

Volume14

Number 051

LFM: Sousa's Greatest March

Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on *A Moment in Time* is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, *the last full measure*.

Intro: A Moment In Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: On May 14, 1897 John Philip Sousa stood at the podium of the Philadelphia Academy of Music,

lifted his baton, and began leading his greatest march. Two encores later the crowd was still on its feet.

The son of immigrants Sousa grew up in Washington, DC around military band music. His father played trombone in the Marine Band. The boy's musical study began at the age of six. Work with voice, violin, piano, flute, cornet, trombone, and the alto horn demonstrated his prodigious ability and he was soon taking engagements as an orchestral violinist, doing some conducting, and turning out primitive compositions.

In 1867 he attempted to run away from home to join a circus band and his father signed him up as an apprentice bandsman with the Marines. Discharged in 1875 he established a reputation as an excellent violinist and theater conductor in national tours and on Broadway. Returning to the Marines in 1880 he raised the president's own to the highest standards of technical execution and performance. Sousa conducted the band for presidents Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland, and Harrison.

In 1892 promoter David Blakely convinced him to resign from the Marines and organize a civilian

concert band. The group played to enthusiastic crowds all around the country. While returning from a European vacation in 1896 Sousa was strolling the deck of the liner Teutonic, there he received the inspiration for a new march. By the spring of the following year the components were together and he had tried it out with a few audiences. Theirs was the same reaction as in Philadelphia. Critics called it jingoistic and said it pandered to the martial fever gripping the country in the prelude to the Spanish-American war, but the people loved it.

Until his death in 1932 no audience would permit him to leave the stage

without playing it. It was the last piece he conducted. "The Stars and Stripes, Forever."

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Bierley, Paul E. John Philip Sousa: American Phenomenon.
New York: Century-Appelton Crofts, 1973.

Anonymous, "Sousa's Greatest," American Heritage (May, June 1997): 106.

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