

Bands and the “Gone With the Wind” Premiere Parade

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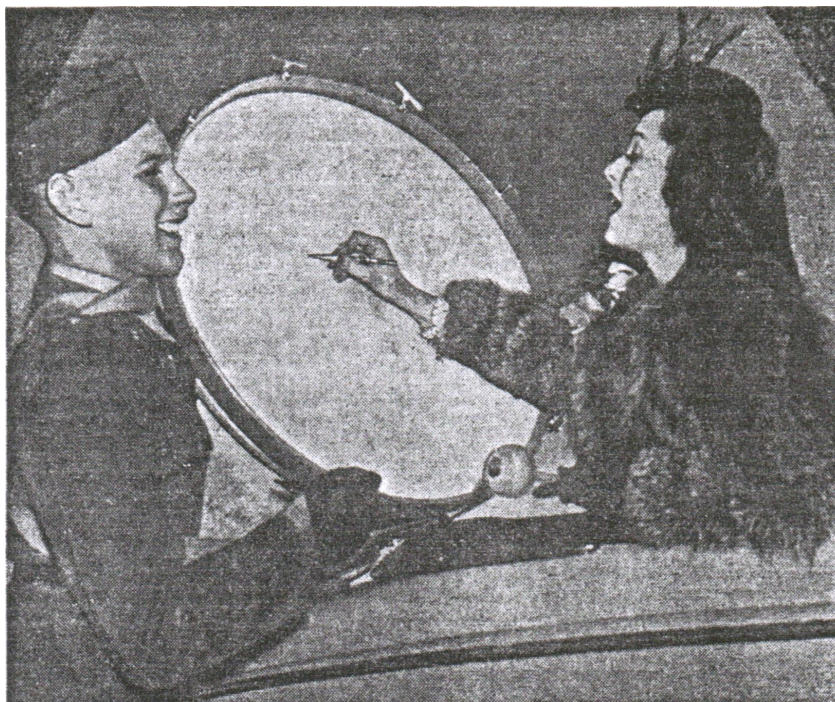
For two days in December 1939, the eyes of the world were on Atlanta for the world premiere of David O. Selznick’s *Gone With the Wind* (GWTW), an all-time favorite movie that took place at the Lowe's Grand Theater on the evening of Friday, December 15, 1939. The lead-up to the premiere put Atlanta in a frenzy. Practically every downtown shop window was decorated with GWTW memorabilia and confederate flags. Hotels were filled to capacity. Governor Eurith D. Rivers took the unheard-of action of proclaiming a one-day state holiday for the movie premiere. Not to be outdone, Mayor William B. Hartsfield declared a three-day city festival. An afternoon parade the day before the premiere drew an estimated 300,000 energetic people, many of whom were students released early from Fulton County and City of Atlanta Schools. An event of this magnitude required the utilization of numerous bands, so practically every possible school band within a comfortable radius of downtown Atlanta participated.

The Thursday, December 14, late afternoon parade was designed primarily as a motorcade of the movie stars and MGM officials, along with numerous politicians and dignitaries. Instead of utilizing bands as marching units, organizers positioned bands in stationary locations from the beginning of the parade route at Candler Field (the Atlanta Airport) to the end at the Georgian Terrace Hotel on Peachtree Street, thereby providing continuous music as the caravan moved along.

The first plane from the west coast to arrive at the airport carried Vivien Leigh (Scarlett), Olivia de Havilland, Laurence Olivier, and GWTW producer David O. Selznick and his wife Irene. Their arrival was cause for celebration, and the Russell H. S.

Band (East Point) was in position beside the airport tarmac to provide musical entertainment, playing *Dixie* almost non-stop. Upon hearing the band, Leigh remarked to Olivier, “Isn’t that nice – they’re playing the song from the picture.”¹

Kay Kyser, a leading Big Band leader who was scheduled to headline two GWTW events, arrived at the airport earlier in the day and made an impromptu conducting appearance with the Russell Band as he was awaiting the arrival of the movie stars. Ann Rutherford, the then 19-year-old actress who portrayed Scarlett’s little sister, Careen, had arrived by train the day before and was also present at the airport to greet her fellow actors and actresses. While waiting, she autographed a drumhead held by Russell student Olen Gunnin, a moment memorialized in a famous *Atlanta Journal* photograph.²



¹ Gerald Gardner and Harriet Modell Gardner, *The Tara Treasury*, Westport, CT: Arlington House Publishers, 133.

²Photo is found in the *Atlanta Journal*, 15 December 1939, 30.

Eventually, the plane carrying Clark Gable (Rhett) and his wife, Carole Lombard, arrived at Chandler Field. After greetings from Mayor Hartsfield and a number of other dignitaries, a motorcade of about 30 open cars slowly departed the airport at around 4:30 p.m. with the musical strains of the Russell Band heard in the background.

The following bands were positioned along the parade route: Commercial High at Brotherton Street; Fulton High at Garnett Street; O’Keefe Junior High at Mitchell Street; Murphy Junior High at Alabama Street; Joe Brown High at Wall Street; Georgia Tech at Five Points; West Fulton High at Luckie Street; the American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps at Grand Theater; North Fulton High at Cain Street; Washington (GA) High at the West Peachtree - Peachtree intersection; Marist at the Peachtree-Ivy intersection; Boys’ High at Pine Street; Tech High at Linden Street; Georgia Military Academy at North Avenue; and Georgia State Girls’ Military at the Georgian Terrace Hotel.³

Arriving at the Georgian Hotel, the entourage was met with music provided by the Georgia State Girls’ Military Band. From a platform beside the hotel, the celebrities were introduced and offered a few words to the massive crowd. Clark Gable raised a Confederate flag, after which the Georgia State Girls’ Band played *Dixie* and the *Star-Spangled Banner*.⁴

Gable, who played the leading role in GWTW, remarked at a post-parade party that the crowd estimates were around 300,000. He also said: “When I saw all those people, even the young ones who had climbed on telephone and electric poles and those leaning out office windows, it seemed to me like 3 million. Everybody was waving and

³ Clark Howell, ed., “Stars Parade Peachtree Today,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 December 1939, 1, 16.

⁴ Herb Bridges, *Gone With The Wind: The Three-day Premiere in Atlanta*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999: xvi.

cheering. It was really one of the most exciting moments of my life.”⁵ His reaction and experience was heightened greatly by the performances of numerous Atlanta area bands. For the band members, they recognized that their parade participation was a memorable and important moment in their young lives.

⁵ Yolanda Gwin, “Author’s Coat Hangs in Hall,” *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 14 December 1975, 21-G.