"Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast."

This information comes to us from no less an eminence than the English playwright Sir William Congreve, who himself acquired it from one William Shakespeare. We have never experimented with this particular application of music, and therefore have had no firsthand experience or observation with which to either confirm or refute the statement, but will gladly accept it on faith, considering the source.

We do know with a fair degree of certainty that every civilization, high or low, in earth’s history has been charmed by music of one type or another. King David, the most glamorous of all kings, was made so in part by his organized choirs with their many instruments.

And, getting around at last to what this letter is about, music has been powerful and pervasive in the life of Hardin-Simmons University from its infant days as Abilene Baptist College. Achievements in many forms of music, both instrumental and vocal, have brought distinction to our school and made it a mecca for students seeking musical training of the highest quality. However, this letter has to do only with the musical institution with which the University is most closely identified in the public eye, the Cowboy Band.

The young Abilene Baptist school had a musical organization before the year 1900 known as the Simmons College Band. It was not overstocked with talent or maturity, and
for several years the longest journey it made was from Abilene to Baird some twenty miles away, on a Texas and Pacific railroad train. The boys had no uniforms but performed their concerts in ordinary street clothes.

In the fall of 1922, a cattleman’s convention was scheduled for the city of San Angelo, ninety miles from Abilene. Even at that early date, Abilene had an enthusiastic Chamber of Commerce. The whole community wanted its delegation at San Angelo to wave bright colors and make a loud noise. For a band to perform this function, all the members needed to be similarly attired to depict and emphasize the spirit of the convention. At this time the old proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” was again proved true. The students on the campus were not only from the cattle country, but most of the male students were actually practical cowboys and were “at home” in high-heel boots, Levis, and John B. Stetson hats.

While rounding up his faculty for the opening of school in the fall of 1922, President Sandefer had employed W. O. Hurwood to direct the band. About two weeks after school opened, Hurwood could not be found. He was a professional piccolo artist. He had joined a circus band at a higher salary and had not taken time to resign. From then on he was known as “Piccolo Pete.”

President Sandefer called for a conference with Dean Olsen. Shortly they agreed that they should ask the violin instructor and orchestra leader, D. O. Wiley, to become the director of the band. It was then known for the first time that Dean Olsen had been a member of the Yale University Band while a student there. He used his band knowledge to convince Professor Wiley that it was not illogical for an orchestra leader to direct a brass band.
Wiley accepted the job on condition that he could offer scholarships to qualified musicians. The band took on new life, and the professor soon closed a deal with Grady Kinsolving and the Abilene Chamber of Commerce to partially outfit the boys in cowboy regalia, and the band then became "The Cowboy Band of Simmons College." It was a leading attraction at the cattleman's convention in San Angelo, and even attracted the next such convention to Abilene.

This trip to San Angelo gave great impetus to the band. This was the longest trip the embryonic musicians had made to that date; but since then, they have marched and played in nearly every state in the Union, and in at least a dozen foreign countries. All this time their uniform has been, and still is, cowboy boots, Levis, chaps, and John B. Stetson hats.

In the early days the leader-instructor was a volunteer from the music faculty, but the band had become such an integral part of college life that a full-time leader was obtained. Until this present year, only three men have occupied this position over the last fifty years. The first one was D. O. Wiley (now retired after serving many years with the Texas Tech Raiders). With the coming of Wiley, the band was incorporated, and Gilbert (Gib) Sandefer, the younger son of President Sandefer, became manager.

The college gym coach, Y. P. Kuhn, took over as drum major and developed a marching cadence nearly twice as snappy as the standard. This, too, increased the popularity and demand for the Cowboy Band throughout the nation wherever a marching band was needed. Under Wiley's leadership this band had helped inaugurate President Hoover and had played in London and on many of the best stages in Europe. With Gib's contacts and salesmanship, The Cowboy Band of Simmons College began to be known farther
and farther from home. Since 1934, until a few months ago (when he passed away), Marion B. McClure, affectionately known as “Prof,” with the aid of Gib Sandefer as promotor, made this band the now world-famous Cowboy Band. McClure was a scholarly musician, a tremendously efficient instructor and conductor, and was a leader whom the boys and everyone truly loved and respected.

We mentioned above that there have been three leaders. The third, Merle Evans, served during an interim when McClure was away, as Will Rogers said, “learning more tunes.” This leader, who had been for years director of the Barnum & Bailey band, could never adjust to the quick cadence which had made the Cowboy Band famous. He left, in the good graces of everyone, and went back to the gypsy life of the Barnum & Bailey show. Then, McClure returned and his leadership became permanent.

The Cowboy Band helped to inaugurate four presidents of the United States and has marched in Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade, all with world-wide television coverage. They have appeared in Madison Square Garden Rodeo and Boston Square Garden Rodeo. When the first amateur rodeo and Cowboy Reunion was initiated at Stamford, Texas, the band led the parade. It has done so every year since, and has become the official “Stamford Reunion Band.” In the years when the Old Confederates were still holding their reunions, the Cowboy Band from Abilene was chosen many times to lead their parade. These famous band men have been present at conventions of both Democrats and Republicans and tried to soften and purify the atmosphere; but they had little success.

That name, “Cowboy Band,” coupled with the snappy cadence of their march, was soon publicized throughout the nation; but a word from Will Rogers about the band which
fascinated him so much was more valuable than a column in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. One of Will's last philanthropic deeds, following his program on the campus, was to hand a check to Gib Sandefer, saying, "Go buy the boys some new tunes." With the tunes they had, their program was a smash hit with any crowd, and their theme song from the beginning was "The Old Gray Mare." This, accompanied by "yells" from the boys, was as enthusiastic as were the yells of the rebels listening to the strains of "Dixie."

Dr. J. D. Sandefer never lost an opportunity to boost this band. Repeatedly he would say, "This band has played before more crowned heads in Europe and bald heads in America than any other band in the world." One of the more recent trips of the band was when the Baptists invaded Tokyo with preachers, teachers, speakers, and musicians, witnessing or performing in the halls of that city. The things that attracted more followers than any other phase of the program were the music and marching of the Hardin-Simmons University Cowboy Band. The Cowboys enjoyed it even though they had to have their boots half-soled twice before leaving Japan.

This segment of university life on the "Forty Acres" is one of the most romantic stories of the metamorphosis of the little Abilene Baptist College which began in 1891. The erection of the Band Hall on the campus in 1972 and the beginning of the Cowboy Band Foundation will be reserved for another chapter, but appreciation for the tradition and accomplishments of this truly unique band should motivate continuing and generous support.