Some persons have enough perception of individual personalities, they inspire others to strive to fulfill their expectations. Such a one is our band director. We have marveled at her patience and understanding as she worked to develop our talents and skills."²³ The dedication page in the 1964 Powell Valley yearbook, also dedicated to McChesney, discussed her success and the respect that she earned during her career. "We who have been close to her know the secret. She has demanded much from her students, but she has demanded even more from herself. Together with Mr. 'Mac,' her late, beloved Sam, she has left an indelible mark on the life of our community."²⁴

After McChesney's death, Carol Daugherty Rasnic, one of McChesney's former students, characterized her in this manner:

Mrs. Mac was indeed a legend in her own time, and it is virtually impossible to reduce to words just what she meant to so many people. Mrs. Mac was my very first cognizance of what a liberated woman was. A female band director in Southwest Virginia in the 50s was simply preposterous. However, she not only defied convention, but she did it in the grand style of consistently sweeping the most coveted awards from yearly band festivals, both on the field and in the concert hall. She was the singular director who everyone knew, even if not by name, as "that woman." Her direct manner surely drew the best out of us who were her worst. . . . There was never any doubt to any of us that she loved us as much as we loved her. The world is a

better place because of our Mrs. Mac, and it will be difficult to imagine Big Stone Gap without her.²⁵

McChesney touched many lives as a music educator. While it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many students she inspired to pursue music or music education as a profession, a handful of individuals who took this path are known. Rod Tate, who would ride his bike from East Stone Gap to participate in the band, eventually became the band director at Appalachia High School. Blaine Gibbs Jr. taught band at Appalachia High School before World War II.²⁶ David Barker also spent his career teaching music in Wise County. Mary Jane Miles taught music in Georgia.²⁷

Although McChesney spent so much time instructing students, she never taught either of her children to play an instrument. Because she was so busy teaching private students and rehearsing with the band, she did not want to spend what little free time she had listening to her children practice. She indicated in a newspaper interview that:

It is the regret of my life. When Sammy was killed in World War II at the age of 27, the first thing I recalled was the day he came to the door of the room while I was giving a violin lesson. I looked up, in a hurry to see what he wanted, and he had tears streaming down his cheeks. He wanted to play so badly, and I just couldn't give him the time. It's a regret that I'll always live with and a lesson I hope mothers will read and learn from. He died never having shared the thing that gave me more joy than I can describe, the joy of playing an instrument you love.²⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Women Band Directors International, "History."
- ² Wright, "What is the W.B.D.N.A.," *School Musician*, 68.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ⁴ Wright, "WBDNA Holds Third Annual Summer Meeting," *School Musician*, 62-63.
- ⁵ "Mrs. Mac' is Honored at National Meet," *The Post*, December 30, 1976.
- ⁶ Wright, "WBDNA Holds Second Annual Winter Meeting," *School Musician Director and Teacher*, 52-53.
- ⁷ "Big Stone Gap Band Members at All-State," *Kingsport Times*, February 13, 1955.
- ⁸ "She Started It All in 1936," McChesney Band Festival Special Insert, *The Post*, October 16, 1981.
- ⁹ "Band Festival Here Sept. 19," *Big Stone Gap Post*, August 27, 1981.
- ¹⁰ McChesney, Southwest Virginia Museum, interview.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Ida Holyfield and Bill Hendrick, "Residents Pay Tribute to Virginia McChesney," *Coalfield Press*, Thursday February 20, 1992.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Ida Holyfield, "Mrs. Mac One of the First Women to Succeed in School Bands," *The Post*, October 9, 1985.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Holyfield, Ida and Bill Hendrick, "Residents Pay Tribute to Virginia McChesney," *Coalfield Press*, Thursday February 20, 1992.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ "The Band Mistress of Big Stone Gap," *Bandwagon*, 5-8.

- ¹⁹ “Teacher Interviews,” *Big Stone Gap High School Jolly Roger*, March 1959.
- ²⁰ Ida Holyfield and Bill Hendrick, “Residents Pay Tribute to Virginia McChesney,” *Coalfield Press*, Thursday February 20, 1992.
- ²¹ “Band Concert is Received with Applause,” *The Post*, March 30, 1939.
- ²² “Annual Powell Valley Band Concert Slated Tonight,” *Kingsport Times*, May 4, 1962.
- ²³ Big Stone Gap High School, *School Bell* 1946.
- ²⁴ Powell Valley High School, *Valhalla* 1964.
- ²⁵ “McChesney Made a Difference in Students’ Lives,” Editorial, *The Post*, February 26, 1992.
- ²⁶ “Appalachia High School Band to be Continued,” *The Post*, June 22, 1939.
- ²⁷ “Virginia McChesney’s Credo: Musicians Must Work to Play,” *The Post*, October 5, 1988.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION

The largest question raised in examining Virginia McChesney's career is if she was treated differently based on her gender. In the 1930s most band directors were male, and there are very few known examples of women directors from this time.¹ Also, articles appearing in national publications indicate that girls and women were discriminated against in bands and as band directors. Timothy Anderson's biography of Barbara Buehlman indicated that she was treated differently at various times in her career because of her gender.² The only statement that documents if McChesney felt she had been discriminated against is a quote that appears in *The Bandwagon* in 1964. She said that "there were no band directors around here when I started, so nobody complained because I was a woman."³ This statement might be true since she was a trained musician and had the support of Wilkes Bobbitt, who initially encouraged McChesney to start the band at Big Stone Gap High School. There is also a chance that she did experience discrimination, and because of her strong-willed, independent personality chose not to disclose it to a reporter. To begin to more thoroughly understand if her gender impacted her, McChesney's career needs to be examined in relationship to the school band movement in the United States and the history of music education in Virginia.

Throughout her career, McChesney received little financial support for her band program from the schools. Today there is an expectation that schools will provide, at the very least, limited financial support for bands and also hire the director as part of their regular instructional staff. In the beginning of the school band movement during the early twentieth century, schools that were eager to have bands did not always fund them. Dr. William D. Revelli's band in Hobart, Indiana, had no budgetary support from his school during the 1930s

and initially relied on the community for support.⁴ Joan A. Lamb, who eventually was able to find employment as a band director after World War II, enlisted in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in reaction to being hired at a school that wanted a band program but was not prepared to support it.⁵ Similar stories can be seen with other programs, so it is not at all surprising that McChesney's efforts were not funded by the school, but rather through community support.

When compared to what was happening nationally, it is somewhat surprising that McChesney was not employed as a teacher by the school system. Mark and Gary state that instruction for school bands initially came primarily from musicians in local bands who were hired on a part-time basis.⁶ Sometimes teachers who were hired to teach non-performance music classes in the schools created bands. Examples of this include Dr. Revelli, who was initially hired as a music supervisor, and Browné Greaton Cole, who was hired as a music teacher in Ocala, Florida, and later created the first band in the state.⁷ In discussing the development of school bands, Keene states that "by 1923 the band became [an] important force in school music. It was no longer an 'incidental school enterprise,' it no longer acquired the services of a volunteer high school teacher who had some band experience. It had a definite place in the school schedule with regular rehearsals under a trained instructor."⁸

When McChesney's career is examined in relation to the history of music education in Virginia, it is evident that she was not the only school band director not employed by a school board. While Keene's statement about the status of band might have been true in the Mid-West, during the same period of time in Virginia, music classes taught by music educators were scant. In 1928, Virginia's ninety-five counties employed about seven music supervisors, one full-time music teacher, and eleven part-time music teachers. Music teachers

were much more numerous in the cities, but Virginia was a rural state.⁹ When McChesney initially started teaching in 1930, it would have been unlikely for the school system to employ her solely to teach music in rural Wise County, considering the small number of music educators employed state-wide. In 1936, the year before McChesney started the band at Big Stone Gap, according to a survey conducted by the state supervisor of music, there were only twenty-five full-time music teachers in Virginia county schools. There were forty part-time and full-time instrumental music educators working with bands or orchestras in high schools. Some of these forty teachers were paid by school boards, some by other sources, and some partially by school boards and partially by outside sources. Wise County administration indicated in the survey that the one orchestra director in the county, presumably McChesney, received a salary from an outside source.¹⁰ This salary was most likely from fees collected from students who took private lessons since there was no record of her fundraising for the orchestra. The band director at Appalachia High School in the late 1930s and early 1940s received a salary, but this salary came from the band mothers organization rather than from the school system.¹¹ There is no record that McChesney received a salary from the band boosters at Big Stone Gap.

I could not locate a source that indicated when more band directors in Virginia started to be employed by school systems. However, in Wise County it appears as if McChesney started to receive a salary from the school system at about the same time as other directors. She was employed part time by the county no later than 1952.¹² The band director who was hired at Coeburn High School began in 1950 and was also employed part time.¹³ Joseph D. Flanary, who was hired as the director at Appalachia High School, was employed sometime between 1949 and 1953. The city of Norton, Virginia, in Wise County, created a band and

hired a director sometime in 1950.¹⁴ Reports of bands at Saint Paul High School in Saint Paul, Virginia, and J.J. Kelly High School in Wise, Virginia, appear in local newspapers at about the same time. I could not determine which director was hired first. Part of the delay in hiring band directors, and therefore making the band programs officially part of the schools, was most likely due to the long-term financial impact of the Depression. Like many other places during the Depression, Wise County was facing a financial hardship that made it difficult to keep the schools open and pay teachers' salaries.¹⁵ By 1938 the situation had not changed, and only a few years later World War II started.¹⁶ After World War II, the county started planning and building new high schools, which would have required considerable financial resources.¹⁷ The school board in Wise County was probably not in a financial position to support making an extra-curricular activity such as band part of the regular school curriculum until the 1950s.

McChesney was able to have a successful career as a female band director in Central Appalachia because of her socio-economic status and gender. As an Appalachian woman in the early and mid-twentieth century, McChesney would have been dependent on her father and then her husband for financial support.¹⁸ The socio-economic status of the Beverly family, McChesney's parents, is demonstrated by where they lived in Big Stone Gap and the education and employment attained by her father. Because of her father's success, the Beverly's were able to provide educational opportunities for McChesney. If McChesney's father had been employed as one of the many poorer laborers in Big Stone Gap, her fate would have probably been much different. Although Sam, McChesney's husband, worked in the mining industry like many others in Southwest Virginia at the time, he occupied a higher status position than miners and other laborers, which kept him safe from the dangers of daily

work in the mines and provided higher income. Because her family was not financially dependent upon her, McChesney could more freely dedicate her time to activities of her choosing. McChesney was also able to heavily rely on her mother for assistance in taking care of her children when they were young.¹⁹ The school system did not employ band directors, so men who were qualified to work with bands had to find other sources of income and probably would have had less time to dedicate to a school band. Blaine Gibbs, the director at Appalachia High School from 1939 until 1944, taught at the school and also directed the band after school, which is probably why he was able and willing to continue working with the group until enlisting in the army.²⁰

It is also important to understand how McChesney's career compares to those of other female school band directors who were teaching in the late 1930s. Like McChesney, Women Band Directors International (WBDI) also recognizes Thelma Stuart Harris as a Pioneer Woman of the Podium. Harris started teaching in 1926 at Hughes Kirk High School in Beechmont, Kentucky, and taught for twenty-nine years.²¹ Unfortunately, I could not locate any information about Harris other than the brief biography that appears on the WBDI website. Barbara Buehlman, who was born in 1936, started teaching in 1960 and was also trained to be a band director. McChesney's and Buehlman's careers are very dissimilar because of the changes that occurred in music education in the public schools as well as the education available at the collegiate level for those wanting to teach instrumental music.

Suggestions for Further Research

While conducting initial research for this project, it became very obvious that historical research about women as band directors, in general, is sparse and that historical research about women as school band directors, in particular, is almost non-

existent. Because of this the research suggestions made by Timothy Anderson in 2010 in his doctoral dissertation about the career of Barbara Buehlman are still relevant. He suggested that the career of Helen May Butler should be documented.²² Helen May Butler, who led a very successful professional all-girl band in the early twentieth century, is often used as an example of a successful woman band director.²³ I could not locate any books or journal articles that focused solely on Butler, but a small biography is available through Oxford Music Online. Books and articles can readily be found for male bandleaders such as Patrick Gilmore, John Philip Sousa, and Edwin Franko Goldman. If Butler is truly the best-known example of an early woman band director, her life and career need to be fully investigated and documented in a similar fashion to male band directors.

More research pertaining to the careers of women school band directors also needs to be done. When Anderson completed his doctoral dissertation about the career of Barbara Buehlman, there were no other doctoral dissertations that were biographies of successful women school band directors. To help address this issue, Anderson suggested that a biography be written of Gladys Wright, a highly successful woman band director, who was the first woman elected to membership in the American Bandmasters Association. Anderson stressed the importance of this biography being written while Wright is still living in order to benefit from her first-hand perspective of her life and career.²⁴

Identifying more women school band directors who taught before World War II and researching their careers is necessary to understand exactly to what extent women were involved in teaching band during the early school band movement. While there obviously was a greater number of men teaching, it is impossible to know the extent of women's

involvement in the field and how their training and career paths compare to their male counterparts without further research.

Historical accounts of music education in each state, especially outside of the Midwest and the Northeastern sections of the country need to be researched. Currently, the historical canon focuses heavily on Midwestern and Northeastern males.²⁵ Without knowledge of music education in other regions of the country, it is impossible to completely understand the history of music education in the United States. The differences in the level of employment of music educators in Virginia in the 1930s and what is reported in current music education history texts highlights this need.

NOTES

¹ The best known woman school band directors who taught before 1940 are recognized by Women Band Directors International as Pioneer Women of the Podium on their website. While it is hard to discern how many women worked as school band directors at this time, the fact that Gladys Wright and Kate Hawkins had to make a concerted effort to seek out women band directors in the 1960s demonstrates how rare of a phenomenon a woman band director was.

² Anderson, "Barbara Buehlman: A Study of Her Career," 81-82, 86-88, 171-73.

³ "Band Mistress of Big Stone Gap," 5-8.

⁴ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 310.

⁵ Sullivan, "One Ohio Music Educator's Contribution," 27-51.

⁶ Mark and Gary, *History of American Music Education*, 305.

⁷ Women Band Directors International, "Pioneer Women of the Podium: Browné Greaton Cole"; "Mother of Florida's School Band Movement," *Palm Beach Post*, June 6, 1953.

⁸ Keene, *History of Music Education in the United States*, 323.

⁹ Hancock, "The History of Public School Music in Virginia," 91.

¹⁰ Richman, "Status of Music Education," 201.

¹¹ "Appalachia Band Club Disbanded," *Kingsport Times*, October 19, 1941.

¹² "Complete List of Teachers is Given by Kelly," *The Post* July 30, 1952.

¹³ Virginia Briefs, *Kingsport Times*, September 15, 1950.

¹⁴ "High School Bands in Area Make Spectacular Progress," *Kingsport Times*, May 17, 1950.

¹⁵ Porter, *School Bells from the Past*, 46-59.

¹⁶ "Wise Co. Teachers Still in Throes of Depression Says Committee," *The Post*, February 24, 1938.

¹⁷ Addington, *The Story of Wise County*, 135-52; "Wise Dedicates New High Schools," *Kingsport Times*, May 9, 1954.

¹⁸ Cummings, "Stand by Your Man," *Beyond Hill and Hollow*, 152-69.

¹⁹ "Virginia McChesney's Credo," *The Post*, October 5, 1988.

²⁰ United States, World War II Army Enlistment Records, William B. Gibbs Jr.; Appalachia High School, *1941 Accolade*; "Appalachia High School Band is Largest Youngest Musical Organization in Virginia," *The Post*, September 1, 1938.

²¹ Women Band Directors International, "Pioneer Women of the Podium: Thelma Lee Stuart Harris."

²² Anderson, "Barbara Buehlman: A Study of Her Career," 210.

²³ Examples of articles that use Butler as an example include: Sullivan, "A Century of Women's Bands in America," 33-40; Hamann, "Music at Lincoln Junior High (Minneapolis) and the Lincoln Junior High Girls' Band: 1923—1940," 55-74; Howe, "An Historical Perspective on Contributions of American Women Music Educators," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 22, no. 2 (2001): 147-158.

²⁴ Anderson, "Barbara Buehlman: A Study of Her Career," 211.

²⁵ Humphreys, "Sex and Geographic Representation in Two Music Education History Books," 67-86.

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APPENDIX A. ANNUAL BAND CONCERT PROGRAM

Annual Band Concert
Big Stone Gap High School Auditorium
May 16, 1958 - 8 P. M.

Accompanists
Carol Daugherty
Ann Liddle

DIRECTOR – Mrs. S. H. McChesney

PROGRAM

Seventy-six Trombones-----	Wilson
Big Top Overture-----	Bowles
Junior and Senior band combined	
Dance-----	Mrs. Quinlan's Students
National Emblem March-----	Bagley
Poet and Peasant-----	Suppe
Three Modernairs-----	Little
*Sounds from the Hudson-----	Clark
*Carnival of Venice-----	Del Staigers arr.
*Rakoczy-----	Berlioz
*Adagio Tarantella-----	Wain
Bugler's Holiday-----	Leroy Anderson
*Samba-----	Miller
*Marche Militaire-----	Schubert
Relax-----	Yoder
Colonel Bogey-----	Alford
Toccata for Band-----	Erickson
*Swing Low Sweet Chariot-----	Morrissey
*Samsonian [Polka]-----	McQuaide
*Zigeunerweisen-----	Sarasate
Light Calvary-----	Suppe
Susannah Shuffle-----	Marini
Selections from Carousel-----	Rogers
Stars and Stripes Forever-----	Sousa

*Denotes pieces that were solos or small ensemble performances. The program does not clearly indicate which pieces had piano accompaniment or were accompanied by the band.

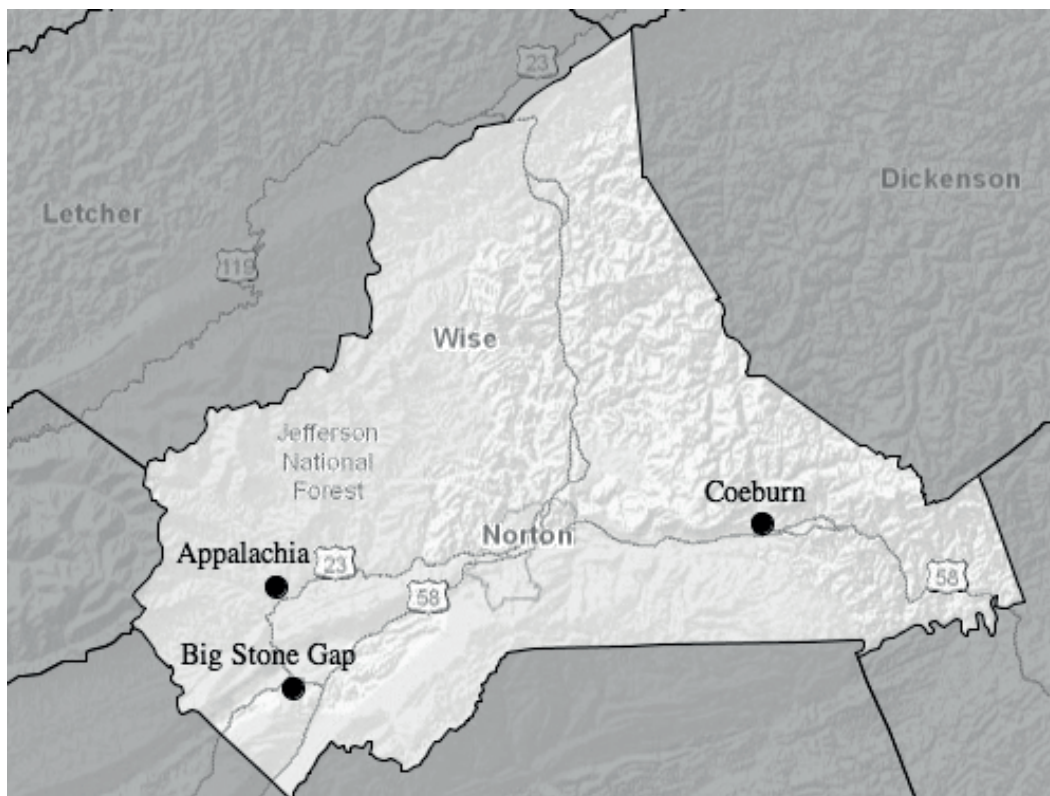
APPENDIX B. MAPS

Wise County, Virginia



U.S. Census Bureau; generated by Marsha Kincade; using American FactFinder;
<<http://factfinder2.census.gov>>; (28 April 2013).

Selected Towns in Wise County, Virginia



U.S. Census Bureau; generated by Marsha Kincade; using American FactFinder;
<<http://factfinder2.census.gov>>; (28 April 2013).