

CONTRARY to popular belief, the bagpipes are not of Scottish or Irish origin. The first version of the instrument can be traced back to the Middle East several centuries before the birth of Christ. It was most likely a rather crude instrument comprised of reeds stuck into a goatskin bag. As civilization spread throughout the Middle East and into the Mediterranean lands, the people brought along their music.

It is generally believed that village musicians used the pipes along with drums for entertainment in an effort to brighten an otherwise drab existence. The instruments also contributed to other facets of community life, such as the burying of the dead.

Some of their instruments were adaptations of the early bagpipe. Instrument sophistication grew with time, as reeds were replaced with the hollowed leg bones of small grazing animals. Holes drilled into the bones allowed the musicians to vary tones and pitch.

Along with their trumpets and drums, the Romans carried with them their pipes. The legions spread the popularity of the instrument throughout Europe, eventually ending up in the British Isles.

It was in the evergreen landscapes of Scotland and Ireland that the pipes reached their highest level of popularity. During the 14th century, the bagpipes could be found in nearly every village.

In addition to providing music for enjoyment, bagpipes were also used to rally the clans to battle, usually against the English. The English found the pipes so disturbing that they banned the Scots and the Irish from playing them at any time. Yet, that didn't stop their use.

Over the years, the bagpipes grew in sophistication. More pipes were added, enabling the musician to reach a wider range of notes.

Mournful tunes were frequently played over the pipes following the death of a warrior. Villagers would gather around the body of their dead compatriot while the piper stood a distance away. It was said that the music was sign to God that a brave and loyal subject was on his way to sit at "the steps of the throne."

The bagpipe was introduced to the New World during the great migration westward. British soldiers were led into battle by pipers and drummers. As the battle began, the musicians swung off to the side, encouraging the soldiers to fight on. Songs of victories past wafted over the battlefield, reminding the soldiers of their heroic legacies.

During the great Irish potato famine of the 1840's, hundreds of thousands of sons and daughters of Ireland left their homes for the promise of a better life in America. During the terrible voyage across the Northern Atlantic, the only respite was their music. Bagpipes, flutes and drums brought back memories of their heritage, and when they could, they sang and danced to the tunes. Their music also mourned fellow travelers who fell sick and died along the way.

While the Irish were banned from many employment opportunities at the time, they did not grow discouraged. With a fervor possessed of many immigrants, they labored their way into the mainstream of America.