

"Velzoe Brown"

By Randy Roy
Editor, Tech Trojan Times

We publish this newsletter as a way of keeping you informed of our progress on the Auditorium Restoration, as well as bringing you stories and articles of interest. However, finding things to write about is becoming increasingly difficult. After all, our school has been closed for 22 years. It's not like there are a lot of things going on. But every once in a while we get real lucky and stumble upon one of those unique, one-of-a-kind things to write about. This is one of them.

It is with great pleasure (and a distinct honor and privilege) that I introduce you to, and tell you the story of one of Tech's own ... "Velzoe Brown".



I was "surfing the 'net" a few weeks ago, looking for information and stories related to Tech, and was subsequently directed to a number of different sites. I stuck pure gold on one of them when Velzoe's story came up. She graduated from Tech 80 years ago. Did that make you reach for your calculator? It's 1926, folks. She graduated before most of us were even born. My first thought after reading her story, was how much I wished I could have known her. What a remarkable life she must have had. I was so intrigued by what I read that I contacted a person that sponsored one of the links that had information on Velzoe. I requested additional information



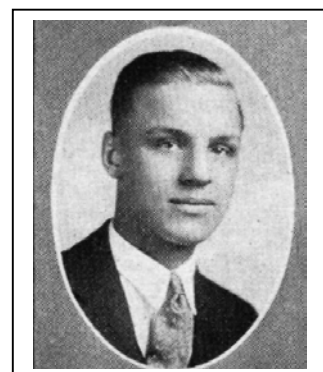
on her. The reply I received totally took me aback. She said, "*Why don't you ask her yourself. She's alive and well, and living in Santa Cruz, CA, and I know Velzoe would be thrilled to hear from you.*" She then gave me Velzoe's address and phone number. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. That makes this remarkable lady 96 years 'young.' I immediately sat down and wrote Velzoe what turned out to be a 24-page letter, most of it being pictures I thought would be of interest to her. Several days later, she called me. We talked for nearly a half-hour. We were both so excited. I can't begin to express how grateful and appreciative Velzoe was that someone from "back home" took the time to write to her ... how excited she was to receive pictures and updates on Tech ... and how curious she was that someone my age (57) would find anything about her life even remotely interesting. She couldn't have been more wrong on that last one !!

During our phone conversation, she regaled me with stories and memories of Omaha and of Tech. She speaks lovingly and passionately of her memories on stage in Tech's auditorium. Velzoe also told me that she started high school at Tech at age 12 ... the year Tech first opened (1923). She spoke about "*the fine new brick building, with its large auditorium, swimming pool, two gyms and thousands of students*". I checked a 1926 Tech yearbook (The Quadrant - Vol 8 - 1925 - 1926), and was amazed to learn something I didn't know before. Back then, there were 4 graduating classes each year.. (Where were those perks when WE went to school) !! She was a June 1926 Tech graduate. An absolutely beautiful girl with sparkling, intense eyes that literally spoke volumes. This woman epitomized Tech, and everything it ever stood for. Speaking of epitomizing Tech, allow me to digress for just a moment. One of Velzoe's classmates is a person whose name you might recognize. Carl B. Palmquist. Yes, our old Principal, Mr. Palmquist, was also a 1926 Tech grad and fellow classmate of Velzoe.



Below Velzoe's picture in the yearbook was this quote: "*To be an artist is her only ambition. To the list of the famous, she'll be an addition.* (Velzoe's 1926 Senior picture is on the left, and Carl Palmquist's 1926 Senior picture is on the right).

So what makes Velzoe's story so unique other than being a surviving 1926 Tech graduate and a member of Tech's first class in 1923? You're in for a remarkably moving story on this lovely young lady. (Normally I wouldn't devote this much space to any particular article in our newsletter, but I'm going to use whatever space is needed to relate her story). I can only hope that you are as impressed with her as I am. Part of what you will read here



will be excerpts from her story; a story that is most definitely "in tune". You see, Velzoe Brown is a musician.



Velzoe is 4th from the left, in the middle of the picture.

Raised in Nebraska, Velzoe was one of five children born to a mother and father who played piano and trumpet, respectively. Velzoe's first instrument was the piano, which she says she learned without lessons. *"I gathered it in with my mother's milk I think."* At 13, Velzoe started playing trombone, teaching herself from an instruction book. She worked her way up to first chair in the girls' marching band at Omaha Tech High. *"One day I was asked to stay after band practice by the conductor of the girl's band at Tech High where I was soon to be graduated from the 12th grade."* Wondering why she had been singled out, she said, *"I never dreamed it was to be an announcement that a traveling orchestra, made up of young women, had an opening for a trombonist, and if I cared to inquire into it"* The audition paid off. Velzoe became a full-time musician with the all-women group, *The Pollyanna's*

Syncopators. There's a little more to this story. *"As time grew ever nearer for the tour to begin, I was told I would have to forgo the actual graduation exercises at Tech High. It was perfectly permissible for my mother to accept the diploma in my absence".* And so it was. *"Picture if you can, an open touring car, a new Studebaker, black, of course, for this was long before the day of colored automobiles."* This traveling orchestra was organized in 1923 in Lincoln, Nebraska, and played ballrooms and theaters from the east coast to California. *"The salary was magnificent. \$40.00 a week, guaranteed, with a possibility of even more, on certain percentage jobs. Girls saved all week, 6 days a week, as clerks, for a mere \$9.00. Teachers made \$30.00 a month plus board & room. So the prospect of not only being liberated from a fate worse than death, that is, an office job, and being paid so grandly for doing what I'd gladly have done for a crust of bread, well, no Cinderella or Alice-in-Wonderland ever felt more dazzled."*



For four years the band toured the ballrooms of the midwest and went as far as Canada and New York City in their sturdy Studebaker. The Pollyannas even came to California, playing the Lamonica ballroom in Santa Monica and the famous Rainbow ballroom in Fresno, where they won a "battle of music" against all their male competitors. In the winters the band played for vaudeville theaters on the Orpheum circuit ... the cream of the theater chains. After the Pollyannas broke up under pressures of the Depression, Velzoe moved to California and played with the famous Juanita Connors band, making good money in hard times. As Velzoe remembers, *"I have letters where I say to my parents, don't worry about me, I have a \$5 bill stashed away. Five dollars was a lot of money. You could buy a meal for 35 cents served in courses in L.A. on a white table cloth with sherbet to cleanse your palate. Can you imagine?"*



"Velzoe & The Upbeats"
Velzoe is 4th from left, in the middle

Later she formed a trio with Edna Lewis, a virtuoso horn and reed player also formerly of the Polyannas, and played all over California. After many years on the job, Velzoe tired of nightclubs and life on the road. She spent time at the Cherry Foundation in Carmel studying early music, classical piano and flute, and then in 1961 moved to Santa Cruz. Velzoe plays regularly at Sunshine Villa and the Live Oak



Velzoe and the Upbeats at the Senior Citizens Opportunities monthly dance

Senior Center, and provides the music at assorted dances with her full quintet, *Velzoe Brown and the Upbeats*. When asked what she thinks of living a musical life, Velzoe said, *"I'm for it, honey!"*

Velzoe's story contains a lot more than I have room for in our newsletter, but I wanted you to meet a truly remarkable lady ... a lady we can be extremely proud of as well as a fellow graduate of Tech High. I plan to put Velzoe's story, in it's entirety, on our Tech web site, so watch for it in the future, at www.OmahaTechHigh.com It's a remarkable story !!