

# PEOPLE IN THE INDUSTRY

## FRANK HOLTON

*c. 1934 By Jos. L. Huber*

Frank Holton was born on a farm in Allegan County, Michigan on September 28, 1857, the son of Otis L. Holton and Mary (Clark) Holton, of Scotch-Irish and English descent. He spent his early years in school working at various jobs from harness and blacksmith shops to printing companies. Early in life, he studied singing and playing the cornet. In the Allegan Band in Michigan he learned the baritone and trombone, which were to be his major instruments.



Leaving home, he was offered the leadership of an itinerant theatrical group in the little town of Hopkins, Michigan. In this job, he was the leader of the band but also had to furnish the wagon and a team of horses. From this meager beginning, he went on to play with Hi Henry's Minstrels, Barnum and Bailey's great circus band, the Ponce de Leon hotel in San Augustine, Florida, Ellis Brooks Concert Band, Sousa's Band and many other great organizations. We can best understand his rise in the music industry by hearing the stories told by him.

"I recall even the minutest details of that first year in business," said Mr. Holton. "About 1896 while I was business manager and trombone soloist for Ellis Brooks and his Second Regiment Band in Chicago, I began advertising a remarkable trombone oil that I had been developing for a year or more. I tried to sell this oil but at the end of two years I found that my transactions showed a loss instead of a profit. This did not discourage me, however, for during these two years I had acquired considerable knowledge of mail order advertising and commercial correspondence which had whetted my appetite for more knowledge of the business world."

"As a musician I had gone further than my fondest expectations, but even though I had practiced strict economy, it seemed almost impossible for me to save any money out of my earnings. It was at this time that I decided to start a band instrument business in a small way. I had very little to encourage me, as my business experience was decidedly limited, and my capital consisted mainly of plenty of courage, enthusiasm, and a desire to become a better provider for my family. It is true that I realized that I had a distinct asset in the many musicians that I had known and formed friendships with during my professional career. On the other hand, I was defying the mental boggy that a professional musician can never succeed in business. This in my own mind seemed ridiculous, yet I did appreciate that it is rather difficult for a man at forty years of age to begin at the bottom and build a new business."

"However, I was anxious to try, and made the first step by renting two small rooms on the third floor of an old building at the northeast corner of Clark and Madison Streets in Chicago, IL for which I paid \$15.00 a month rent. The rooms were in a terrible condition. The first thing I had to do was to invest in a can of paint and paint the woodwork, walls and floor myself. My furni-

ture consisted of a desk, a ten-foot counter, another eight-foot counter, a showcase, and two chairs. I smile when I recall that I bought the showcase and counter for \$5.00 each.”

“How I lived the first two or three years is still a mystery. During this period I took nothing out of the business as a salary, and I kept up my professional work playing nights and Sundays whenever I could. I wonder today at my colossal nerve, when I realize that it was at least six months before I could afford to hire an office boy and pay him \$3.00 a week. I had a large card on which was written: “Will Return in 15 Minutes”, which I hung on the door whenever I was obliged to run errands.”

“My first business consisted in the sale of second hand instruments and my trombone oil. This grew gradually and at the end of the year I was able to afford the services of an instrument maker. Then I began to experiment on the construction of trombones. Several times during the first year or two I found myself unable to pay my rent, and had to take some of my instruments down on Clark Street and pawn them for the necessary funds.”

“That was a trying period for Mrs. Holton, as it became necessary to cut our family expenses to the lowest point, because I was putting back into my business most of my earnings as a musician. We lived for several years in a flat which we rented on Bowen Avenue for \$10.00 a month, with Mrs. Holton still giving music lessons to help pay expenses. In 1900 I found that my business was growing to the point where I needed more space, and I moved to the corner of State and Madison Streets, third floor, where I paid \$60.00 a month for two very large rooms. It was not long before I was forced to expand again and rent more space in the building.”

“Something occurred at this time which had a great deal to do with shaping my career and the future of this business. One July day a man came in to inquire about an instrument and I found one in my stock which suited him. We had quite a pleasant chat, got acquainted, and he continued to come in and see me whenever he was in town. He was an exceptionally

good customer, for he always paid cash for everything that he bought, and a cash customer in those days was much appreciated. This man was George Renner of Elkhorn, Wisconsin. The friendship grew, and when the summer months came, Mrs. Holton and I spent many delightful weekends with Mr. Renner and his family near Elkhorn. The contacts that I made here were later to become a decisive factor in determining the final location of my plant.”

“After being at State and Madison Streets for four years, the owner of the building decided to tear it down and put up a new one. I then moved to 107 Madison St. where I occupied an entire floor of about six thousand square feet. My business had greatly increased and I was then manufacturing a good many cornets, trombones, and some other instruments.”

“In 1904 I incorporated my business, as some of my trusted employees wished to become more closely allied with me. The business continued to grow rapidly, so that three years later we purchased land on the west side of Chicago and built a three story factory containing about 15,000 square feet of floor space. Before 1911 our business had grown to the point where we found it necessary to build an addition to this factory. During all this time I had been working, experimenting, and planning on how to improve the mechanical structure and the tonal qualities of my beloved trombone and all the other instruments. My whole heart was in this delightful work.”

“In about 1916 I became very much interested in the small city of Elkhorn, and I purchased a farm in that section of Wisconsin to be used as our summer home. However, as time went on, it became apparent that the factory which we had built in Chicago would not long be adequate to house the increasing business of Frank Holton & Co. It was suggested to me by my friends in Elkhorn that I move the entire plant there, where there was plenty of room, and also a chance for both Mrs. Holton and me to enjoy the country life which we desired.”

“We liked Elkhorn, and were fascinated by the surrounding region, but the prospect of moving the factory was not seriously considered until fall, when it

became positively necessary to move or to build another factory in Chicago. When the situation was presented to Mr. Renner, he at once began to investigate and found that the businessmen of Elkhorn were very much interested in trying to have the plant moved from Chicago to Elkhorn."

The little city of Elkhorn at this time had a population of only 2000 but money was raked together, socials were given, farmers donated money and hauled gravel and brick, and a forty-three thousand dollar factory was to be built which they agreed to give Frank Holton providing he brought his payroll to a half million dollars inside of seven years. People had faith in Frank Holton, for they knew that he was honorable.

"Before making our final decision, I took about thirty-five of our employees and their families to Elkhorn to look over the site and to get their opinions regarding the wisdom of moving. Very fortunately, they were generally delighted and unanimous in their approval, so that in 1918 the entire factory, machinery, equipment and stock was moved to Elkhorn, where a splendid new plant, modern in every detail, had been constructed by the Elkhorn citizens."

"You can imagine my satisfaction a few years later when our accounting department presented to me our annual statement which showed that we were doing a business of about a million dollars a year - a business of international repute, which had been started with little more than a lot of nerve and a capful of trombone oil. But it was the best trombone oil and netted the company ten thousand dollars per year."

"We are now shipping instruments throughout the world, to England, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China and India. The growing factory already completed has over 80,000 square feet of floor space on a plot of six acres."

It was this author's privilege to observe at first hand the manufacturing process used in building Holton Band Instruments. Here are raw materials, sheets of brass long pieces of tubing, later to be converted into the shining and beautifully decorated instruments

which are shipped out to all parts of the world. The assembling department fits together the numerous parts - over five hundred into each saxophone and various numbers in other instruments. The sand blasting of the horns is done in the finishing department, where they are also plated and burnished. It is an interesting feature of the Holton factory that the burnishing, after the plating, is done by hand, instead of by machine, as is the practice in some factories. It takes real experts to do this engraving on the instruments. This work is also done completely by hand, and calls for the skill of true artists."

The dust which comes from the instruments as they are buffed and polished is taken care of in the Holton factory by a system of exhaust fans, which draw off all the dirt and also act as ventilators for the main room of the plant. The final testing of all instruments is done by experts, who are recognized as authorities on each class of instruments. The perfect quality of Holton's products is assured by the fact that the instruments are handled and tested in the factory by men who themselves are players and understand what results are to be sought after, as well as the mechanical construction of the instruments.

Holton cases are made with the band instruments right in the factory in Elkhorn, and, as with the instruments, combine beauty of line and finish with durability. The shells of selected Basswood or three ply veneer are covered with real "sharkoid" Seal Grain Finish, one of the most practical materials known for the covering of cases. They are lined with a green or purple silk plush.

Elbert Hubbard, the noted writer who went down in the ship *Lusitania*, described Frank Holton's progress in this way. "Over twenty years ago Frank Holton built his first trombone, and from this beginning - slowly, cautiously, conservatively - he has built, enlarged, made additions and taken care of customers in a way that makes this the foremost institution of its kind in America. When they wish to use the superlative, they say, 'This is as good as a Holton'. But beyond this they do not go. And in his own chosen work, Frank Holton has set the world a standard which his competitors have not approached, much less surpassed."

During the life of every business there comes a period when untoward circumstances and adverse conditions put its management to the supreme test. Economists state that this cycle is covered in the average business before the first seven years of its existence - when seventy percent of all concerns, unable to stem the tide of misfortune, succumb. The business graveyard is filled with hearts too weak to withstand the grueling drive down the "stretch".

Frank Holton entered this crucial period early in 1916. Then came the test that proved not only the character of the organization Frank Holton had built, but that tried the innermost soul of this artist - owner.

Arrangements had been completed to move from Chicago to Elkhorn. When it is understood that the manufacturers of band instruments requires the services of highly skilled labor, the problem of securing this labor in Elkhorn is apparent. It takes several years to train a novice and make him a skilled craftsman. To provide for this Frank Holton had taken most of his skilled employees with him to Elkhorn before the factory was begun and had received their assurances that they would stay with him. When the actual time came to go, many of them decided to remain in Chicago. In a town of less than 2000 inhabitants, housing conditions were inadequate. At this time the volume of orders for Holton instruments had reached unprecedented proportions and it became impossible to fill orders with so few men in the factory who could do the work.

Frank Holton in relating the events of this period in his career said that it was the first time that he had been so nearly discouraged that he did not know which way to turn. It was obvious that there was only one solution to his problem, and that was to begin at once to train more workmen. The general dissatisfaction his employees evinced because of inadequate housing bred acute unrest. War had been declared and the United States government demanded a very large quantity of instruments at once, at a price which would have made a handsome profit. The government sent its representatives to Elkhorn, demanding increased production and threatening to put Holton out of business unless he complied. He was told that

unless he produced a certain number of instruments per week, the government would withhold the delivery of all raw materials to the factory. Frank Holton went immediately to Washington to see what he could do about securing material. Finally Holton got to the bottom of the problem and decided that before he could even train new employees, he would have to get a place for them to live, so about June 1st, 1919 he determined to build their homes himself and take the personal responsibility for housing conditions. He went to the local banks to secure a loan on his building proposition, estimating the total cost at \$140,000. The banks gladly offered to loan 50% on each house as soon as finished and the balance needed on Holton's personal notes, with a Chicago firm to put up twenty-seven houses. The contract was lent on a cost plus basis, a plan prevalent during the war times. Then houses built on the ready cut plan were erected immediately. And by the first of October nearly all of the twenty-seven houses were finished. As fast as one house was completed, the banks permitted Mr. Holton to mortgage that house to raise money to go on. These houses were sold to the employees on the installment plan, small down payment and very small monthly payments.

Cold weather was coming on, and the city had not been able to put in the sewers which they had planned on doing earlier in the year. It would be absolutely impossible for these families to live in the homes if the sewers were not put in before winter. However, the work was not actually started until November 1. It had to be abandoned a week or so later because of freezing weather. The whole tract became a sea of mud, and, as there were not sidewalks, it was almost impossible to leave the houses. Finally, Holton secured several loads of plank and laid them down over the mud to make the homes accessible.

The first hard rain in November practically filled every basement with water. Holton took three men out of the factory and assigned them the job of pumping and bailing out the basements. With this housing problem on his mind, Holton was confronted with the more serious task of finding even untrained help. For at this time other companies were bidding for every bit of available labor. As a last resort, he went out on the

farms of Wisconsin and brought in farm boys to learn the business.

Later, he was able to raise money enough to pay off the building contractors by loaning on his personal notes together with the mortgages on the homes. The streets were still in bad condition. It finally became necessary for Frank Holton to take his own crew and go in and build two sewers to serve the houses temporarily, and put in a large septic tank on each. In one, he was obliged to lay tile a half mile across a farm to take care of one sewer. The municipality did not get the city service in until late in the summer of 1920. However, before 1921 the skies began to clear and Frank Holton & Co. did the largest volume of business in its history up to that time.

They were successful in appointing 3,000 agents from coast to coast to sell their line, but more important was the fact that during this trying period Holton was continually experimenting with new instruments, tests which he conducted personally in his laboratory - which for months was strewn with many types of instruments made in every factory in the world, - slides and bells from a dozen trombones. To perfect his instruments he called in the best talent available.

During this trying period Frank Holton drew upon an asset which has been established for forty years - the firm, warm friendship of musical leaders everywhere. Men like Clarke, Pryor and Sousa - stood behind him, because they knew that he was giving his life in an endeavor to build better band instruments.

They knew Holton personally, and respected his talent and ability, and appreciated the quality and the honest workmanship of the merchandise which he was delivering. This support, coupled with the assistance of the local banks, and the loyalty of the townspeople of Elkhorn, gave him the courage necessary to carry through.