

The first PCHS Band as pictured in the 1933 Peningian.



# The history of Port Chester High School

*To commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the current PCHS building, this is the third in a series of articles about its history. This section talks about Paul Weckesser and the PCHS Band.*

By Ron Weckessar

“He arrived on the scene like a bombshell” in October of 1932. Before him there had been no high school band to speak of. In fact, there had been no high school band at all, but “when Paul Weckesser came, everyone all of a sudden went out to get instruments,” recalled Amerigo Liberati of the class of ‘34, “and in just one month he taught them all to play.”

Indeed an entry for Nov. 5 in the Class Diary of the Peningian reads, “The band made its first public appearance today and left a great impression on the people who attended the White Plains game.”

“Everyone, including the faculty, was stunned,” continued Mr. Liberati. “How was this possible?” they asked.”

“He would go over the parts with every single student until they got it right,” explained trombonist Angelo Galasso of the class of ‘37. “He’d bring his trumpet to demonstrate how a particular passage should be played. For me he’d actually indicate on the sheet music the position of the slide for a particular note. He was A-1 okay in my book. He was a quiet guy, and not once did I ever see him get angry.”

“He was the nicest man you’d ever meet, and soft spoken,” confirmed Anthony Pizzarello, who graduated four years later. “Nobody—but nobody ever said anything negative about him. The kids respected him so much that they did their absolute best—not so much for their benefit as to enhance his reputation. And that’s what made the Port Chester High School Band the great institution that it is.”

During its first year, the band was an after school activity and

hearsals were only two per week. It was scheduled for a definite period in its second year when the number of rehearsals increased to three. By the beginning of the third year, the school board was so impressed by what Mr. Weckesser had accomplished that Band became an accredited subject; and in 1934 the now 60-member organization won

the Mertz Reed Band which, with equal enthusiasm, people came in droves to hear on the opening day of Purdy’s Grove, the site of the present Columbus Park, on June 25, 1885.)

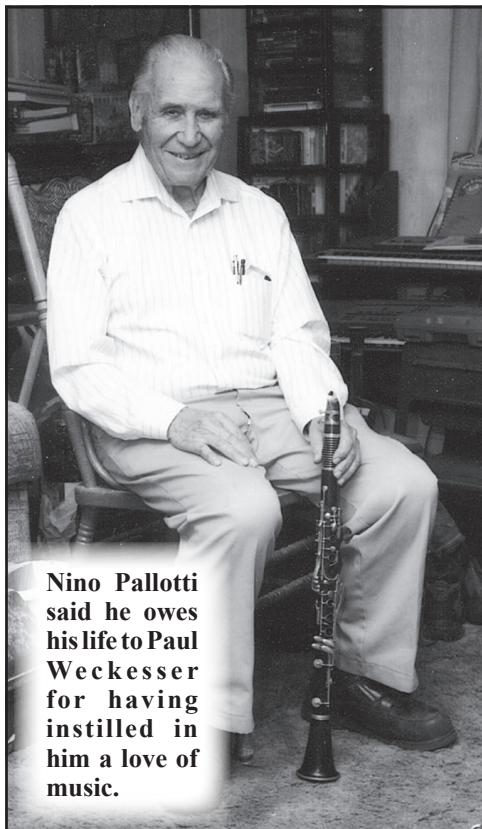
“I hadn’t yet graduated,” continued Mr. Liberati, who had studied architectural drafting before entering high school, “when I was asked by the Commissioner of Parks to design a band shelter for acoustics. Segments of the Glen Miller and the Jimmy Dorsey bands would come to play at Lyon Park in the shelter I had built.”

## Paul Weckesser enters the service

Just before the United States’ involvement in the second world war, Paul Weckesser—along with many of his student musicians—entered the service and was made warrant officer of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Medical Regiment Band in the 27<sup>th</sup> Division of the New York National Guard.

“His departure left a great big void in the school,” said the widow of Anthony Bubbico, a member of the exclusive dance band during the ’40-41 school year. “His successor, Clement A. Barton, admitted that he

didn’t even come close to being the leader that Mr. Weckesser had been. I remember when Paul used to go from door to door soliciting money to buy instruments for poor children because in those days almost nobody could afford to buy one. Then, when he had amassed a number of instruments, he laid them out on the floor of the auditorium and said to the kids to pick out the ones they wanted; and in just one month he formed the great Port Chester High School Band. That’s why, after my husband and I saw [the movie] *The Music Man*



Nino Pallotti said he owes his life to Paul Weckesser for having instilled in him a love of music.

the highly coveted Award of Excellence at the Columbia University Festival in New York City.

Besides playing at football games and the spring festivals of the grade schools, within just a year the band became a sensation at Lyon Park.

“During the summer people would come in droves to hear the weekly concerts presented by Mr. Weckesser’s band,” remembered Mr. Liberati.

(Thus did the organization become the spiritual successor of the Port Chester Cornet Band and



Paul Weckesser, who formed Port Chester High School’s first band.

30 years later, we decided to call him The Music Man. He was the original Music Man, whose life had paralleled that of the main character in the movie.”

Nino Pallotti, who plays several band instruments and still gives private lessons 65 years after graduating from Port Chester High, confesses that he owes his life to the great band leader for having instilled in him a love for music.

“I was in sixth grade at the Roosevelt School when I met Mr. Weckesser,” he said. “He taught music not only at the High School, but also the elementary schools. I thank God that he came into my life, for I probably would not be alive if he hadn’t.

“Soon I began to take private lessons, and by the time I was in high school I was good enough to make the Dance Band. I now knew that music would be my career.

“But then I was drafted. I’ll never forget that day when the train was pulling out of the station loaded with draftees, and my mom and my friend Pat Pagliari’s mom

fainted on the platform as we were waving goodbye.

“At Fort Dix I was put into a special unit where for three weeks I entertained playing the sax and clarinet. My friend Pat, however, was transferred to Camp Craft and from there was shipped to Italy where he was killed in action. Yes, music—actually, Mr. Weckesser—saved my life!

“Then on to Fort Leonardwood, Missouri for basic training. There I was learning to be a combat engineer so that I could build bridges and repair airstrips while under fire; but a month before my training ended I auditioned for the Armed Services Force Training Center and after basic was transferred to a 50-piece band and also an 18-piece dance band. We played at drill and dress parades and never had to go overseas. Just how lucky I was I came to realize when a guy I had been in basic with called out to me and said, ‘Hey Pallotti, trade that clarinet in for a rifle and get on the train!’

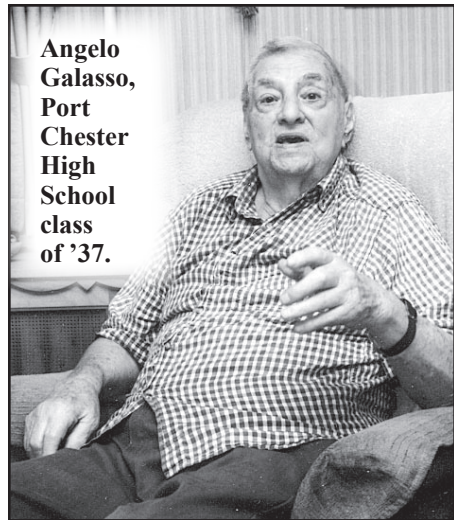
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## The history of Port Chester High School

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"After I came home I was on unemployment for two weeks until I landed a job with the Johnny Morris Band in New York City. We did one-nighters throughout New England and all along the East Coast. We played at the Paloma Ball Room in Norfolk, Virginia for two weeks, then went down to Florida for another six.

"After the band broke up, three of us--myself and two saxophonists--joined the Tony Pastor Band. Rosemary and Betty Cluny were



Angelo Galasso, Port Chester High School class of '37.

with the band, too, and together we made the movie *Two Blondes And a Redhead* which opened at the Embassy on North Main Street.

"Then I met my future wife, and when I told Tony that I was going to get married, he got angry and said, 'What the hell you gonna get married for? Give all the women a chance!' But she was the one for me. I was one lucky man. And in more ways than one."

### Paul Weckesser returns to PCHS

Paul Weckesser's return to the high school was a major event after the war. The 1946 yearbook announced:

### MAJOR WECKESSER BACK CONDUCTING BAND AT HIGH SCHOOL AFTER FIVE YEARS' SERVICE

He continued as band director while with the New York Air National Guard until recalled to active duty in 1951.

"From then until I took over, the band wasn't the superior organization that it had been under Paul Weckesser," stated Ken

Force, who was appointed director in 1966.

Archie Jacobs, then head of the Port Chester Music Department, wrote in his "Historical and Goal Review of the Port Chester High School Band":

"...there began a slow but gradual deterioration of the band program. Two new instructors were hired in the ensuing years but nothing seemed to slow the tide. When a vacancy occurred once again in 1966, a strong search got underway to find the most suitable candidate that would bring new life to our floundering band. After interviewing more than twenty-five highly qualified candidates, I recommended to the then Superintendent of Schools, Fred Kowalski, that Kenneth R. Force be appointed to the position. It was my opinion that this man was an excellent

musician, highly energetic, aggressive, knowledgeable and well recommended. More important, I felt that the candidacy of Mr. Force offered us something extremely unique and quite different other than the usual high school band..."

### Ken Force introduces British marching band style

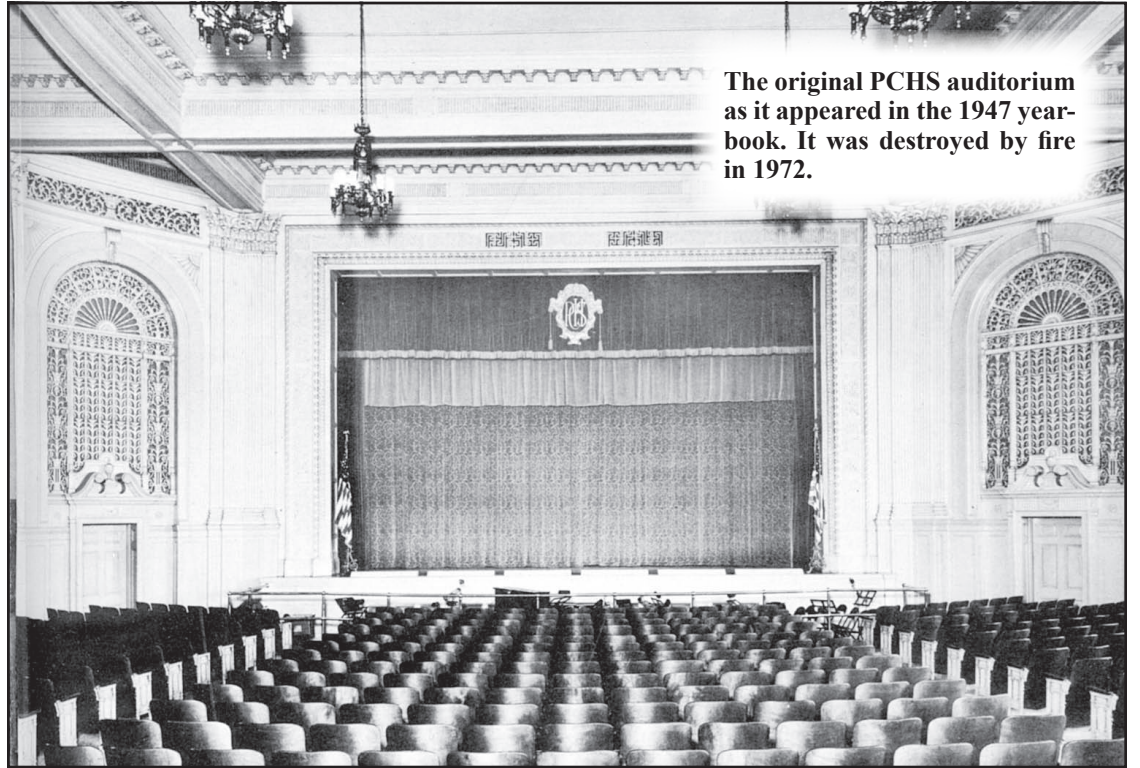
Indeed did something "quite different" result as might be expected from a man by the name of Ken Force.

"After returning from England, he introduced the British marching band style," said Chairman of the Music Department Ken Kraut.

"Those kids had to spend at least one hour every day practicing so that they would have the music memorized out on the field," said Captain Force himself; "and on top of that I would change the program every week."

Now director of music at the United States Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York, Mr. Force continued:

"The first thing I did was to take the band to the Cherry Blossom



The original PCHS auditorium as it appeared in the 1947 yearbook. It was destroyed by fire in 1972.

Festival in 1967. Then, with funds raised by the Band Parents Association, we went to the Rose Bowl in 1971. Karl L. King, who with John Philip Sousa and Edwin Franco Goldman had founded the American Band Association, said that it was the best sounding and best looking high school band that he had ever seen.

What's more, it was the first time that the selection committee for the parade had ever taken a band under a hundred members. But I convinced them that every one of my boys would hold up under the six-mile march. And, sure enough, not one dropped out along the way."

The captain then proceeded to the financing of the trip:

"Anthony Rende, the first president of the Band Parents Association, had led the fund drive which raised \$50,000 for the charter plane and hotel accommodations. The amount, which far exceeded our expectations, was due in no small part to his oratory. He could really stir up the crowd, as he did on Columbus Day at the Port Chester Marina:

"Our high school band is the best band in Port Chester" (The crowd applauded.)  
 "Our high school band is the best band in New York!" (The crowd cheered.)  
 "Our high school band is the best band in the state of New York!" (The crowd roared!)  
 "Our high school band is the best band in the United States of America!" (The crowd went wild!)

"Give me a poor town, and I'll build a band," continued Mr. Force. "No other band has the rich cultural roots that the Port Chester band does. The kids are so spirited, as music is so important to those from a lower socio-economic background.

"Too, these kids are more passionate than American kids brought up with all the benefits of the affluent society. But as long as the community fosters discipline and focus, the students will reflect the yearning to improve themselves and will have goals in their lives. I'd hate to think of all the kids that would never have graduated from high school if it hadn't been for the various music programs. Music held them in the schools."

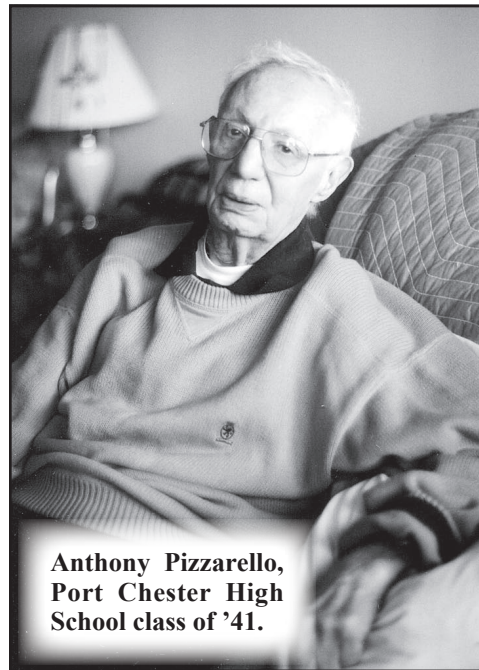
By the time of Ken Force's appointment as band director, Paul Weckesser had retired as chief of United States Air Force Bands.

"When I called him in 1966, he said, 'Port Chester loves a show!' So, after contacting his wife May to arrange for a surprise, I took the band down to Washington, D.C.

Air Force, Paul Weckesser taught music at the public school system in Georges County, Maryland until illness forced him to retire indefinitely.

### Fire destroys memorabilia

On Feb. 23, 1972, fire broke out in the auditorium of the high school. The palatial stage that had witnessed the formation of "the best high school band in the United States of America" was now little more than a blackened hole; and all the plaques and photographs--all the memorabilia from the Force and Weckesser years kept in the band office below--perished in the fire. Although the auditorium would eventually be renovated, the original grille-work could not be duplicated, and a wall of sheetrock reduced the size of the stage.



Anthony Pizzarello, Port Chester High School class of '41.

On Nov. 27, 1985, the founder and great director of the Port Chester High School Band passed away at Malcolm Grow Air Force Medical Center outside of Washington, D.C. Had the student who set the blaze come under his personal attention, undoubtedly the disaster would not have occurred, and he, too, would have proclaimed, as did Nino Pallotti, "I thank God that he came into my life."

and led it right up to the front door of his house in the suburb of Oxen Hill. Percy Granger, who was guest conductor, led the band in the performances of his new concert compositions while Paul stood dumbfounded at the door."

After his retirement from the

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