

Chapter 13: Inside The Corps

What was the Corps like behind the uniforms and public image as seen on the field? Probably not much different from any other Drum Corps, as most of them were after the same things. In order to pursue these ends, they did the same things, different only in degree and method. Let's see if we can discover what, if anything, made the Optimists distinctive, and tick for so long, so successfully. In attempting to do this, it is probably a good idea to begin at the top, if only for want of a starting point.

Downtown Optimists Club

To begin with, there was the Downtown Optimist Club itself. Without them, there would have been no Corps, at least, not one of the magnitude of this one. The club, one of many in their field, was a remote organization to the general membership of the Corps. We knew them in name only. Nobody knew when or where they convened, or how large a part the Corps played in their overall programs. Their representative closest to us was, of course, Al Baggs, whose concern was us. From him we heard of club decisions or activities, but only if they involved the Corps and its affairs. Most, if not all of us, were only interested in things that applied to the Corps.



Optimist International Crest

From time to time, a club member would come around to see what was going on, and often we would be unaware of his presence. Even if he was noticed, no one would know who he was, as they were seldom introduced. The most common reaction, if a stranger appeared was, "Who's that guy?". Usually he would be taken for an interested father or uncle, perhaps even an outsider who would not know anything about Drum Corps. Thus he was not to be bothered with. All of us would have been surprised to find out just how much these "strangers" did know, as well as what an influence they and their colleagues had on the make-up and operation of that which we all loved, The Corps.

The Executive

Next to the club, on a level more accessible to the membership was the executive and those associated with it. As the Corps itself changed with time, so did the executive, though for different reasons. Age was the one factor affecting all in the Corps itself, along with other things affecting individuals.

In the executive, no constant factor existed, and some of these people would stay for years. Change at their level could have many reasons. The increase of responsibility in other field i.e. family, business, etc., ill health, advancing years or even just being superseded by others more fit or capable of taking up the reins of control. This last sounds a little too efficient, or even ruthless, but it was not that way at all. Anybody was welcome, at any time, for any reason, if they wanted to help out. Provided that the interests of the Corps were not interfered

with, nobody was subject to dismissal or arbitrary rulings. There were, as anywhere, power struggles, with winners and losers, and sometimes losers stayed or sometimes they left. Those were personal, and usually hidden, not general policy.

Over the years, many people helped out at the executive level, some of whom remained almost unknown, while others became visible and accepted by the Corps. After, though, being subjected to intense scrutiny and hauled through the shark-toothed field of Corps discussion. Once accepted, they were in for good, becoming part of the whole and wearing the green jacket.

At the beginning, Al Baggs was the only executive member that we knew of, or saw, though he was soon joined by others. Bernie Beer came in, then Don Daber, and many others as the years passed. In this fashion, somewhat haphazard though it was, an effective management was maintained throughout the entire existence of the Corps. During all those years, there were many people involved, some of whom will be mentioned later, others who will not, if only because of a lack of records to draw from.

All who did become involved brought their own particular specialties, there being hardly a skill or trade that we could not take advantage of, if necessary. Such depth was often to prove useful. It goes without saying that all of this was done in a volunteer spirit, for if profit was the incentive for any, they would have to go elsewhere.

The members of the Corps itself were always interested in the people who became involved. Often this would lead to the coining of humorous nicknames that would be used frequently, and in public. The only one who was never addressed familiarly was Mr. Baggs. Long ago, he had been stuck with the name of “Daddy” Baggs, but this term was seldom, if ever, used to his face. “Daddy” Baggs did have a sense of humour, but it never occurred to people to use this nickname openly. It truly was a term of endearment, of respect for the man who had “fathered” a championship corps. This attitude was good in that it maintained a certain formality that helped in the running of the Corps. Even in a Drum corps, there has to be some discipline and hierarchy.

Other members of the executive, or even instructors, would be treated in a more informal fashion, and this never led to problems. In fact it was all part of the fun of being in the Corps.

During the very early years, an attempt to introduce a sterner formality between members and instructors fizzled out. It was asked that instructors be addressed as “Mr.” when members spoke to them. This did not last very long, possibly because at that time there was not much age difference between the two factions. This, plus the fact that after rehearsals everybody, executive, instructors, and members would often hang out together. This did not foster formality.



1963: Don Daber

The Instructors

Now that we are onto the topic of instructors, it must be said that they were as “Drum Corps” as any of the members, in some cases, more so. Everybody was very young and exceedingly enthusiastic. Before the Corps became champions, many times over, all was new and exciting. Nobody was ever blasé or world-weary. Everybody was learning and loving every minute of it. It is hard to capture on paper the feeling that existed and successfully impart it to the reader. Possibly, it was what most of us experience during our youth, when spirit and enthusiasm are at a peak. Whatever field or endeavour one is in, it is a period in life unmatched. For us, it was the Corps.



Lorne Ferrazzutti and Barry Bell

The instructors of this Corps were more than somebody that you only saw at practice. They were often friends. Anyone of them was only too glad to pass on knowledge to those who desired it. They were true mentors and would bend over backwards to assist anybody in the Corps. In contrast to today, although there was an equipment department, of sorts, there was no Corps equipment truck, unless someone brought their own vehicle to be used. This occasionally happened. In these primitive days, everybody was responsible for their own equipment and was expected to be. People like Lorne Ferrazzutti hardly ever went home without a carload of drums, obligingly relieving people of having to carry them, a facet of his generous nature. It really was a chore if one had to board a crowded streetcar or subway train while carrying a bass or side drum, however, it was done all the time.

Barry Bell was, without a doubt, a true Corps person. He was always available for anything involving the Corps, or even other Corps. He was one of those who could sit for hours discussing Drum Corps and often did, until the wee hours. Then, almost everyone was possessed of this zeal to some degree. If they had not been, this book probably would not have been written, or it would tell a different story.

All of these people in the instructional staff were possessed of much talent and intelligence. People like Barry, Lorne and Doug McPhail, were assisted by capable individuals from within the Corps itself. They could be anybody, designated or volunteer.

The time that they put into the Corps, with little or no remuneration, could have been used in more lucrative pursuits. This assessment also applies to the executive. Collectively, it demonstrates that they, like the members of the Corps, truly liked what they were doing. This was a major factor in the success of the entire operation.

The Corps Members

What was the appeal of the Corps, almost magnetic in its attraction to those who were interested?

Many times we would spend long hours debating and discussing what it was about, this activity that held its devotees so strongly. The probable answer lies in a combination of factors that were not always related.

A definite liking for music would bring those who wanted to play rather than just listen, but who could not pursue it professionally or would not. Whether this

would be due to lack of time, money, or talent is beside the point. The Corps, any Corps, would provide an outlet for such inclinations.

It did not cost a lot of money to belong. There were no dues in those days, and all that was needed was enough to be able to live on the road for a day or two, everything else was provided free; uniforms, instruments, instruction, and travel expenses, only meals being paid for individually.

Talent! It was not really necessary, or asked for, that one be talented to be in the Corps. Most of us were decidedly not talented, but as a group managed to give the impression of a reasonable facsimile. Talent was usually a matter of individual ambition. A clever horn player could, and did, fake his way through part of the show without being detected. Many Corps, us included, in order to fill a blank, would use a person who could not play a note but go through the motions with his instrument. If this went unnoticed, one's Corps would not suffer, point-wise, on the score sheets. Of course, if too many did this, it would be noticed. Only the drums and guard could not fake their routines.

If the Corps had more than a few above average performers, so much the better, the unit would be better for it. Often, the show would be designed around such people, using their talents to the best advantage, without putting the rest, most of us, in a lesser light. Al Morrison, Joe Gianna, Doug MacKenzie, and Ronn Prokop were people who fitted the category of above average and were showcased to the benefit of all. Also, though there would usually be backups for any of these people, now, and years in the future. Different names held sway then.

About the only thing required of all was the time involved. That all should participate to the same degree was almost necessary for the maintenance of uniformity and cohesion. With the Optimists, and likely most other Corps, peer pressure usually ensured that this requirement was fulfilled.



1963: Skit with Ronn Prokop, Jim McConkey & Dave Johns

During the early years, the time element was not too demanding, but as the Corps got better it began to increase. In order to keep up with or even surpass better Corps, the time involved gradually grew until eventually it reached extreme levels. This could work to the near exclusion of all else in one's life. It was a matter of personal opinion if it was worth it or not.

One of the decidedly strong appeals of the Corps was the outdoor, fresh air aspect of the whole activity. Although most music was learned and rehearsed indoors, once the summer arrived, or even before, most activity was conducted in the wide-open spaces. To get a break from stuffy classrooms, well lit but confining offices, or factories, and participate in a healthy physical activity, possessed a broad appeal for many. This, culminating in those weekend bus trips, provided an irresistible lure that was almost addictive in its attraction.

Bus Trips

The bus trips were, without a doubt, a major part of the fun of being in the Corps, at least this one.

They would go something like this. In the wee hours of Saturday morning, all over the city, certain people would arise while others were still sound asleep. Quietly getting themselves ready, they would finally pick up horn or drum and sneak out the door, off for the day with their favourite Drum Corps. Depending on the length of the trip, the bus would be ready to leave at 7:30, 8:00, or 8:30, when finally everybody had shown up. In the Optimists, we seldom had to wait for anyone, or had people missing. It did happen but only occasionally, which was an indication of how the corps was liked by those in it. Some people, who were really dedicated, would arise even earlier than the others, to meet at someone's house for an hour or two of section practice before meeting the bus. Such enthusiasm!

Once the Corps was assembled, all would board the bus after roll call and away we went. Usually it was a fine, sunny Saturday morning and all was well as the bus pulled out onto the rolling road, full of young, happy people.

The locations from which we departed were not always the same. Sometimes it would be Jarvis Vocational School, sometimes the Canadian National Exhibition grounds. One good spot was at Church and Adelaide streets. It was convenient because it had an early opening restaurant nearby where one could load up with goodies before leaving.

In the early days, it was usually Barry Bell or Al Baggs, or both, in token charge of the bus. Token because they seldom did much. That would have spoiled the fun. Once on the bus, safely in one's favourite seat, it was sit back, feet up, and leave it all to the bus driver. For some reason, the rowdiest element always seemed to congregate at the back of the bus. Reflecting this, a song was composed, called "The Back Seat Boys", that paid tribute to these worthies. The group was fluid and transient, with people joining and leaving as desired, but it was constant.



1961: Bernie Beer & Mr Baggs on the bus

People occupied themselves in various and sundry ways; reading, card playing, discussion and debate, usually about the Corps. These pastimes would be accompanied with sleeping, singing, and, sometimes, unbridled riotousness.

This lasted until everybody was exhausted, which often took a long time, young and healthy as we were. The bus driver took it all in stride, probably having seen worse if in the habit of driving weekend groups. It was all great fun and most times ended with us taking up a collection for the driver on the way home. In a Corps hat - remember those!



1963 or 1964: Travelling to Midwest

If the trip was to the United States, as increasingly they were, experience taught us a few things. When US immigration boarded the bus at the border, they would ask, "Where were you born?", to each individual. It was the best just to say "Toronto", which came out "Tronna". When one honest fellow said "Sicily", we were held up for hours while border guards conscientiously checked that all was okay. This entailed phone calls to Toronto to verify documentation. After that, everybody was born in Toronto, or at least in Ontario.

This little incident served to highlight the homogeneous nature of the Corps. We had all kinds and were a multi-cultural society, in miniature, long before such arrangements were official government policy. Were it still in existence today, its make-up would likely be even more cosmopolitan, reflecting modern society. Everybody got along very well, different natures and temperaments serving to add to the overall fun of a bus trip.

This Corps, and no doubt most of them, always had a clown or two to liven things up. We had many, but the most obvious in the early days was Don Chisholm. His irreverent wit could keep a whole bus in a turmoil of laughter until he had to be begged to stop. You just could not take it anymore.

Being in a Junior Corps, these trips were pretty clean cut, which was a plus factor. The debilitating effects of alcohol were minimal as it was not encouraged, and the ugly and illegal presence of drugs had not yet made its presence felt. These things would, and did crop up and were handled in a manner designed to reduce, if not eliminate them altogether. Not, it must be said, always successfully. The effects of alcohol abuse became evident once when some wine was acquired in the course of an out-of-town trip. The results were odious and repugnant, serving the discomfort of all on the bus. Such things are, of course, a matter of personal choice, and in a Corps will be found all different types of people. If you wanted to be in the Corps, you did not have to use such things, but sometimes you had to endure them.

Eating on the trips was an experience, not only for the Corps but also for those who worked in the restaurants. When fifty or sixty young people descend on a place all at once, on top of the people already there, things get pretty hectic. Mostly for the people who worked in these

establishments. At night, although fewer local people would be in the place, there were also fewer staff on hand to serve; however, believe it or not, this Corps was a fairly well-behaved lot, and we were never refused entrance. It can happen. Everybody always got fed and back on the bus in a reasonably short time. This was a credit to the restaurant staff as well and the Corps. Even years later, with a much larger Corps, there were seldom problems, certainly none caused by the attitude of the Corps itself.

Often people, who were not officially connected, went on trips with the Corps just to see the shows or to act as a cheering section. These could be friends, relatives, or, in many cases, ex-members following their old Corps around. This was quite a common practice and could result in a whole convoy instead of just a single bus.

Girlfriends were a bit of a different story. If one had a girlfriend who liked the Corps, it made things a lot easier. Many of these would come to all the practices as well as the shows if they were really keen. Some were, almost all Corps had some groupies and we were no exception. It was not all that much fun for the girls, though, as all they could do was watch whatever the Corps did. Nowadays, with the gender mixed Corps, it is possible for the girls to participate. They were capable of that at the time but things were just not done that way. Either you were in a boys Corps or a girls Corps. When, at last, the girls did become truly involved, they proved to be an asset in more ways than one.



1961: Pat and Barry Bell

It would be interesting to speculate how many budding romances were destroyed by membership in a Drum Corps. The Optimists certainly experienced their share of these. There were people who got married while still in the Corps, and the wise ones left. Then there were those who married but did not leave, and this could have been the cause of broken marriages. It did happen. Corps life, with its constant demands on one's time for rehearsals, and all the travelling involved, was not truly compatible with domestic bliss. Possibly, another category common in years to come, marriage between two people in the Corps was the answer. Whatever, marriage and Drum corps, two fine institutions. It is of course, a personal choice, but not an easy one.

During the trips many things occurred, usually in a fashion to punctuate the tedium that could set in. On a memorable occasion, one of our better horn players, Ed Nanni, was encouraged to challenge Barry Bell to a horn playing contest. Barry agreed, picked up a horn and began triple-tonguing as a warm up for the bout. The contest was cancelled in the face of such expertise.

There were, of course, mishaps that occurred. Those that involved the bus, or an accompanying car, caused the most inconvenience to all. Often assistance had to be sought from many miles away. We always got home in one piece, never experiencing any disastrous accidents as plagued some other Corps. Considering the amount of travelling involved, this was lucky and fortunate. It was also a tribute to good management.

The Corps “Identity”

There was always a good “Corps identity” for want of a better name. When we met to go on a bus trip, we were not a bunch of individuals. We were “The Optimists”, and this helped to make the trips more enjoyable. During the early years, things were not so demanding and there was more free time available. Later on, almost every minute was scheduled and the Corps, though better, demanded more of its members. The people in it at the time thought nothing of this because, to them, it had always been this way. What had been one or two day trips became week long tours that were a whole different ball game from early times.



1962: Ivor chatting with a cop while Prokop, Kaiser, Burak & Hedworth look on

On the bus itself, the mixture of people sometimes created an unruly atmosphere. This was a group of teenagers, most of whom were in the process of being educated. As a result of this partially civilized stage of development, it did not take long for the descent into near savagery. If this involved only certain elements of the Corps, many found it hilarious, some, only to be tolerated.

The inside of the bus could become a haven for the vilest noises and exclamations known to man. These would be accompanied by the appropriate offensive odours, and the whole served to create a scenario that was not for those of delicate sensibilities. Any inclined this way would soon learn this. But nobody was ever physically injured, even though many fights took place. They were all in good fun. To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever quit the Corps because of the atmosphere on the bus. The later addition of girls to the Corps, it was noticed,

did have a beneficial civilizing effect on the whole operation. If things did get too out of hand, as sometimes occurred, there was always an adult or two on board to keep things under control. This was a good thing because occasionally things got just too bizarre.



1962: Toronto Optimists at Varsity Stadium

Probably the best all round bus leader during his tenure was Barry Bell. He could maintain a semblance of

order with a potent mixture of wit and discipline. This would serve to preserve order, suppressing extremists, who were a minority, thus allowing the majority to enjoy the trip. It was the majority who usually gained the upper hand and trips were conducted in a pleasant and tolerable atmosphere. As a whole, the Corps was rather a culture unto itself, tough, harmless, and, if you did not like it, you could always leave. This seldom happened.

The overall attraction, even addiction, that the Corps exerted on its members is best illustrated by events of today. Whenever reunions occur, formal or otherwise, after the first few minutes, all talk is of the Corps. Most of these people are successful, in the accepted fashion, in their latter day lives. Some are high ranking business executives, others business owners. Nearly all are solidly capable in some field or endeavour. Some have families, and some are now retired. No matter.



1962: Toronto Optimists in the Grey Cup Parade

Seldom meeting other than at arranged occasions, when they do, the Corps and its activities dominates the conversation. In some instances, this phenomenon applies to people from forty years ago, and to many from thirty years ago.

Reasons for the initial interest have been mentioned, but why such a lingering attraction, even a possible longing for past experiences. One can only guess, and then it would vary for each individual. One thing, though, that is doubtlessly near universal, is the remembered feeling of “All for one, and one for all” that generally prevailed. No matter one’s status or ability, in the Corps all were the same and when that unit marched out on the field it was the “Optimists”, not 50-100 individuals.

It is a fact that people in Drum Corps are a breed apart and never forget those days, no matter how distant they may be.

Tradition

The Corps first became champions almost by chance, and in doing so established a tradition that was ever harder to maintain. Championship status was increasingly promoted as a goal to strive towards. In spite of this, membership requirements remained pretty much the same. Anyone could join, and did, but, as stated before, as the Corps got better, it would be harder to get a spot. Once in, you were expected to conform to the regimen. Manuals covering almost every aspect were written and expected to be followed. These could include dress, uniform care and maintenance, personal practice time, behaviour, instrument care, and so on and so forth. In the later stages, these things would grow ever more complex.

Such organization was non-existent when the Corps began but developed piecemeal as the Corps got older and grew in stature. Except for the name, a guy who joined in 1958 and a guy who joined in 1968 would think they were in two different Corps. It was all part of the attempt to maintain its record in the face of increasingly rigorous competition in the form of more, and better, Corps on the field and in the efforts to move up in places where success had yet to be achieved.



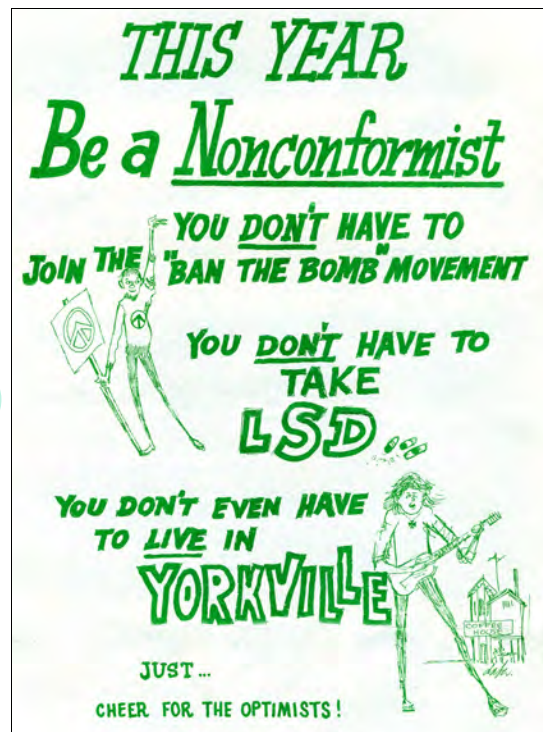
1963: Rick Robida, Ronn Prokop, Fred Lombard & Joe Palanica

All this striving and the development that it spawned were to ensure the success of the Corps for a long time. Everybody knew that its winning streak, especially locally, had to end one day. The establishment of traditions, and the attempt to maintain them, ensured that it was a long time before this happened and was the one thing that made the “Optimists” distinctive.

Was the Corps hated for its success?

Possibly! During the early years, we were cheered as the underdog. Later, anybody who could beat us was cheered as the underdog. Often the Corps was booed, even when winning, if the affair was a close run thing. Many were. Just as often, the Corps was cheered when a performance left no doubt in anyone’s mind as to who had won. No matter what the reactions in those far off days, a look at the records reveals a streak that can never be erased, because that is what actually happened.

As this chapter winds down, and we get back to the real story of the Corps, on the field, we can anticipate a whole range of drama yet to come. There are seventeen years of story telling yet to cover, where anything and everything could, and did, happen. So let’s have a coffee and a smoke and relax for a while, and then carry on with this absorbing, real life, soap opera.



“Cheer for the Optimists!” flyer from the 1960s