

Band members head home

By DAVE BROCKMANN

Sentinel staff writer

WASHINGTON — The Watsonville Band has a new booster and his name is President Bill Clinton.

Maybe it was the playing of his alma mater song from Hot Springs, Ark., that did the trick.

The President went out of his way to thank the Watsonville Band for coming to the nation's capital to play at the annual Fourth of July staff party Thursday night.

And then, when he walked down the steps of the White House to offer a personal congratulations on the South Lawn, it was like a dream come true for conductor Bert Viales and the band members.

"This was big. Really big," smiled Ed Pio, the band's longtime manager. "This was the pinnacle in the band's 49-year history, and we have to thank Chief of Staff Leon Panetta for making this remarkable event a reality."

Twenty-four hours later, band

members were still pinching themselves to see if what they did indeed happened.

Jim Settle from Watsonville, the 82-year-old tuba player and oldest member of the band, said, "I woke up at 6 o'clock this morning wondering if it was just a dream."

Another said, "This was something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

Never before had a band other than the U.S. Marine Band, dating back to when Thomas Jefferson was president, played for the staff party.

But when you consider the relationship that has been established for many years between Panetta and the band — and last year's performance at the dedication of California State University Monterey Bay attended by Clinton — it was really no miracle that the invitation was extended.

Over the past week, however, there was some grumbling among

those in the military asking why a 197-year tradition was being broken by a band from California.

The tradition wasn't exactly broken, though, because the Dixieland band from the U.S. Marines did perform, and the musicians said they were happy to share the spotlight — even going so far as to provide three kettle drums for the Watsonville Band's percussion section.

Band members began packing all of their equipment Friday morning to prepare for the trip back to California.

Band members who arrived last Saturday will depart today from Washington National Airport at 11:15 a.m., arriving in San Jose International Airport at 4:47 p.m.

The remainder of the 173-member traveling party will return Sunday at 5:45 p.m., also in San Jose.

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REFERENCE