

Chapter 1: 1952 – An Inspiration

Some say that Preston Scout House was the inspiration upon which Mr. A.G. “Bud” Parker based his idea for a Boy Scout band.

Mr. Parker was the man who originally conceived the idea of forming a band for his Scout Troop. Bands of Boy Scout origin were not a novel concept. Preston Scout House, one of the most famous even during this period, had been making a name for itself for some time. Perhaps he had in mind a band that would one day be their equal.



Bud Parker, Scout Master

Whatever his motives, the idea of a parade band was enthusiastically received by the boys of the 18th Toronto Boy Scout Troop. The necessary approval for the project was soon forthcoming from the Oakwood District Commissioner, Mr. A. W. Baggs.

Bud Parker and Al Baggs had no idea of what this band would become. Nor did the Scouts who gathered once a week in the halls of Davenport Presbyterian Church. The church was located in the working-class west end of Toronto, on Davenport Road near Dovercourt Road.

In line with the community-oriented policies of most churches, its facilities were available for worthwhile activities like the 18th Toronto Boy Scout Troop of which “Bud” Parker was Scoutmaster with Mr. Peter Chapman as his assistant.

Although the Scout District Office and Church approved of the band, they did not supply the instruments. Mr. Parker paid for them himself and they remained his property. The Scouts were issued straight plastic bugles with no valves, herald horns and drumsticks but no drums, just pieces of wood. Equipping a band is an expensive proposition. For complete beginners though, these instruments were no doubt adequate.



1952: Pre-Optimists Scout Band at Oakwood Collegiate

Practice was held in the church after regular Scout meetings. Eventually, used drums were obtained and a properly equipped band was now a reality. The drums, as was the norm then, were fitted with pigskin drum heads. Plastic heads, if they existed then, were not in general use. Pigskin heads were susceptible to climatic

conditions, but, since everybody else used them, there was no disadvantage. The 18th Scout Troop Drum and Trumpet Band was now a fact. No one noticed, but Canadian Drum Corps history was about to start a new chapter.

“Trumpet Band” was a term in common use in Canada at this time. To the Scouts in the band, the terms “Drum and Bugle Corps” and “Drum Corps”, were unknown. Such distinctions had no impact on the band members who just wanted to get on with it. Rudiments of bugling and drumming occupied their minds now. Soon the rafters of the church were resounding with what vaguely resembled music. In his project, Mr. Parker was assisted by Peter Chapman and Al Latham, the first Drum Major. Mr. Baggs was not heavily involved with the band at this time. He stayed on the fringe but his support was always there.

Guidance

In order for the band to progress and flourish, they needed proper guidance. At this time, there were other bands in the Toronto area, some of high calibre. From these came willing, experienced instructors. Without them the whole thing might have collapsed.

Bill Self and Ross Wilson of the Second Signals Trumpet Band were two of them. Don McVicar of Leaside and Rolly Formica were two more. These names were, and still, are well known in Toronto Drum Corps circles. Their efforts put the band on solid footing. It is interesting to speculate whether they had any idea what it would one day become.

Under the supervision of “Bud” Parker, the band continued to learn and develop throughout 1952. Their initial purpose was to be a parade band for the Scout Troop. During the first year their appearances, usually Church parades, were minimal. Not until 1953 did they begin to appear in street parades, which began to reveal the shortcomings of this “green” outfit. They only knew one song; however, Al Latham, the Drum Major, with the wisdom of a pro, had them play it every second block. This way, it always played to fresh ears. No one was the wiser.



1954: 18th Scout Troop Band (Waterloo)



1952: 18th Scout Troop (Oakwood Collegiate)

Their single-song repertoire consisted of “Powerhouse”, a standard march for beginners. Somewhere along the way, the intricate maneuver of the counter march

was learned, to complement the straightforward work of street parades. (A foggy memory says that it was earned one night at a parade in Waterloo, I believe, because it was necessary for participation in the street parade.) Despite the fact that this band was just supposed to be for parading, they also began to enter some competitive events. You cannot do street parades forever. Success raised its smiling head in 1953 when the band won a prize at the annual Waterloo Band Festival. No one is sure what they won, but it was a sure sign of progress in only their second year. They paraded with Preston Scout House, a recognition of their status as an independent “Trumpet Band”. A definite sign of things to come?

Preston Scout House, along with Western Technical Commercial School Trumpet Band, better known as “Western Tech”, were the two best junior bands in Canada. The Waterloo Music Festival was one of their major showcases.

Although street parades, for the 18th, were still the band’s main activity, entrance into a show such as this was indicative of their desire to progress. This desire would never cease.

During this year, Mr. Baggs started paying a bit more than casual attention. This was a trend that was to augur well for the future.

1954

As time moved into 1954, the band again entered the Waterloo Festival and this time earned the silver medal for second place in the standstill contest. No one won first place, not having achieved the required score, but second was a worthy place for a unit still so young.

It was during this year, however, that the band, having a small nucleus of reasonably experienced players, became subject to player stealing, one of the major concerns of the Drum Corps.

That current year and the next, 1955, almost brought disaster to the Scout band, as they were constantly raided for players. This practice, worthy of the name piracy, went on as much then as it did in later years, and possibly today. The unit barely survived its ravages as other bands eager for success solicited members to leave their unit and transfer to another.



1954: Pre-Optimists Scout Band

A Drum Corps great, the late Pepe Notaro, was noted for his insistence on members staying with their own Corps. Some of this passion must have existed in the 18th Scout Troop Band because they did survive. They were, after all, still small and the loss of even a few members was serious.

Aside from street parades, contests were standstill affairs. This involved standing in concert formation and playing before a panel of judges. All entrants

played the same piece, and the winner was the one judged to have played it the best. This was not an interesting format. Competition was usually other Scout, Navy, or Air Cadet bands. From these beginnings were to grow competitive Drum and Bugle Corps, adding to those already in existence. Ultimately, this would produce a flourishing movement in Canada, which continues to this day.

1955 and A Sponsor

And so the band, now well established, moved into 1955, a year that would bring many changes and altered the character of the group forever.

To begin with, for reasons still not quite clear, the band moved next door and became the 157th Scout Troop Band. It may have had something to do with the fact that only one band could attend the Scout Jamboree, and the 157th was that band. This issue caused some dispute and was responsible among other things for Mr. Parker dropping out of the organization later in the year. However, the band continued its regular activities, mostly street parade work. This year was also the first year that records were kept of such things.

Out of total of thirteen parades, three were unpaid, five paid ten dollars, one twenty, one fifty, and one sixty, and two seventy-five. These sums seem tiny by modern standards but no doubt helped the band's finances in 1955. The smaller amounts were church parades, and the larger ones usually for businessmen associations.



1955: Opti-Corps members Bob Cook, Ron Cook, Hector Roberts



1955: Members of Opti-Corps at the CNE

A high point of the year was marching through the town of Preston as guests of the Preston Scout House band. Despite the seeming success of the band, time caught up and forced changes, as previously noted.

Many of the members of the band had, by this time, reached the rank of Queen Scout. This is about as high as you can go before having to leave the Scouts and go on to whatever came next. Leaving was mandatory at a certain age, similar to aging out in modern Drum Corps. Many of the boys would have to leave at the end of this year; enough that the band would virtually cease to exist. Nobody

wanted this. In order to prevent it, the band would have to quit the Scout movement en masse, and this would mean finding a new sponsor.

During the year, they actually asked for a sponsor over the P.A. system at a show. This did not work, so more shrewd minds went to work on more subtle ways to acquire what was needed. Mr. Parker who was still in charge at this time and Mr. Baggs, who had become much more involved since the early days, decided to approach the Optimist Club of Toronto, to see if they could gain their support.

The Optimist Club

The Optimist Club, founded in 1919, was called Optimist International, even though all its original clubs were in the United States. Its founders wanted a truly international organization, and this dream was realized in 1924 when the first Canadian branch was opened. This was the Optimist Club of Toronto, which became known as the Downtown Optimist Club. Although there are now over fifty such clubs in southern Ontario, this is the one that now commands our attention. Its motto, "Friend of the Boy", is self-explanatory and no doubt provided the attraction for Mr. Parker and Mr. Baggs. Before sponsoring the corps, Mr Baggs was not a member of the Optimist Club; however, the Club agreed to sponsor the corps and he joined the club, eventually, becoming a lifetime member.

They attended a meeting of the club's boys' work committee and submitted their proposal. The offer was warmly received and was considered a very attractive project that fitted in with the club's boys' work. It was, however, rejected on financial and time-consuming grounds. These reasons were given for not undertaking the sponsorship of a large project such as a boy's band. The answer was sent in a letter to Mr. Parker, who passed it on to Mr. Baggs. Undeterred, he sat down and wrote back, explaining why he thought a



1957: Opti-Corps

mistake was being made and outlined the benefits of having a band. He pointed out that too much had been made of the costs involved, kinds of uniforms, and so on. Whose band it would be and who would control it was not even discussed. Mr. Baggs wrote diplomatically, in order not to offend, and stressed the fact that he and Mr. Parker were extremely anxious that the band stays together. He suggested that, under a committee organized for the purpose and with written contracts, the control and operation of the band could be determined.

The finishing touch was added with the mention of the Madison, Wisconsin, Optimists who sponsored a band in which over one thousand boys had received musical instruction. This reference to good returns for a relatively small investment, plus the obvious lure of attendant

publicity, might have been the turning point in persuading the Optimist Club to reverse its previous decision. The fact that Mr. Parker and Mr. Baggs were engaged in such delicate, protracted negotiations that were required to produce a positive result is an indication of how important the band was now considered to be.

This all took place in May of 1955. The band, although now under the sponsorship of the Optimist Club, continued to the end of the year unchanged.

After having overseen negotiations that ensured the future of the band, Mr. Parker left the organization in early 1955. Differences over which unit would attend the jamboree and family illness contributed to this decision. It is not known if he ever saw what developed from his original initiative, but he will always be remembered as the man who started the whole thing.

Mr Baggs

The reins of control were now taken over by Al Baggs, the business manager. He would be the guiding force behind the development of the band for some years to come, holding the position of what would become known as the Corps Director.

Born in Toronto, Al Baggs was a clever man and will become a central part of this story. He lived at one time or another in Winnipeg, Toronto, Detroit, and Windsor. In the course of all this travelling, he had managed to become the youngest warranted scoutmaster in Canada. This helps to explain his position as a District Commissioner when the band was formed. He had worked for the Dominion Bank, the T. Eaton Company, and the Globe and Mail.

His interests were many and varied, including archery and the collection of guns and edged weapons; however, it was his connection with the Scouts that brought him into bands, and then the Drum and Bugle Corps.

Drum Corps became his overriding concern, while the scouting activity faded from his life. It was scouting's loss and Drum Corps' gain, particularly the Optimists Drum Corps.

Opti-Corps

Right now, though, it was still a trumpet band consisting of twenty-eight boys. This small number was another reason that joining the Optimist organization was desirable. It was hoped that boys from other Optimist sponsored activities would be drawn to the band, thus increasing its size. The band consisted mostly of horn players, with some snare and tenor drummers. Now, with the sponsorship of the Optimist Club, new uniforms and instruments appeared.

The blue and gold colours of the Optimist Club were used to create uniforms. These consisted of blue pants, wedgie hats, and gold T-shirts, and later blue jackets with gold trim.



Mr Al Baggs

Along with all this positive change, it was decided to move the band from mostly street parades into the Junior Novice class. A few successes, in their new class, kept morale high and whetted



1957: Opti-Corps

appetites far more. In April of 1956, at Stouffville, Ontario, the band placed third and received an award for most improved unit; but, it was the end of the year that capped it all. They returned home from Merritton, Ontario, at the Canadian Novice Junior Champions. In one year they had risen to the top of their new class. Although no one thought of it then, this was a sign of the tenacity that was soon to make them Canadian Champions for eleven straight years.

The Drum Major was now one Phil Tachauer, who would later become active in other aspects of Drum Corps, such as judging.

Although some of the original instructors were still involved, a snare drummer and original member from the 18th Scouts named Harry Clark

was now instructing and arranging. Many years later, Harry instructed both the De La Salle and the La Crosse, Wisconsin, Blue Stars. His talents were, at this time, already apparent.

The Corps, as we may now call it, having mastered the Junior Novice Division in one year, were not content to rest on their laurels. They now made a move up to the Junior “B” Division. This level entailed the use of a counter march, a preliminary form of marching and maneuvering, used commonly by marching bands. No matter what this band did, success greeted their efforts. The enthusiasm, converted into work, brought them first prize in the Kiwanis, London, and Waterloo Music Festivals.

Along the way, having by now become a familiar sight, they picked up the name “Opti-Corps”.



1956: Junior Novice Championship Certificate

The First annual Ontario Junior Drum and Bugle Corps Championship

During this year, the Optimist Club sponsored the first annual Ontario Junior Drum and Bugle Corps Championship. In competition were the Leaside Lions, 180th Squadron Sky Raiders, Danforth Crusaders, Preston Scout House, Western Tech, and Grantham Police Boys' Band. This was a Junior "A" competition, under the auspices of the then aptly named, Canadian Bugle and Trumpet Band Association. No doubt, Mr. Baggs had a hand in this. For a man who would be the first to admit that he did not know one note from another, or a drum rudiment, he was gradually becoming more involved in the business end.

As for "Opti-Corps" they watched at this championship, not being in the Junior "A" Division. The next major contest, in their own class, was the Canadian Championship in Galt, Ontario. The Corps capped an already successful season by winning the Canadian Championship in its debut in Junior "B".

They won by fifteen points, clearly indicating that the move up was legitimate. With their successes of the past two years, many of the membership had toyed with the idea of Junior "A" status. This was a big jump, like going from the minor leagues to the majors, in baseball. Though most of them were probably not aware of it, plans had been underway for some time, to ensure that this transition took place.



1956: Opti-Corps in front of Toronto's "old" City Hall