

## Bernadette Spitz

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**From:** pat pilgrim [cwp5@suddenlink.net]  
**Sent:** Friday, May 22, 2009 11:17 AM  
**To:** Bernadette Spitz  
**Subject:** Re: Doc Witt plaque language

That is great! Thanks for doing this one. Pat

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Bernadette Spitz  
**Date:** 5/22/2009 10:00:23 AM  
**To:** cwp5@suddenlink.net  
**Cc:** Beverly Abell; Heather Nick  
**Subject:** Doc Witt plaque language

Pat:

Good Morning, I was wondering if you could review the proposed plaque language that we are suggesting for Doc Witt's plaque. The date for the ceremony is June 25<sup>th</sup> at 1:00pm. We will let you know the exact location as the time draws closer. We would appreciate any comments on the language as soon as possible – so that we can send the order to Fort Worth and receive it back in time for the presentation. Thanks so much for your help. -Bernadette

JOHN FRANKLIN "DOC" WITT  
1884 -1952

Tyler's Music Man, Doc Witt, organized the Tyler Municipal Band, Tyler High School and Tyler Junior College Band. Doc enriched Tyler citizens with his love of music for 44 years.

Bernadette Spitz  
Senior Planner, Historic Preservation Officer  
City of Tyler  
903.531.1173  
bspitz@tylertexas.com

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John Franklin "Doc" Witt

1884 -1952

Tyler's Music Man, Doc Witt, organized the Tyler Municipal Band, Tyler High School and Tyler Junior College Band. Doc enriched the Tyler citizens with his love for music for 44 years.

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423 W. Ferguson Street  
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MAILING ADDRESS  
P.O. Box 2039  
Tyler, Texas 75710

FILE COPY

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CITY OF TYLER  
*Planning & Zoning*

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February 25, 2009

Pat Pilgrim  
14964 CR 475  
Lindale, Texas 75771

Re: Nomination of John Franklin "Doc" Witt for Half Mile of History

Dear Ms. Pilgrim:

I am so pleased to relate that the Tyler City Council, at their regular meeting on Wednesday, February 25, 2009, voted unanimously to approve your request to nominate John Franklin "Doc" Witt for the Half Mile of History program. We will be in contact with you regarding the presentation and placement of the stone.

If you have questions regarding the Council's decision, please contact the Planning and Zoning Department at 903-531-1175.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Holly". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Barbara Holly, AICP  
Director of Planning

2/4/09  
A-9-0



**NOMINATION FORM  
HALF MILE OF HISTORY**

**Section A: Nomination Information**

**Name of Nominated person, place or event:**

"DOC WIT"

**The nominee is being honored for outstanding contributions in the area(s) of (please check all that apply):**

<input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/Media	<input type="checkbox"/> Philanthropy
<input type="checkbox"/> Architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> Government/Military	<input type="checkbox"/> Religion
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Arts and Culture	<input type="checkbox"/> Industry	<input type="checkbox"/> Science
<input type="checkbox"/> Aviation	<input type="checkbox"/> Invention/Innovation	<input type="checkbox"/> Sports
<input type="checkbox"/> Business/Corporate Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Law	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Medicine	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Oil/Gas	

**Section B: Nominator's Information**

**Name of person making nomination:** Pat Pilgrim of Tyler's Women's Forum

**Address:** 14964 CR 475

**City:** Lendale **State:** TX **Zip:** 75771

**Daytime telephone:** 903-881-0138 **Email:** cwps@suddenlink.net

**Relationship to nominated individual:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Nominated Individual's year of death:** 1952

Narrative for “Doc” Witt  
Half-Mile of History Nomination

A cultural icon in Tyler’s history is Professor John Franklin “Doc” Witt, director of the Tyler Municipal Band, active in the 1930’s. Doc Witt’s association with the Tyler Woman’s Building is cemented by the formal opening of the building held on October 4, 1932 at 8:00 p.m. The program for the evening included an original score written by Doc Witt called “The Tyler Triumphal March” for the building’s dedication service. The handwritten music was donated by the Tyler Woman’s Forum to the Smith County Historical Association for display in their archives. One of Doc Witt’s favorite students was Jack Flock, a renowned local attorney for many years before his retirement. Jack as a young lad, was championed by Doc Witt and Jack inherited his silver trumpet which was eventually donated by Mr. Flock to the historical association for display alongside the sheet music.

When the Tyler Woman’s Building received recognition by Texas as a state landmark, a marker ceremony was held March 31, 1990. As part of the program, the Tyler Youth Orchestra played Doc Witt’s music. A video made at the time features the music as a solo piece played on trumpet by Director of the Tyler Junior College band, Jack Smith. Dr. Witt had a history of playing with John Phillip Sousa and this piece reflects the jaunty staccato beat of typical march music. In the video, Mr. Flock recalls the day of the dedication as follows: “The day was hot and sunny. I was a member of the band that played that day. There were thirty pieces and we performed in front of the building. Affectionately known as “Doc,” Professor Witt stood with his trumpet clasped under his arm except when performing. Doc Witt only composed one piece of music in his career and that was the “Tyler Triumphal March,” dedicated to the Tyler Woman’s Forum. Doc was known as an outgoing and trusting man. He referred to his many friends by the name “Sugar” and to the students he taught as “Sugar Puddin’” He referred to me as “Big Boy.” At the close of the ceremony when people were invited to lay items in the cornerstone, Doc Witt called me over and handed me a copy of the program to place in the box. I felt honored to be singled out for this!”

Doc Witt should be “singled out” for recognition in the “Half-Mile of History” in Tyler because of his lasting contributions to the cultural growth of the city as well as his dedication to his students to whom he passed along his love of music.

Sponsored by the Tyler Woman’s Forum and the Tyler Woman’s Building

"SHELLEY'S 'SKYLARK' must have had something of the blithe spirit of Doc Witt, because Doc was always laughing and joking; and one of the best antidotes for a grouch that anybody could take was to run into Doc for just five minutes on a street corner. Not even in the late stages of his pain-racked life was his keen sense of humor dimmed, and at least twice he bounced back after his physicians said his hours were numbered.

"And his music! The things he could do with a trumpet were wonderful to hear. He used to pick up his instrument at Band practice or at one of the regular Friday night concerts on Tyler's courthouse plaza, and he would give the valves a few perfunctory pokes and prepare to take a solo part. When he did, everybody sat and marveled. Even some of the boys in the band would occasionally quit playing just to listen to the master.

"His passing will be felt by his many friends everywhere, and music has lost a fine teacher. And when the angel Gabriel sounds his trumpet on judgment morning, it had better be a clear, true note or he is likely to get a critical glance from an old trumpet teacher...."

*Editorial, page 4  
THE LONGVIEW DAILY NEWS  
Longview, Texas  
February 8, 1952*

# TYLER'S MUSIC MAN

BY MORRIS BURTON

John Franklin Witt, farm-born in East Texas, rose by his gifted musical talents, and by life-long labors to become one of this nation's bandmasters. For over 44 years, he directed the Tyler Municipal Band. In 1921, he created the first Tyler High School band and directed it for 26 years. The Tyler Junior College Apache Band was also his creation in 1947, and this group was led by him for five years until his death in early 1952.

Few Tylerites knew Professor Witt as "John Franklin", or even by his initials, "J.F." To all, he was best known as "Doc", although the origin of this monicker is lost. So in limited means of portraying this artist, the several names and nick-names will become entangled. He actually had a preference for Doc.

He was born May 26, 1884, near Omaha, Texas, in Morris County on the farm of his father, the third son among eight



children born to James and Erma Witt. Jim Witt, a cotton farmer, had migrated from Tennessee, and his wife, Erma Devenport, was a native of Georgia. Doc lived the typical life of an East Texas farm boy with any odd job for extra money. His father died in 1897 leaving the 13-year old son a much tougher struggle. But Doc continued his education in the Omaha Public Schools, graduating in 1901.

His real education started in music when he joined the town band in Omaha and was assigned a second-hand cornet, purchased by the band at some earlier date from Sears-Roebuck and Company. The long hours of musical practice, seated in the top of a large oak tree in the backyard of his farm home, gave Doc the beginning of his skill for he played for a make-believe audience and thereby developed the tremendous cornetist's lip that he possessed coupled with a huge chest expansion that gave him volume of tone second to none. Both abilities became his trademarks.

He realized the need for more formal musical training, and when the famous Gus and Mollie Bailey Circus came to Omaha in 1902, Doc played several selections for the bandmaster of that circus---and left with them for the remainder of the season. It was with this group that he first learned the mysteries of musical sight-reading. Also, Doc learned the temperaments of other military band instruments, and laid his foundation for successful teaching of all instruments.

Gus and Mollie Bailey were an ideal pair for this young musician to select. Gus had been the leader of Hood's Texas Brigade Band, and had composed the song, "Old Gray Mare Ain't What She Used To Be" just before the Second Battle of Manassas, when some soldier spooked a mare loaded with tin pans through Hood's Brigade camp. His wife, Mollie, said to have been a nurse for the Confederacy, smuggled both notes and quinine in her hair arrangement past the Union sentries in moving to and from the enemy lines. In 1869, the two organized their circus and with their nine children traveled the breadth of Texas with this circus from a winter headquarters in Blum, Texas. Their tents flew the Confederate flag on all occasions.

Let Cecil B. James of Hamilton, Texas, tell you firsthand of this Mollie Bailey Circus:

"Mollie's Show was part Circus and sometimes an indoor show on the Theater Plan, with Theatrical plays put on by her children and other 'actors' she carried with her. All of Mollie's family took part in the Shows. They had trained dogs, etc., and also regular theatrical performances with juggling acts in front of the stage while the scenery was being changed. All of the Bailey children helped with the shows, and they had other talent with them. As I remember the Bailey children, the daughter, 'Birdie' had some trained birds of some kind, possibly Canaries, and she sang songs and acted in the Theatrical portions of the show. And of the boys, I remember Albertine and Eugene. Of course, the main show, afternoons and at night, was the 'Flying Trapeze', 'Rings', 'Tumbling' and 'Slack-Wire Walking'....My, 'em were the days for us kids!"

(Excerpt from letter, Cecil B. James to author, April 25, 1967)

The Bailey Circus owned outright some 100 lots over Texas and used their own grounds for their shows. Any ex-Confederate was admitted free. By 1907 the wagons were disposed of and four railroad cars adopted. On the death of Mollie Bailey in about 1915, her sons took over management, shifting the travel to trucks in 1919, and closing the Circus soon thereafter.

The apprenticeship served by John Franklin at age 17 no doubt taught him lessons of showmanship and artistry that remained with him during his career, for he returned to Omaha from the Bailey Circus as a well-trained cornetist. He now



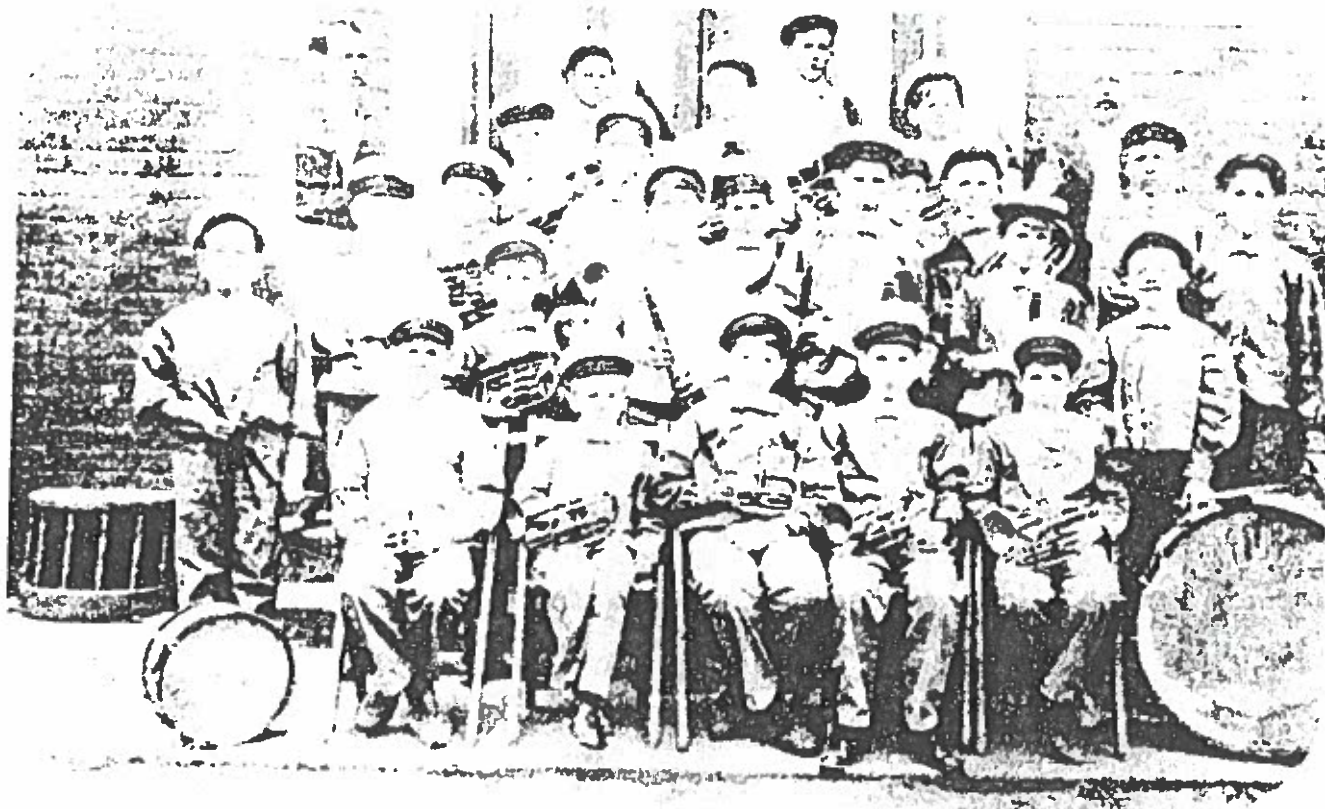
realized the need for more formal musical education and training, and enrolled in the now-defunct Grayson College in Whitewright, Grayson County, Texas. Here he was Assistant Bandmaster which training added to his luster and aided in the expenses of his education.

Fate intervened again. Grayson College burned, and the doors were closed. For the next five years, Doc Witt was engaged with or associated with many institutions and military bands of renown. This was the era of the brilliantly uniformed military band, with the full range of brass and percussion instruments, but with musicians of such varied talents that classical and popular music (traditionally in the tempo of the waltz) would be interspersed in any program. These five years for young Doc made him the artist he was in music.

One season was spent with the John Phillips Sousa band, followed by study with Herbert L. Clark, a Sousa soloist and recognized still as the most talented cornet player of all times. This training was followed by appearances with Ringling Brothers Circus Band, the Ennis Band, the Scotch Kilties, the Pat Conway Concert Band of New York City, and added training with A. Fred Weldon, cornet soloist of the University of Chicago, and the W. P. Chambers School of Music of Chicago.

By 1908, Doc, then 24 years of age and with more than eight years of dedicated musical training and experience, returned to Omaha, following the close of the season for Al. G. Fields Minstrels. And Tyler first entered his musical life!

About the turn of the century, several local musicians had assembled a brass military band of the youngsters of Tyler. Their abilities and reputation grew over the East Texas area until the group was widely known as "The Tyler Kid Band".



Pictured is a postcard photo of this original group, but names of leaders or individuals therein are not known. The Kid Band had been made famous by their music at several of the reunions of the Confederate soldiers. One of the early leaders was a Professor Hanson for he led the Kid band in two concerts on September 7, 1908, for a meeting of the Texas Rural Letter Carriers Association.



But late in 1908, the Tyler Kid Band was without a leader, and they had been invited to attend the Confederate reunion at Mobile, Alabama. An advertisement was carried in the DALLAS MORNING NEWS for the services of an experienced military bandmaster. Doc read this ad, applied, was hired, took the group to Mobile, returned, and was hired permanently as Band Master.

In February of 1909, the Tyler Kid Band was being contacted for an appearance in 1910 at Memphis, Tennessee, again for a reunion. General H. A. Tyler, Commanding, Forrest's Cavalry, UCV, of Hickman, Kentucky, wrote Sid S. Johnson of Tyler "for the Kid Band". In addition to their Mobile trip, the group had also attended a reunion at Birmingham, date unknown.

The DALLAS MORNING NEWS in October, 1909, described the band:

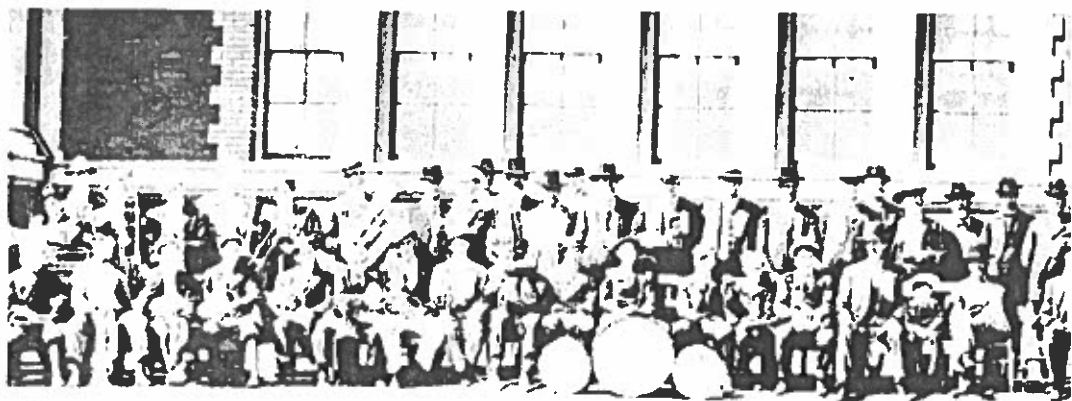
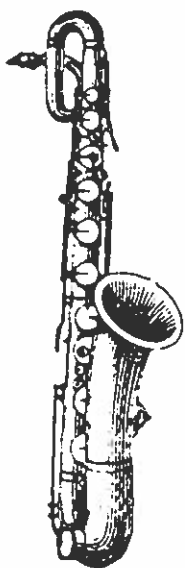
"...Leading the marches of the men from Tyler yesterday at the Prohibition Exercises was a band of twenty-six boys called the 'Kid Band of Tyler'. It is an organization of young fellows, all of them from in or near Tyler, and just entering upon public appearances. They played with fervor and were frequently cheered, both in the city and at the fair grounds. The band was directed by J. F. Witt, the only adult in the organization. It is an amateur band and its work is declared decidedly creditable..."

That description earned by the first band ever trained by Doc Witt could equally apply to any of the many bands he led and conducted in his career for he would never accept an average or mediocre performance from his musicians.

The front cover of CHRONICLES depicts Doc as this Band Master. The initials on his uniform collar (W.T.K.B.) stand for "Witt's Tyler Kid Band"!

This band was equally renowned on the concert stage. The DAILY COURIER-TIMES (Tyler) of November 5, 1909, stated that a series of six concerts would start on November 18 at the old Albertson Opera House with "the Tyler Kid Band, led by their splendid director, Professor J. F. Witt". For some unexplained reason, this series was shifted to the stage of the Lyric Theater on North Broadway.

On April 15 - 16, 1910, at Nacogdoches, Texas, a combined meeting of the East Texas Press Association and the East Texas Industrial Congress was held with Judge S. A. Lindsey, former Smith County Judge and former Tyler newspaper publisher,



**TYLER BOOSTERS AT EAST TEXAS INDU**

as the key organizer. At 8:50 AM on Thursday, April 14, 1910, the Tyler delegation left for Nacogdoches with the special train consisting of eight cars including Pullmans, Cafe Car and Private Car No. 05 of the Cotton Belt Railroad. The Tyler Kid Band, 22 pieces strong, was aboard to play both en route and at all stops. The NACOGDOCHES SENTINAL reported, "...the kids have a fine band and play the best of up-to-date music. Individually, they are the best bunch we ever saw..." A photograph of this group with other Tyler citizens scattered in the crowd is included in this article. (BELOW)

Another Confederate reunion appearance at Mobile, Alabama, came for the band on April 26, 27 and 28, 1910, immediately in advance of their June, 1910 trip to Memphis. Reverend Marshall O. Meador listed these costs:

Railroad Fare for 25 Members	\$220.00
Sleeping Car Fare for Round Trip to Mobile	125.00
Eating Expenses for 25 members for Five Days (Three at Reunion; Two En Route)	125.00
	<u>\$470.00</u>
Pay From the Music Committee of Reunion	- 200.00
Needed.....	<u>\$270.00</u>

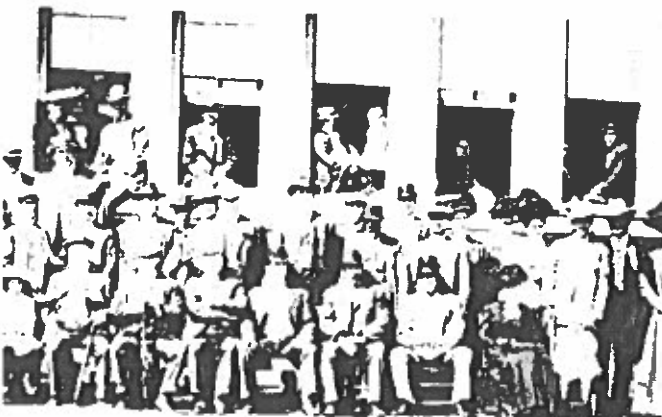
Reference to "Needed" above was meant the amount needed from public subscription, and all Tyler drug stores acted as sites for subscription lists. By April 20, \$120 was raised and the final \$150 needed. But this was raised and on Sunday, April 24, 1910, the band (25 pieces strong) left via Cotton Belt to Big Sandy accompanied by Rev. Meador, City Marshall Burgess and W. L. Bostick, with one CSA Veteran, Ben Rowland, along. Roster of the Tyler Kid Band was given as:

Prof. J. F. Witt	Clyde Gibbs	Ellis Fenn	Clyde Chotes
Ladd Floyd	Wm. Burgess	Bunk Burks	Wm. Meador
Barney Moore	Ame Braddy	Hugh Williams	Clarence Perry
Roy Sheets	Emmet Barron	Carol Golson	Edgar B. Campbell
Phillip Torti	C. Meyer	Albert Harris	Berney Mayhew
Rex Persley	Maury Halton	Dan Witt	

Dan Witt was the younger brother of Doc, being 5 years his junior, and was a Tyler dentist at this time. Just how he qualified as a kid for this band is unexplained, but it is apparent that some of the kids have been maturing right along, physically and musically.

It should here be noted that a 1919 clipping listing members of the 144th Infantry band listed as members Will Meador, Phillip A. Torti and Albert H. Harris. The "aging" of these young musicians must have been the basic reason that Professor Witt first proposed a military band as a City of Tyler activity. It was a distinct trademark of future bands that the musicians would be somewhat mixed in age range, but this process put the young beginner in the same band section as the accomplished professional soloist, and thereby true musical talent and ability were developed.

In October of 1910 the new uniforms had arrived according to the COURIER-TIMES of October 5, consisting of 38 uniforms in green with black stripes, and gold bands around the cap. These uniforms were worn the very next day in the three day official dedication of the Smith County Court House. This program started at 10:00 AM on the north side of the Court House, with the Court House lavishly decorated with red,



**CONGRESS, Nacogdoches,**

white and blue and with a large flag of the United States as background. Seats were provided for over a thousand and many citizens stood for the ceremony.

Interest in city sponsorship was evident. The Kid Band expanded its range and now included sacred music. From the TYLER DAILY COURIER-TIMES (May 31, 1910):

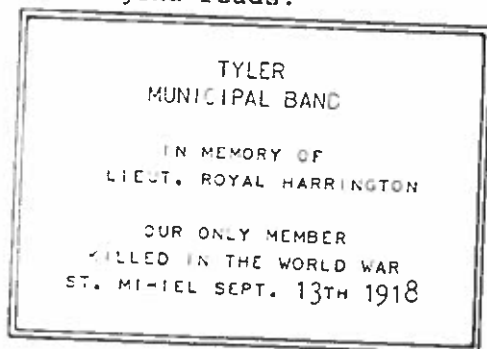
"...The Tyler Kid Band has just received several fine pieces of sacred music which they are to practice for a few nights, then they propose to give a sacred concert from 4 to 5 PM Sunday at South Park for the citizens generally who may desire to spend one hour at such a concert. Surely the city fathers will erect a band stand or pavillion for the use of the boys and the citizens who may gather there on any occasion..."

Professor Witt expanded his teaching to orchestral music as told in this item of February 18, 1911, of the TYLER DAILY COURIER-TIMES:

"MARVIN SUNDAY SCHOOL. On Sunday morning, the march for primary class will be played by an orchestra, composed of boys, pupils of Prof. Witt. The boys composing the orchestra is (sic) as follows:

1st Cornet.....John Foscue	Cornet (Solo).....Galloway Calhoun
2nd Cornet.....Tom Wiley	Tuba.....Albert Harris
1st Trombone.....Fred Baldwin	Mellophone.....Rex Pursley
2nd Trombone.....Frank Glenn	Drums.....Herndon Pursley
Clarinet.....John Glenn."	

In 1916 came the organization of the Tyler Municipal Band and the now adult members of the Tyler Kid Band started their second musical career. For the next 36 years until his death in 1952, Doc Witt made this musical group his own pride and joy. It would be difficult to recall any Tyler project whether civic, political or athletic that did not have the band present to lend its pomp and ceremony. It must be mentioned that music of that era was either 'live' talent as in the case of his band (or played at home by amateurs) or it was heard on the scratchy, limited-range 'phonographs' of the times. So for the majority of Tylerites, their music came from either church attendance for choir voices melded with the organ and piano, or from the Friday night band concerts of Doc Witt. By 1922, the popularity of these one hour concerts had grown, and the Tyler Kiwanis Club erected a band shell on the west end of the Court House Plaza, with the acoustical curved horn of the band shell facing west. This structure was dedicated to the memory of Lieutenant Royal Harrington, and the plaque (removed when the stand was demolished in 1934) is now placed on a stage in the Hillside Park. Its legend reads:



The end of World War I in November, 1918, actually came at a time when most of the Tyler citizens were asleep for the word arrived at 2:00 AM. But the neighbors near the corner of West Bow Street and Albertson Avenue knew it at once for Doc had been alerted by telephone and he started playing his trumpet for joy! And he assembled his band and they spent the rest of the morning until daylight circling the Public Square and playing all varieties of martial music.

The pure talent and musical ability of Doc Witt was unmatched but he combined this side of his personality with his own flair for showmanship, no doubt inherited from those years of the circus and the traveling band. Doc required his musicians to wear military-type uniforms. He wore his uniform as leader in full white, piped in gold braid, with high collar, white shoes and always it was immaculate. With his own physical appearance his height, his full head of almost pure white hair, his ruddy cheeks and complexion (no doubt aided by the strenuous playing of his silver cornet), and his erect posture, Doc Witt was the living embodiment of the band leader.



# the TYLER KID BAND



POSING FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHER just prior to some sort of "Merchant's Excursion" in this 1911-vintage photo is Professor J. F. Witt and the Tyler Kid Band. The scene in Tyler is midway on the west side of College Street opposite the new 1910 Court House (it is reflected in the show window just below the "CLO" in CLOTHING). These two buildings are now occupied by Lion's Shoe Store and Zales Jewelers.

The TYLER KID BAND was composed of (reading left to right starting with the bass horn player):

- |                    |                          |                       |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. William Burgess | 8. Ed Meador             | 15. Albert Harris     |
| 2. Emmet Barron    | 9. Rex Persley           | 16. Clyde Gibbs       |
| 3. Ame Braddy      | 10. Clarence Perry       | 17. Ladd Floyd        |
| 4. William Meador  | 11. Claude C. Choate     | 18. Hal Smith         |
| 5. Otho Hill       | 12. Bostick "Bunk" Burks | 19. Edgar B. Campbell |
| 6. Le Roy Burns    | 13. Rayburn Barney Moore | 20. Roy Sheets        |
| 7. Hugh Williams   | 14. Berney Mayhew        | 21. Ellis Fenn        |

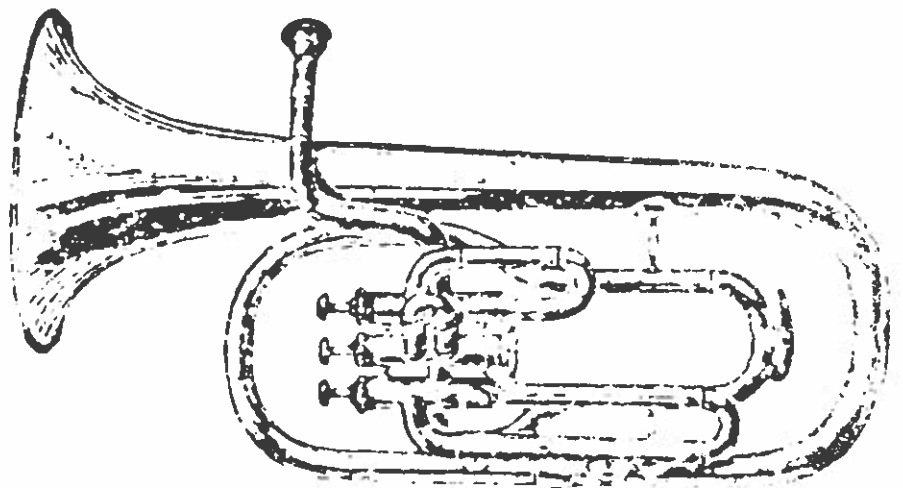
21. Professor J. F. "Doc" Witt (at extreme right hand side)

[PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE SMITH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY. GIFT OF THE CHILDREN OF THE LATE MRS. R. E. L. JOHNSON, TYLER]

The Tyler Municipal Band was one of two in the nation then supported by municipal taxation. A Band Commission was created to supervise the band activity, and a tax amounting to one mil (or 1/1000 of a dollar) per \$100 tax valuation was paid to the City of Tyler by all tax-payers to support the band. Small wages were paid the individual musicians after they had won a spot by their demonstrated ability. Music, uniforms, supplies and band hall rental were also purchased. No Tyler musician of note ever rejected an offer to join the band because of the meager salary alone however. An invitation to affiliate was virtually a "command performance". This band also could be stripped to form a small but loud-playing group for rent or hire for any special occasion. Trade trips around East Texas for the East Texas Fair, political speeches, and similar events always had the band of Doc Witt along. In 1937, when the late Brady P. Gentry was making his race for Congress, he obtained two such bands to accompany his speech-making over East Texas, and by having the band leapfrog on the itinerary, crowds could be attracted by a 15-minute concert prior to his arrival.

But the training extended his pupils paid John Franklin Witt his largest benefit and dividend whereby he first met his wife, Miss Willie Evans, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. B. E. Evans of Tyler. Mrs. Evans, born near the old Camp Ford Prison stockade site, was the daughter of Mac D. Lorange, the first Mayor of Tyler and a member of the 12th Texas Legislature. Miss Willie and Doc were married July 31, 1912. She had been a piano pupil of Mrs. A. P. Baldwin of Tyler and Doc, residing in the Baldwin home, soon joined the lessons, bringing his cornet in for many duets at the piano.

In 1921, Doc organized the Tyler High School Band and thus joined the faculty of the Tyler Independent School District. For over 26 years, he directed this group before turning his baton over to P. C. "Pete" Martinez in 1947.



A photograph of this era in about 1938 shows Doc, still resplendent in his all white uniform but now cut military style with patch pockets, Sam Brown military belt, and peak lapels on the collar. Seated near Doc is one of his young musicians, Wayne Raper.

His musical talent was not limited to his playing ability and to his masterful directions, but also included composing. For the dedication of the Woman's Building, center of the Tyler Woman's Forum, Professor Witt composed an original march titled, "Tyler Triumphful", which was featured at these ceremonies. Manuscripts of this selection had been lost and only recently came to light in limited form, and these scores have been presented to the Forum in a ceremony last year honoring Doc Witt, over which Tyler attorney Jack Flock presided. Mr. Flock was one of the Witt band members of the early thirties and received a college scholar-

ship through efforts of Doc to attend as a musician. Mr. Flock decided upon his law career and could not utilize this aid.

Still another band was assembled by Mr. Witt. In 1947, while the Tyler Junior College was located on South College Street on a part of the campus of the Tyler High School, Doc put together the first TJC Band. In the early development of Tyler Junior College in 1926 and 1927, the student body decided upon an Indian symbol for the teams of that institution and selected the name "Apaches" as the figure for their collegiate allegiances. But Doc was hard-pressed to design an appropriate uniform for his band matching this theme, and for the first time in his long career, selected a dark uniform color. With some minor style changes, the uniform still identifies the Tyler Junior College Band. [SEE PHOTO PAGE 1]

Witt was a long-time member of the First Christian Church of Tyler where Miss Willie was church organist. He became musical director of the Friendly Class of Marvin Methodist Church, no doubt influenced by one of his former pupils, then teacher of this class, the late Galloway Calhoun. Some church-goers raised an eyebrow slightly to hear the sound of brass instruments within the Church with tempo booming out from bass drum, snare drum and cymbals, but the custom still holds today at the Friendly Class of having a brass band play for their singing. And on December 17, 1950, the Class awarded him their degree of Doctor of Sunshine, just before Christmas, reading as follows:

"THIS CERTIFIES that J. F. ("Doc") Witt, having ever been an Apostle of a happy philosophy of life and the highest type of good fellowship, and having day-to-day gone about scattering sunshine and brightening the lives of those with whom he has come in contact, leaving a veritable pathway bestrown with good will, happiness and smiles, thereby living the spirit of Christmas every day of his life, THE MEMBERS OF THIS CLASS, joined by his host of friends and admirers, have this day conferred upon him the degree of DOCTOR OF SUNSHINE and invested him with all the rights, benefits, privileges, honors and dignities which accompany the same."

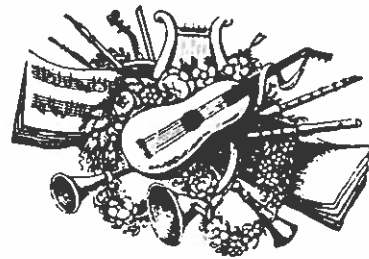
Many honors came to Doc from his associates in the field of music. He was honored as the outstanding high school band director of Texas and was awarded a key by Colonel George E. Hurt, director of the Longhorn Band of the University of Texas at Austin, and this key opened the doors of the Band Headquarters and Rehearsal Building.

Death came on February 7, 1952. Doc lacked only a few years completing a half century of leading and directing bands in Tyler. Other towns in Smith County Troup and Lindale, had also known his talents. The Cotton Belt Railroad had also utilized his directing ability in assembling their own band from among their employees. Burial was in Oakwood Cemetery among other men of history of Tyler.

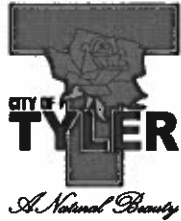
Probably one of the most lasting honors that came to Doc was the recognition shown him and his career by the Board of Trustees of the Tyler Independent School District in August, 1965. Acting upon a suggestion from the Smith County Historical Society, this group named the Rehearsal Room of the new John Tyler High School "The J. F. ("Doc") Witt Band Hall". Thus, his name will be kept alive among the young and beginning musicians for it was their welfare that he always labored to improve.

The career of John Franklin Witt as an artist and musician was characterized by William Savage Landor (1775-1864) in his poem, "On Music":

Many love Music but for music's sake,  
Many because her touches can awake  
Thoughts that repose within the breast half-dead,  
And rise to follow where she loves to lead.  
What various feelings come from days gone by!  
What tears from far-off sources dim the eye!  
Few, when light fingers with sweet voices play  
And melodies swell, pause, and melt away,  
Mind how at every touch, at every tone,  
A spark of life hath glistened and hath gone.







**CITY OF TYLER, TEXAS  
CITY COUNCIL COMMUNICATION**



**Agenda Number:**

**Date:** February 25, 2009

**Subject:** Request that the City Council consider designating John Franklin "Doc" Witt as a Half Mile of History recipient.

**Page:** 1 of 2

**Item Reference:** Half Mile of History Preservation Program

The Half Mile of History is a cultural and historic landmark program paying tribute to people, places and events that have contributed to the City of Tyler and/or Smith County. The Half Mile of History is a permanent, outdoor walk-around loop that covers an approximate one-half mile stretch of sidewalk surrounding the square in the heart of downtown Tyler. People, places and events chosen for the Half Mile of History are honored with a commemorative plaque placed in the sidewalk.

One of the responsibilities of the Tyler Historical Preservation Board is to recommend people, places and events to be included in the Half Mile of History Preservation Program. On February 4, 2009, the Tyler Historical Preservation Board voted unanimously to recommend John Franklin "Doc" Witt for inclusion in the Half Mile of History Preservation Program. A brief narrative follows.

John Franklin Witt better known as "Doc" was born near Omaha, Texas, in Morris County, a farm town in East Texas, on May 26, 1884. He began his music training at a young age, at the age of 18 he joined the Gus and Mollie Bailey Circus and then later he received formal education and training at Grayson College in Whitewright, Texas.

The call for a military bandleader in 1908, by the Tyler Kid Band, brought Doc to Tyler. With his eight years of experience with various military bands, one being the famous John Phillips Sousa band, Doc led the Tyler Kid Band for the next eight years, until in 1916; the now adult members of the Tyler Kid Band organized themselves into the Tyler Municipal Band. Doc led this group for the next 36 years until his death in 1952. Among their many events, they held one hour concerts around town and in 1922 the Tyler Kiwanis Club erected a band shell at the west end of the Courthouse Plaza for their performances. A memorable performance of the band was in November, 1918, at 2:00 am after the declaration of the end of World War I, as the city was still asleep, the band gathered at the corner of West Bow Street and Albertson Avenue and started playing varieties of martial music circling the public square until daylight rejoicing for the end of the war. The band, led the pomp and ceremony, for most Tyler projects whether they be civic, political or athletic events.

**Agenda Number:**

**Page: 2 of 2**

In 1921, he created the first Tyler High School Band and directed it for 26 years. The Tyler Junior College Apache Band was also his creation in 1947, and this group was led by Doc for five years until his death in 1952. Doc composed only one song in his career and this was the "Tyler Triumphant March", which he dedicated to the Tyler Woman's Forum. Doc received many honors; one in particular was when the Tyler Independent School District Board of Trustees in 1965, named the rehearsal room at the new John Tyler High School, "The J. F. "Doc" Witt Band Hall.

As a result of Docs' lasting contributions to the cultural growth of the city as well as his dedication to his musical students to whom he passed along his love of music, Tyler will forever be grateful. He was laid to rest at the historic Oakwood Cemetery among other men of history in Tyler.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The Tyler Historical Preservation Board, by a 9-0 vote, request that the City Council approve the designation of John Franklin "Doc" Witt as a Half Mile of History recipient.

*Barbara Holly*

**Drafted/Recommended By: Barbara Holly**  
**Department Leader**

**Edited/Submitted By:**  
**City Manager**



SMITH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

ORGANIZED 1969

Nov. 11, 2008

Bernadette -

Pat Pilgram asked us to forward to you this information on "Doc" Witt.

Let us know what else we can do to help the City of Tyler honor this fine man.

Sam Kidd  
SCHS Treasurer

- ① Sent app to him on 11/17/08, need back by Nov. 26<sup>th</sup> for Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting
- ② Awaiting app from Mary Jane McManara
- ③ 12/29/08 Will send app. in return on Jan 15<sup>th</sup>.



# CHRONICLES

OF SMITH COUNTY, TEXAS

PUBLISHED BY THE SMITH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TYLER, TEXAS

Reproduction

## Did you know?

About 1819 a group of Cherokee Indians led by Chief Bowles settled here after being driven out of Tennessee.

In 1839 Texas President Mirabeau Bonaparte Lamar ordered the soldiers of the Republic of Texas to drive the Indians from East Texas. The last battle took place in Van Zandt County on the bank of the Neches River on July 16, 1839.

Texas was admitted to the Union as a state in 1845 and on April 11, 1846 the Texas Legislature established Smith County from part of Nacogdoches County.

The first courthouse in Tyler was built at 111 West Ferguson of hand-hewn logs, clapboard roof, mudchinked cracks and was 26 feet long by 20 feet wide. It was constructed at a cost of \$200.

On February 25, 1861 an election was held and the people voted 1,149 for and 50 against secession which preceded the War Between the States.

A large ordnance plant was located in Tyler and produced millions of bullets, over 2,300 rifles and employed over 300 people.

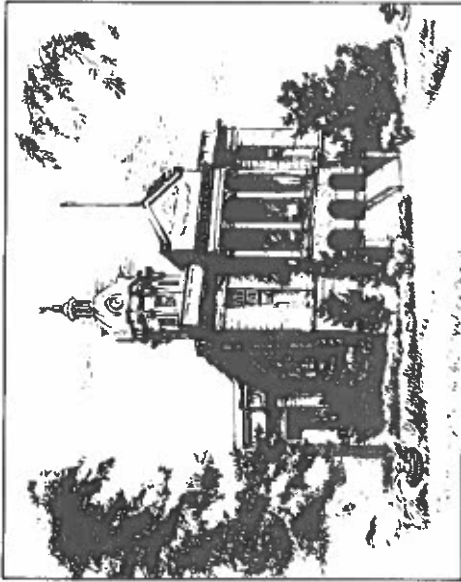
At the end of the war, a large stock of gun powder was left over, so they tried to burn it. You guessed it, the explosion was so great it blew out most of the windows in town.

Camp Ford, located northeast of Tyler, was the largest prisoner of war camp west of the Mississippi River.

*Your Interest In Smith  
County History Is  
Important...*

*We Need You!*

*Become a Member  
Today...*



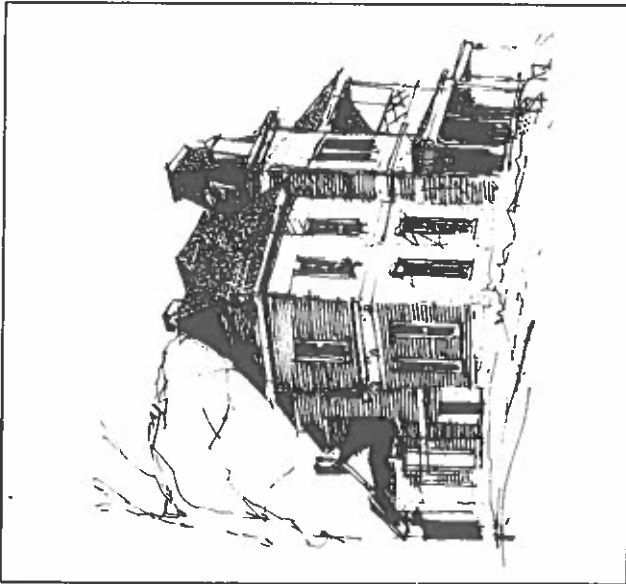
Smith County Court House

1910-1955

Courtesy of Jacqueline Adams

**Smith County Historical Society**  
125 South College  
Tyler, Texas 75702

Organized 1959



Douglas-Holland-Pollard House

Courtesy of A. C. Gentry

## Note From The President...

We invite all to join and share in the fun and fellowship of those who are interested in our distant and recent history. As we continue to expand our services to the community, we hope you will come and provide vision for the future of the Smith County Historical Society.

We welcome members across the spectrum of involvement, from those who want to receive our publications and provide financial support, to those who will involve themselves in the leadership and implementation of community projects.



*Rudolph Bergfeld* was born in St. Louis on August 1, 1855, to immigrants from Bremen, Germany. At the age of 23, in 1878, he left his parents' home in St. Louis and arrived in Tyler, Texas. He opened a saloon in Tyler's downtown square. This was the beginning of many entrepreneurial successes.

In addition to owning several saloons, he began amassing real estate in Tyler, Dallas, Houston, and Wichita Falls. Much of the property was primarily city lots; one of the first subdivisions was the Durst and Bergfeld Addition in 1897. This subdivision was the beginning of the Azalea Residential District.

Bergfeld was instrumental in the creation of Tyler's second opera house, the Grande Opera House. In another entrepreneurial endeavor, Bergfeld turned his interests to banking. In the 1890s, Bergfeld Loan and Trust was started. The Bergfeld Loan & Trust merged with City National Bank in the early 1900s to become Citizens National Bank.

Bergfeld also served as director of the Tyler Chamber of Commerce for 30 years was also a member of the Board of Education for the Tyler Public Schools from 1907-1924. Upon his death on May 31, 1930, the citizens turned out in full support of this generous and talented man in what is recalled as the largest funeral in Tyler. He is buried at Oakwood Cemetery and maintains the distinction of having been the largest property owner in Smith County.

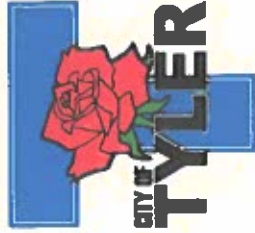
*John Franklin Witt*, better known as "Doc", was born on May 26, 1884, near Omaha, Texas, a farm town in East Texas. At the age of 18 he joined the Gus and Mollie Bailey Circus; however, he later received a formal education and training at Grayson College in Whitewright, Texas.

The call for a military bandleader in 1908 by the Tyler Kid Band brought Doc to Tyler. With his eight years of experience with various military bands, one being the famous John Phillips Sousa Band, Doc led the Tyler Kid Band for the next eight years.

In 1916, the now-adult members of the Tyler Kid Band organized themselves into the Tyler Municipal Band, and Witt led the group for the next 36 years. Their most memorable performance occurred at 2 a.m. in November 1918 after the declaration of the end of World War I. As the City was still asleep, the band gathered at the corner of West Bow Street and Albertson Avenue and started playing martial music while circling the public square. They played until daylight, rejoicing for the end of the war.

In 1921, Witt created the first Tyler High School Band and directed it for 26 years. The Tyler Junior College Apache Band was also his creation in 1947, and this group was led by Doc for five years until his

death in 1957



*A National Beauty*

*Half Mile of History  
Marker Unveiling  
in honor of Rudolph Bergfeld  
and John Franklin Witt  
Thursday, June 25, 2009*

*Opening Remarks: Mayor Barbara Bass*

*Bergfeld Biography: City Manager Mark McDaniel*

*Comments by Bergfeld Family Representative*

*Witt Biography: Mayor Bass*

*Comments by Witt Family Representative*

*Unveiling of Markers and Certificate Presentation*

*Musical Selection by TJE Band*

*Adjourn*