

# Noah Zeller

Noah Zeller became the conductor of the Waterloo Musical Society Band the same year cows were prohibited from grazing in local streets. It was 1882, and the young man who hid his musical passion from his Mennonite parents while growing up on a farm in Breslau, transformed the fledgling group into a band respected across the country.



It is written that as a child, Zeller hid his violin in his bedroom, practicing in secret after lowering it from his bedroom window. During a time when many bandmasters were trained in England or the United States, Zeller was entirely self-taught.

Zeller was born on October 12, 1851 and attended Riverbank school. Despite opposition from his parents he persevered in his musical studies. At eighteen he led his own orchestra in Bridgeport and began playing clarinet for the Berlin (Kitchener) band until 1875. After serving as leader of that band he decided to organize one in Waterloo. While Zeller tried to direct both the Berlin and Waterloo bands for a time, rivalry between the two communities prevented him from serving on both, and he chose to focus his energy in Waterloo.

During the early years, musicians met twice a week above the Waterloo fire hall with each member contributing 15 cents a time to pay the director. Membership in the band was a serious matter. “No new musician was accepted into the group until all active participants of the band had voted. Five dissenting votes meant disqualification.”

Within a year of its formation, in July 1883, Zeller took the Waterloo Musical Society Band to Buffalo, New York to take part in a three-day singing festival. While the band played to much acclaim, a newspaper report states: “It was while on parade at this event that one of the players developed some difficulty in playing his instrument. It turned out that someone had (inadvertently?) dropped a cucumber in the bell of his instrument, plugging it.”

Zeller led the band to further acclaim, winning first place at the Guelph Fall Fair that same year. The first place finish in Guelph was followed by so many firsts that the band was excluded from competing in some festivals. “The band’s early success was due in large measure to the leadership of Noah Zeller, who served as band master for 18 years.” The community was so pleased with Zeller’s leadership that they presented him with an “elaborate gallon-size silver wine tankard.”

He married Anna Todt and the couple had four sons and four daughters. As a young man, he worked as a cabinet maker to augment the income he received from teaching private music lessons. “The circular stairway in the old post office at King and Benton Streets . . . was his masterpiece.”

Over the years, Noah Zeller took both the Waterloo and Berlin bands across North America from Detroit, Michigan to Goderich and Quebec City. After the Berlin band

performed at Massey Hall, a reviewer wrote: “Of all the bands which visit Toronto, except professional bands, it is the best.”

Noah Zeller, who was the uncle of Walter P. Zeller, founder of the Zeller stores, lost his foot in a train accident and several years later resigned from his musical duties. He died on February 8, 1914. “In all the years of his active life in the interest of music he was beloved and respected by his bandsmen and the general public for his knowledge, kindness, understanding and tact.”

*Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library*