

The movement starts to grow in the 1950s

by Carman Cluna

When writing about drum corps of the 1950s, it is almost impossible to keep from back-tracking to the mid- and late-1940s, for the ground work of the drum corps idiom when it was at its absolute height was laid down during that post-war period.

It was an era of warmth, an era of emotional dynamics, an era that will never be duplicated. It provided both the impetus for and the framework within which the shape of the drum and bugle corps activity would flourish for the next 20-odd years.

Born in 1933, it was where I came in!

World War II was over. Millions of servicemen returned home and resumed civilian status.

Nationwide, the patriotic spirit was at its zenith . . . hundreds of new American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts sprung up from coast to coast, each one a vehicle that would provide an extension of the camaraderie and common bond that had flourished in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and

Air Force.

A large percentage of these posts ran the gamut in forming everything from "ancient" drum corps (Colonial fife & drum motif) to bugle and drum units, which, before long, evolved into such "always to be remembered" senior units.

Most of these spilled well into the 1960s and 1970s and several are still a major part of the senior drum corps scene today -- G.I. Joes, Amboy Dukes, Pittsburgh Rockets, New York Skyliners, Lt. Norman Prince Princemen, Hawthorne Caballeros, Archer-Epler Musketeers, Reilly Raiders, Geneva Appleknockers, Cohoes Grenadiers, Grey Knights, Interstatesmen, Hilton Crusaders, Syracuse Brigadiers, Connecticut Hurricanes, Ballantine Brewers, Yankee Rebels.

. . . And on, and on and on. I hereby acknowledge that every senior drum and bugle corps that engaged in field competition during the aforementioned period has not been listed above. This is due only to the reality that the

40-some-odd years which separate the present from the 1950s do present a challenge to the powers of recall -- and yes, even to the powers of well-meaning, mind-boggling research.

By the early 1950s, many of these veterans posts were giving birth to parade units made up of their own kids and, before long, "standstill" competition within the junior ranks evolved into competitive field units.

Among the most prominent during this time were the Holy Name Cadets (Garfield, NJ), Liberty Bell Cadets (Philadelphia, PA), Osmond Cadets (Philadelphia, PA), St. Vincent's Cadets (Bayonne, NJ), St. Joseph's Cadets (Newark, NJ), St. Joseph's Cadets (Brooklyn, NY), Mt. Carmel Cadets (Brooklyn, NY), Selden Golden Lancers (Selden, NY), Minisink (CMCC) Warriors (New York City, NY), Loretto Knights (Brooklyn, NY), Lindenaires (Lindenhurst, NY), New York Kingsmen (Bronx, NY), Babylon Islanders (Babylon, NY), Carter Cadets (Bronx, NY), Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights (Newark, NJ), St. Ignatius All-Girls (Hicksville,



EMERALD KNIGHTS, Cedar Rapids, IA (approx. 1972).
Photo by Paul Jensen from the collection of Drum Corps World.



MELOMANES, Trois-Rivieres Quest, QUE (1998).
Photo by Roland Doré from the collection of Drum Corps World.



ANAHEIM KINGSMEN, Anaheim, CA (1986).
Photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World

NY, Audubon All-Girls (Audubon, NJ), Firettes All-Girls (Norwich, CT), Alpine All-Girls (Rochester, NY), The Statesmen (Rochester, NY), Summerville Shoremen (Summerville, NY), St. Joseph's of Batavia (Batavia, NY), Watkins Glen Squires (Watkins Glen, NY), Avant Garde (Saratoga Springs, NY), Boys of Syracuse (Syracuse, NY), St. Lucy's Cadets (Newark, NJ), Norwood Park Imperials (Chicago, IL) and St. Mary's Cadets (Nutley, NJ).

The corps were so numerous that "circuits," akin to "leagues" in the sports world, were formed: Penn-Jersey, Mid-Atlantic, Greater New York, etc. Once again, I regret any omissions and, once again, be advised that many of the juniors did not peak until the early or mid-1960s.

The Roman Catholic Church played a major role, particularly in the East. No better character-building vehicle, with its inherent disciplines, could be found anywhere -- and so, many Parish-headquartered units later became partially sponsored by local American Legion and/or VFW Posts, which enabled them to compete in state and national veterans-sponsored competitions.

Back then, drum corps were a "WAY OF LIFE." In my native Brooklyn, NY, and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish, I had no friends other than drum corps participants. A kid, usually without any musical knowledge or experience, would join a junior corps, receive relentless training in marching and music or percussion, and form friendships that, to this day, fall into the "lifetime" category.

Yes, it was -- and still is -- (at least in our memories) a way of life for those of us who are fortunate enough to still be part of the scene. And to this day, we revere those who pointed us in the direction of drum and bugle corps.

As time went on, the competitive urge pushed us into four to five rehearsals a week. We ate, slept and drank nothing but drum corps and the competition season lasted from May through September. Eastern corps engaged in midwestern tours and the midwestern units came East.

American Legion and VFW National conventions -- which included national drum corps championships -- played major roles in the competitive tours. In 1953, it was St. Louis, MO, and in 1954, Washington, D.C., but the financial costs were soaring.

During the fall and winter months, most

units busied themselves with fund-raising activities and events which ran the gamut from selling newspapers to sponsoring dances and military balls, since neither the veterans posts nor the local parishes were able to help finance their operations.

Drum corps minus goosebumps = zero

During those years, goosebumps abounded. The excitement generated by the competing units became a trademark of drum and bugle corps competition. Emotion was built in -- and many a tear (of the HAPPY variety) -- was shed in the stands. No one ever had to ask: "What are they playing?"

The inimitable sound of 36 to 52 horns -- a solid brass choir, with percussive accompaniment -- was something that can never be duplicated, be it by a jazz band or even a symphony orchestra . . . IT'S DRUM CORPS.

That "good 'ole starting line" was where every corps lined up and the journey of each to the 50 yard line projected to the audiences what they could expect in the way of style, etc.

The American flag was mandatory. Each corps paid homage to it via the color presentation, which, almost without exception, produced goosebumps galore. Just about every musical selection played by those corps was instantly recognizable, which produced a stirring feeling of communication between the performers and the audiences.

Yes, the 1950s spawned the new world of drum and bugle corps and laid the foundation for what was to follow in the ensuing years.

But, be that as it may, the drum and bugle corps activity now could benefit greatly from a shako-in-hand examination of those formative years.



LAWMEN, Staten Island, NY (1962).
Photo from the collection of Tom Rocca.



LONG ISLAND KINGSMEN, Kings Park, NY (approx. 1982).
Photo by John Wacker from the collection of Drum Corps World.