

The Skirl of the Bagpipes in the Carolinas

Bill Caudill reflects on how piping has shaped his life

By Scott Williams

Raised in North Carolina, of ancestors who immigrated from Skye to the Upper Cape Fear and Upper Pee Dee river valleys of the Carolinas, with a father who loved square dancing and was steeped in the old-time music of Appalachia and a mother who played piano, no wonder Bill Caudill became a musician. But a piper? Well there is that fourth great grandmother who was a MacCrimmon.

Bill Caudill, Director of the Scottish Heritage Center and Instructor of the College Pipe Band at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina, grew up in the country outside the small town of Waxhaw. His father was from the community of Ronda in the foothills of the North Carolina Mountains. His mother was from the Charlotte area but grew up in and around Waxhaw.

"I live only a few minutes drive from the gravesites of at least eight emigrant ancestors from Scotland. I have connections to Skye (MacQueens, MacDonalds, MacRaes), Glenelg (MacCrimmons), and Islay (Sinclairs and MacKenzies) just to name a few of my Highland ancestors who came to the Carolinas in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At least some were Gaelic speakers, but none that I know of were musicians, though I'd love to claim some genetic connection between my piping and the fact that my fourth great grandmother was a MacCrimmon."

Bill started chanter lessons in 1976 when

he was in the third grade and by the time he was in junior high school, he was playing regularly with a pipe band and performing in the community.

"I felt that I was considered a bit of an oddball. Not too many people knew much about things Scottish and I'm sure a lot of folks thought that my wearing a kilt and playing the pipes was strange to say the least. Nonetheless, I led a fairly normal teen life, and had friends appreciated what I did in my spare time. I played in the high school marching band and did a special

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feature one year playing the pipes for one of the band's shows."

When Bill first expressed an interest in learning to play the bagpipes, his parents had a somewhat difficult time at first locating a tutor for him. After a year, they found Dick Campbell of the Charlotte Caledonian Pip Band. "It was basically a street band but at the time I began tuition all of the players were correctly taught and they produced a reasonable sound. Dick was a reasonable player, but I think he knew his limitations. He used to tell me, "Don't do as I

do, do as I say.” He took me through the exercises in the old *Logan’s Tutor*, through the *College of Piping Tutor*, and on to a number of band tunes before I touched a bagpipe. I really thank him for that as, unlike so many kids I see today who get their pipes too early, I was ready for them and already had a good dozen or more tunes off well.

“My first set was an early 1960s vintage MacPherson’s — although I now play Dick’s old silver and ivory Hendersons that were given to me after his death. I spent the first week on those MacPherson pipes blowing just the three drones and learning to tune them to each other. I think that was very important in the development of tuning and learning to blow tone. I then graduated to the full instrument. Dick soon got me started on solo competitions as he felt that this would be a way to get feedback and encouragement in addition to what he was doing with me. My first competition tune was the ‘The 10th H.L.I. Crossing the Rhine,’ and I placed second.”

Around 1980, Burt Mitchell moved to

the area and took over the Charlotte band, turning it into a competitive one. It was time for Bill to move on. “Burt was a successful professional competitor at that time. He worked with me and taught me a lot about expression and execution — particularly in dance music. He also gave me my first piobaireachd, ‘The Lament for the Old Sword’.”

Bill’s first competition with the Charlotte band was at the games in Savannah, Georgia, in 1980. “Nobody knew anything about the band as it hadn’t been active at all in competition. We turned some heads that day when the band played tunes like all four parts of ‘The Red Speckled Hen’ and ‘Alec C. MacGregor’ in our medley. It was definitely above grade level material and we did it pretty well. The Charlotte band under Burt Mitchell went on to become the top Grade IV band in the South in the early 1980s. When I left in the winter of 1982, I was at that time it’s longest serving member. The band had seen an almost 100 per cent turnover from older casual players to younger competitive play-

ers.”

Around the same time, Bill started attending the North American Academy of Piping in Valle Crucis, North Carolina, and receiving a couple of weeks of tuition from Sandy Jones and Hamilton Workman each year. “But from 1982 on, I was pretty much on my own.

“I learned a lot of light music tunes on my own and tried to make them sound like I thought they were supposed to sound. It was unfortunate that I was a bit geographically isolated from folks who could help me on a full-time basis. I did have the opportunity to spend a week at College of Piping in Glasgow in 1988 and I had piobaireachd tuition there from Fred Morrison Sr. and Ronald Morrison. Colin MacLellan and Ed Neigh, with whom I have taught at the North American Academy of Piping, have also taken me through a few piobaireachd. Still, I regret that I haven’t had the opportunity of working with a good teacher for any length of time since the early 1980s. I pretty much worked my way up from EUSPBA (Eastern



Bill aged 9



... aged 19



... and today

United States Pipe Band Association) Amateur Grade III to the Professional level on my own without a regular teacher. I'm happy that I've been able to achieve what I have through absorbing what I could from a lot of sources. In some ways I think it has helped me be well rounded if nothing else. And I learned a lot by listening to good recordings, and if there was one that was truly influential, it was the 1974 recording made by Donald MacPherson in New Zealand. I had that LP and listened to cassette copies of it in my car driving to school so many times that I wore out the cassettes. That recording, perhaps more than anything, influenced my idea of how a good bagpipe should sound like and what good expression was."

"In the winter of 1982, I accepted an offer to join the Grandfather Mountain Highlanders, a successful Grade III band in western North Carolina. There were a lot more young people involved in that band and that helped me make the decision to leave the Charlotte band. Harvey Ritch was the band's Pipe Major and, though I never took any lessons from him, I learned a lot about band work and bagpipe sound from him. Harvey was a good teacher and had taught most of the players in the band himself. By 1984, he had recruited Ed Krintz, the former Pipe Major of the Grade II Denny and Dunipace band in Washington,

was upgraded to Grade II and competed at Maxville in Ontario and at Montreal that year. Ed appointed Bill as Pipe Sergeant shortly after his arrival and he began to play a major part in the set-up work for the band.

prizes at the few Grade II contests that were held at that time. I remember one very good performance we had at Delco in Pennsylvania in 1988. Unfortunately we didn't have the depth in drumming that we did in piping and this was always a handi-



At Grandfather Mountain

"In 1987, Ed's work responsibilities forced him to relocate from the area and I was selected to become pipe major. At that time, the Grandfather Mountain band had a lot of young people in college, myself included, and we got together only about twice a month for all-day Saturday practices, meeting in Greensboro, which was

cap. During the late 1980s we definitely had the strongest pipe section in the Southern United States....

"By the 1990 season, I was becoming stretched a little thin and stepped down from the pipe major's position with Grandfather Mountain, but Ed Krintz was able to secure a transfer back to North Carolina and he resumed his role with the band."

When it came time to consider colleges, Bill chose the small liberal arts and sciences St. Andrews Presbyterian College, located in Lenoir, North Carolina.

"There were a number of reasons for this. First, I am a Presbyterian and knew of the college through the church. Secondly, I had deep family roots in the community and region in which the college was locat-

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D.C. to take over. Ed was also an professional competitor and I got a few pìobaireachd from him during my high school years."

When Ed Krintz took the band, he led it to additional successes. In 1986, the band

centrally located for those in colleges here in the state. I commuted about two hours twice a month from St. Andrews Presbyterian College, where I was a student, to manage practices.

"The Grandfather Mountain band took

ed. Thirdly, the college had always had some identification with its Scottish Presbyterian roots as well as historic connections with this region of Highland settlement.

"Since its opening, the college has hired pipers to play for convocations and graduations. I was a pretty good high school student so I received a handsome academic scholarship at St. Andrews, but once they found out about my piping interests and abilities they added an additional stipend to be the official piper for the college. During my four years of undergraduate work I not only played at official events, but also served as an ambassador for the college by playing at church engagements, civic functions, and so on. I became a 'piping poster child' for the college, which in turn raised awareness of the college's Scottish roots and connections, and it enabled me to bring piping into an area that had not had it for at least two or three generations.

"My interests were primarily in antebellum Southern history and the American Civil War, but I soon veered toward Scottish-American history and the history of Scots in North Carolina. I did my undergraduate honours thesis on the historical use of Gaelic in the old Highland settlements of the region. That work led me to connections with several scholars in Scotland, resulting in some scholarly attention to my interests and research."

Just before he graduated in 1989, Bill was asked to remain at St. Andrews to join the college staff with the hopes of creating a number of projects that would further highlight and bring attention to the college's Scottish identity and roots. "Little did I know that what had been my hobby was to become my profession!"

One of his first tasks was to establish the Scottish Heritage Center at St. Andrews and its associated projects, including

founding a college pipe band. "By 1991, I had brought a group of players together at St. Andrews and we began doing some local performances. Our first ones were in street clothes as I also had the challenge of raising the funds to purchase for the band. I'm very proud to say that, by the age of 23, I had founded and completely outfitted my own pipe band!"

The band played successfully in Grade IV through the 1998 season and produced a recording. "This was a great educational project for the students involved. We sold about 3,000 copies and Ed Neigh gave it a very favourable review in the EUSPBA magazine, *The Voice*. It has also been heard on National Public radio."

The band remained unchallenged at the Grade IV level in the Southeast in Grade IV and was upgraded to Grade III for the 1999 season. They have remained in Grade III since. "I've been told by some prominent pipers and judges that it's a shame that we aren't able to keep the band together during the summers as we'd likely do well at some of the larger contests in EUSPBA as well as in PPBSO. That's pretty much impossible, as we've got students spread from as far away as Texas and Colorado as well as Massachusetts and Connecticut. With the geography involved it just isn't feasible. We are challenged by the fact that membership in a college band is transitional, as well as the fact that we are only active during the academic year, thus missing the major contests of the summer months.

"The band has never finished out of the prize list in any contest since it's competitive debut. We've had some good young players with lot of potential pass through our ranks and some have gone on to pursue their piping and drumming interests beyond the college years. In 2003, at Maxville I was extremely proud to have had alumni of the band playing in both the winning Grade I

and Grade II bands. That was very fulfilling."

In 1992, the college band entered and won its first Grade V contest. By the next season, it was doing well at Grade V, was challenging up to Grade IV, and was either winning or taking second place everywhere in the Southeast. Within two years, the band was upgraded to Grade IV and began attracting some experienced players to the college through scholarship offerings.

Bill is also a solo competitor and has been since age 12. "I remember my first first-place win at Charleston, South Carolina, in 1980. From that time on it was only to get better. I won the EUSPBA Championship for Grade IV in 1981, for Grade III in 1982, the Grade II overall in 1984, and was among the top four players in Grade I for each of my four years in that grade (1985-1988). I also remember winning the Amateur Grade I Piobaireachd at Delco Games in Pennsylvania in 1988, playing 'The MacLeod's Salute' for Jim McGillivray on a very hot dusty day. His score sheet said simply 'This was an Open calibre performance.' I remember that as being one of the wins that gave me the confidence to move up to the professional level the next year. I've been fairly successful, having place third overall for the past two years running. I remember playing 'The Lament for Captain MacDougall' for the win in 2001, again before judge Jim McGillivray, and I think that was probably the best tune I'd ever played. I've never had the opportunity to compete in solos overseas and hopefully sometime before I get too old I'll have a chance to do that."

In 2002, Bill won two of the five qualifying events for the United States Piping Foundation contest in Delaware. As well he won the Professional Piobaireachd at Stone Mountain, Georgia, for three years running. He also won the Professional Piobaireachd

at Loch Norman in North Carolina playing “The Earl of Seaforth’s Salute”. “Those wins, as well as the Piper of the Day awards at Ligonier and Grandfather Mountain, stand out as some of my proudest achievements of recent years.

“To me, one of the greatest challenges for any piper is being able to produce a high quality sound. That’s something I’ve sort of developed a knack for and enjoy being able to help produce — not only for myself but for others, be it private students, my bands or other bands that I work with. My current set-up includes my old Henderson drones with Crozier drone reeds and a Naill chanter with Donald MacPhee chanter reeds. I play a Gannaway bag — no zippers or kitty litter for me!

“I am very involved with the EUSPBA, and have served on the Association’s Music Board and the Judge’s Panel since 1998. I currently serve on the grading committee and am chairman of the judge’s review committee of the Music Board. I have judged throughout the EUSPBA but have yet to have the good fortune of an invitation to judge in one of our other societies here in North America.”

Bill is active as a teacher. Not only is this part of his everyday responsibilities, but he also teaches most of the serious and aspiring young players in his region of the Carolinas. “I work with a varying number of the college students each year and maintain about 10 to 12 private students. I’m proud of the impact I’ve been able to have on some of the college alumni who are now pursuing piping seriously. One of the most fulfilling things about being located where I am, in a community of people who are largely of Highland descent, is that I’ve served as somewhat of a piping missionary — bringing piping to an area that did not have any piping to speak of before I arrived. I’ll always be proud of that.

“In 1988, I was invited to join the staff of the North American Academy of Piping under the direction of Pipe Major Sandy Jones. I now work with Sandy as well as Ed Neigh and others for one month each summer in the mountains of North Carolina. I am frequently called on to do band clinics and have travelled throughout the EUSPBA to do these. I do two or three workshops for some of the local bands here in the Carolinas, but sometimes go farther a field as time permits. I have also instructed at the Mid-Atlantic Workshop (Delco Workshop). My time for private students is a bit more limited now that I have a wife and children, but I like to do what I can for those who are willing to work and learn. I normally see three or four private students each week in addition to the college students who are enrolled for private tuition with me through the college’s music department.

“My first instructor used to tell me, ‘You’ve got to crawl before you can walk and walk before you can run.’ I’ve always remembered that axiom and try to relate it to students who get impatient with their progress as well as with the young kids who want to go off playing round hornpipes and the latest gimmicky tune they’ve heard when they still have fundamental issues regarding execution or expression to be resolved. You can’t get from one to 10 without going through two through nine as well.

“In lower grade band work, the K.I.S. (keep it simple) method works. Here at St. Andrews, we have had success in creating our own musical style. I always have to base that on the abilities of the weaker players, but also provide something that is interesting for the better players and the audience for whom we are preparing the music. I’m not one to try to emulate the latest recordings I hear. There is a lot of classical stuff out there that is not being heard. Bob Worrall once told me that he always

enjoyed hearing our band each year because we always came out with something that was different and fresh. I think it is important to include older music in our band medleys. A lot of the lower graded bands are unsuccessfully trying to emulate upper grade bands.”

Bill is also a composer. “The Grandfather Mountain band is currently playing my composition, ‘The Grandfather Mountain Highlanders at Montreal’ as the introductory tune to their competition medley. I also composed a little jig called ‘The Pig Sty’ commemorating a very memorable practical joke played on Sandy Jones at the North American Academy of Piping one summer. I wrote a 4-parted 2/4 march called ‘Miss Anne McLean’ for my wife, which was played at our wedding.

“I’ve done a few recordings during my piping career. My first was with an album the Grandfather Mountain Highlanders produced back in 1987 under Ed Krintz. I played the solo for ‘Amazing Grace’ on that one, and another solo track on another album the Grandfather band produced in 1992. I also produced two recordings with the St. Andrews Presbyterian College band, in 1998 and in 2002. On the second I did a cut of the Gaelic song ‘Bu Deonach Leam Tilleadh’ or ‘I Would Willingly Return’ with keyboard accompaniment. We overdubbed some field recordings I had made of some of the last Gaelic speakers in North Carolina. I think it sort of captures some of the spirit of what once was. I’ve also recorded a few tracks on Scottish small-pipes with a Celtic band from Charlotte as well as with a fairly well known Christian musician, Jim Morgan, from Laurinburg.

“I do a lot of playing in my local area and try to do at least one serious true piping recital each year in the community. Most of my performances are somewhat ceremonial — I get tonnes of funerals for these old

Scots in this region who want pipes as a send-off, and I do a lot of church performances, particularly with pipes and organ. I do a lot of educational programs each year in the local schools, not only telling kids about the pipes but also the history of the Scots in the Carolinas. Last year, the college band did a major concert with Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser and that was a great success. I enjoy presenting pipe music in any way that I can that will increase the awareness and appreciation of the instrument and its music.

"Faith and determination can take you a long way. I've seen through my own life the importance of faith in a greater power as well as faith in yourself. I think that my own piping career has been laid out by some divine power. Somehow I was led to my interest in piping and its pursuit as opposed to some other more mainstream hobby or interest. I don't know how it happened but it did. It was piping that led me to my choice of colleges. It was piping that helped lead me to my current profession. And it was piping that led me to meet my wife. I don't mean to come across as some sort of testimonial-spouting fundamentalist, as I'm not that at all. Nonetheless, I can only believe that the successes that I have had in life thus far didn't only come from what I put into them.

"As far as determination goes, I'm one who believes that people can achieve whatever good things they want as long as they are able and willing to put in the time and effort. I was handicapped in many ways in my piping career by not having the advantages that one might have if they were living in someplace like Toronto, Glasgow, or even Delaware. Still, I have tried to persevere and do the best that I could with the resources that were available to me. I'm probably never going to be a Gold Medalist or one of the luminaries of the piping world,

but I can at least have some comfort and satisfaction in knowing that I've tried to make a difference in my own region and that I've achieved more than many would dream of achieving in piping. I can't imagine my life without piping."

Bill also raised money for the 1800 square foot building that houses the Scottish Heritage Center. The facility contains old and rare books collections as well as other artefacts and items relative to the history and traditions of Scots in the region.

"I assist a good number of visitors who are researching genealogies as well as topics in Scottish-American history, and have assisted in the production of several BBC documentaries about the emigration of Scots to our region. I also co-ordinate a major annual academic symposium dealing with topics about Scots in North America and each year we bring over several notable scholars from Scotland. The symposium attracts a couple of hundred attendees each year from throughout the United States and occasionally from Canada and Scotland as well. Being Scottish is truly my job and life now."

Shortly after establishing the center, Bill completed a Master's degree in folklore. "My thesis dealt with oral histories associated with the final major Highland emigration to North Carolina that occurred in 1884, comprised mainly of crofters from Skye and Lewis who were recruited by local Scottish-Americans as agricultural labourers."

Bill enjoys historical research and writing, and he has had a number of articles published on the history and cultural retention of the Highland community in North Carolina. He has lectured on topics relative to North Carolina's Highland Settlement at symposia sponsored by the Scottish History Department at the University of Glasgow and, most recently, made a presentation at a conference honouring the work of Dr. Charles Dunn of Harvard University's Celtic Department and author of *Highland Settler*.has fallen out of literary favour two and a half centuries later.



Bill, middle, marching with the pipes