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## by William "Rip" Bernert

More advanced drum and bugle corps started on the East Coast of the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

During this time frame, the Audubon all-girl corps greatly impacted the development of the activity and the emergence of females in the then male-dominated activity.

The true beginning of marching and maneuvering drum and bugle corps started prior to World War II in New York City, Philadelphia, New England and North and South New Jersey. Many units from that era faded at the start of the war.

During the war years, notable junior corps emerged in the East. To name a few: Holy Name Cadets, St. Vincent's Cadets, Irvington SAL from North Jersey, Upper Darby American Legion, Howard C. McCall and Raymond Osmond from the Philadelphia area, and

# Audubon Bon Bons

The Audubon Bon Bons, 1939 (photo from the collection of William Bernert).

Haddon Heights in South Jersey.

Immediately after the war, senior corps emerged from some of those pre-war junior corps, namely Garbarina from New York City; Hawthorne Caballeros from North Jersey; Jersey Joe's from Riverside, South Jersey; Yankee Rebels from Baltimore, MD; and Archer-Epler and the Reilly Raiders from Philadelphia. Joining them were the Princemen from Malden, MA.

These junior and senior corps, along with others, started producing music and intricate drills never heard or seen before. Their performances entertained packed stadiums and were directly responsible for the growth of hundreds of drum corps throughout the United States and Canada.

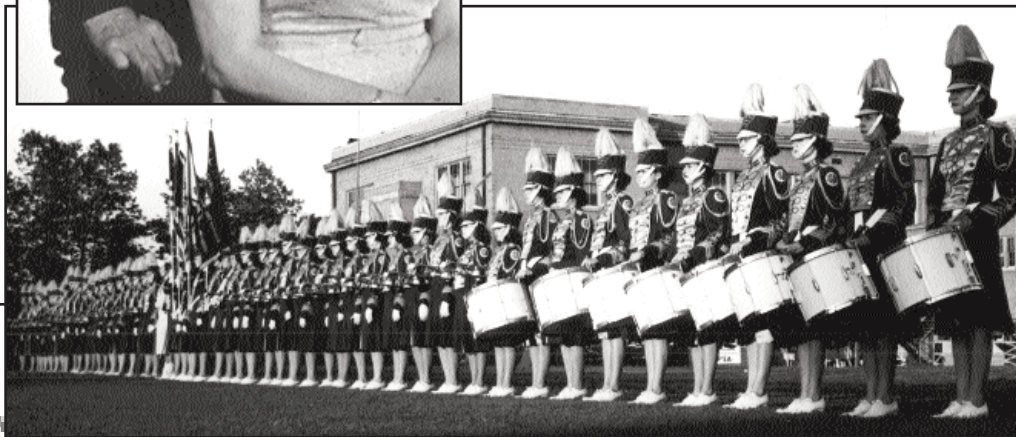
At this time, senior corps consisted of all men. The junior corps consisted of boys, while some corps added girls into the color guard or as guidons or majorettes. The exception to this rule was a corps that started



took the challenge seriously and ultimately engaged the whole family in a life-long quest that opened up the male-dominated activity to females.

The first two years, 1938-1940, were devoted to training and performances in parades. In 1941, the corps entered its first field competitions against Philadelphia and South Jersey corps.

In 1946, because of the just-ended war, the New Jersey state competition was for parade groups rather than a field competition. The drum corps world was shocked when an all-girl corps not only won the parade, but in so doing, became the 1946



(Top) J.B. and Tess Bernert; (above) Audubon Bon Bons, 1953; (below) the Bon Bons, 1957 (photos from the collection of William Bernert).

New Jersey State Champions.

Thereafter, the corps progressed under the direction and determination of the Bernert family. One of the Bernerts' sons, Bill, was encouraged to support the family quest by teaching marching as well as their ultimately championship indoor color guards,

in 1938 from a small town in South Jersey called Audubon, under the direction of the Bernert family. They organized an all-girl drum and bugle corps.

The Murray-Trouitt American Legion Post of Audubon originally sponsored the corps. The group was conceived in major part because of the challenge put forth by the post to Joseph Bernert Sr. to develop an activity for girls, since most corps at that time focused on boys.

Interestingly, Bernert and his wife, Florence, had two sons and no daughters. He



arranging music and teaching the horn line. Their other son, Joe, came on in the 1960s to work with the growing size of the field color guard.

The Bernerts combined their strengths of family, great management skills, discipline and devotion to "their girls" to produce a string of quality programs.

As Audubon progressed, other all-girl corps emerged. Some lasted for a while, but most failed quickly due to the lack of management skills and discipline so apparent in Audubon.

In those early years, from the 1940s to the mid-1950s, it was very difficult for Audubon, since the corps was successful against the lower- and middle-rated corps, but never against the elite corps of the era. Simply stated, the judges of the time were all men and the accepted mentality of that time was that girls could not compete on the same level as boys.

Comments such as, "You do a very nice job -- for girls," were common. The Bernerts, along with their girls, continued on with their quest to beat the big corps.

In spite of suggested prejudice, Audubon managed to become runner-up to perennial champion St. Vincent's Cadets at the VFW Nationals in Milwaukee in 1953 by one-tenth of a point. The corps learned that you don't "decision" a champ -- you have to knock them out!

The management and membership of Audubon had a burning desire to succeed. The organization was going to keep fighting for top ranking until they got the respect they felt they deserved. Director Bernert's motto was, "We're going to out-work them and out-think them and then we're going to beat them."

During the 1950s, junior corps had been growing in the Northeast and Midwest, but New Jersey corps remained ranked at the top.

Audubon's uniform was military style, with the popular "Chaco" hat that most corps



Audubon Bon Bons, September 10, 1972 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

season that Audubon won over all of the top corps. This accomplishment in major part could be attributed to the progress of the drum section under instructor Bill Reamer.

Audubon's drum quartet won the VFW Nationals. The quartet and the corps' individual snare drummer, Rita Macey, dominated local Penn-Jersey individual contests. The girls got noticed. Each contest win propelled the corps into

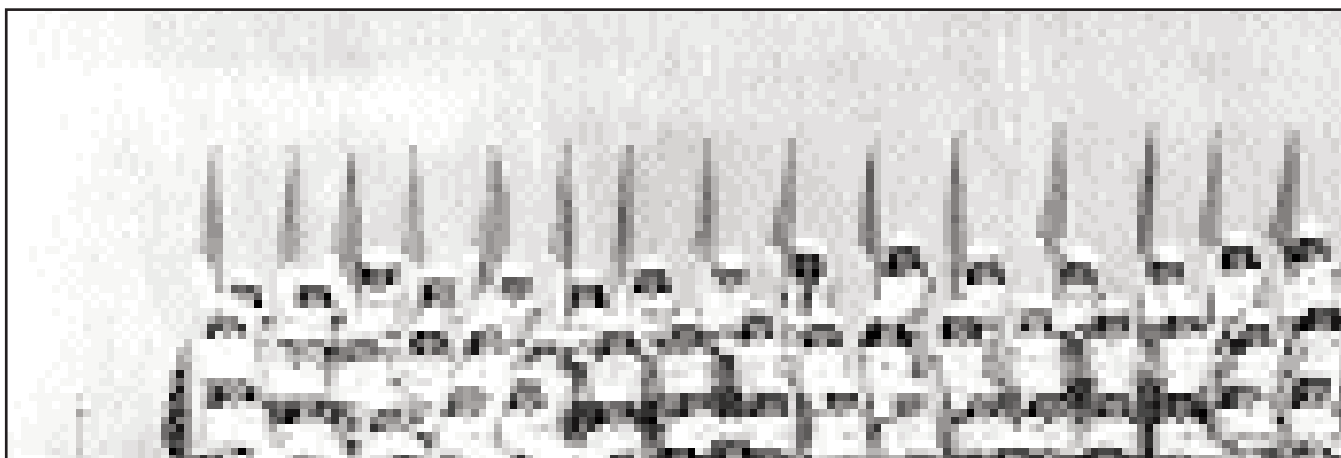
wore. During the 1954 season, the popular and talented music judge, Dr. Bernie Baggs, made the comment, "Why don't you change that uniform and let them look like girls?"

This comment led the corps' management to note the famous Kilgore College dancers from Texas on a television appearance, at that time wearing cowgirl outfits. It was the look management wanted for the girls. That decision, along with adding concert pieces

believing it had arrived and was ready to contend at the national level.

The following year, in 1957, there were three prime shows: the VFW Nationals in Miami, FL; the American Legion Nationals in Atlantic City, NJ; and the National Dream contest in Bayonne, NJ. Audubon's goal was to win one of them.

The VFW outcome remains questionable in the eyes of the organization. Audubon



Audubon Bon Bons, 1973 (photo from the collection of William Bernert).

from "Annie Get Your Gun," brought Audubon a completely new image in 1955.

The Bon Bons had arrived. As the corps gained popularity, their ever-widening fan base began to voice disapproval of some of the contest scoring. Slowly,

some of the judges started to pay attention. Many began to recognize the ability of the girls and allowed them to be competitive in this previously male arena.

In 1956, the corps defeated several of the elite corps at various shows. But it wasn't until the final show of that 1956

came in second at Atlantic City by a few tenths of a point to the Holy Name Cadets. This was one of the top shows of that time, with a great field that included Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights, St. Vincent's Cadets, Hyde Park Crusaders and St. Kevin's



Audubon Bon Bons, 1973 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Audubon Bon Bons, 1964, at the National Dream in Jersey City, NJ (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Audubon Bon Bons, approximately 1974 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

#### Emerald Knights.

Audubon came up short by .05 to Blessed Sacrament at the National Dream contest.

Although disappointed, there was much to celebrate. Audubon was now ranked as one of the top drum and bugle corps in North America. The corps' drum section had the highest score of both junior and senior corps at Atlantic City.

Audubon's individual snare drummer won the VFW Nationals and although no one realized it at the time, this all-girl corps paved the way for women in drum corps for the future.

Today, girls and woman of all ages are welcomed to compete against and alongside

boys and men. Girls and woman on all levels of drum and bugle corps -- junior, senior and alumni -- participate in every area . . . drums, bugles, guard, directing, instructing, arranging and judging. It all started in a little town in South Jersey.

The following year, 1958, the corps maintained a high ranking and got its share of wins. Audubon lost four contests by less than three-tenths of a point to Blessed Sacrament, which was considered the top corps in North America that year.

The Bon Bons went through a short rebuilding period in the early 1960s, but they were able to defeat most corps except the elite. Audubon had the highest music score

of both juniors and seniors at the 1960 American Legion Nationals in Miami.

In 1969, the VFW established a championship for all-girl corps, as there were a number of them attending the national contest in Philadelphia. There wasn't a separate show for the all-girl corps, but the corps scoring the highest in the preliminary contest would be declared the champion and put on an exhibition at the junior finals.

Audubon won and they went on to win again the next two years in Miami and Dallas.

Various invitational contest sponsors, including the World Open, U.S. Open, Kentucky Bluegrass and Toledo Key to the Sea started to provide separate contests for all-girl corps. Although the goals were higher than winning all-girl contests, Audubon realized that the times were changing and the all-girl contests were a place that the Bon Bons could find success.

About that time, Audubon was part of the gathering of corps that was dissatisfied with the American Legion and VFW sponsorship of their national contests. They had separate rules, different score sheets, different times on the field and used judges from a different era. The corps were packing their stadiums, but the prize money was a pittance.

Corps attended rule meetings of the veteran sponsors to have input for uniformity of rules and how and who would judge them. When the corps went home, things stayed the same. At that point, the corps decided to take a page out of the senior corps book.

The senior corps had formed their own association, Drum Corps Associates, and held their own championship. Thus came the

birth of Drum Corps International, the association that was founded for the betterment of *all corps*.

Even with all of the changes that were happening, Audubon managed to grow in size. They continued to maintain a style of entertaining audiences with popular music and daring, intricate drills.

The Bon Bons dominated those all-girl shows, but they wanted more. They entered the 1973 DCI Championships in Whitewater, WI. They came in 23rd of 48 corps -- 10 points away from making the finals, but to standing ovations.

Comments on the judges' tapes and score sheets were a shot of reality: "You'll never be successful playing that style of music," "Today's corps don't march in squads, platoons and fronts" and words to that effect.

Audubon could have conformed

Audubon Bon Bons, 1971, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



to the DCI style, but chose not to play that game. They were putting more than 100 girls on the field, had three buses and an equipment truck, employed several instructors and went on long tours. This was a huge undertaking for a corps from a small town.

The corps could have kept going at the local level with success -- and it did for awhile. But as time went on, the DCI influence on judging overcame the corps' style. The organization started to deteriorate in the mid-1970s.

In the Audubon organization's opinion, DCI was not the total reason for the demise of the Bon Bons and other corps, but it certainly was a huge part of it. From the beginning, DCI made it financially impossible for small market corps to exist.

The judging drove the lower paid, "non-degreed" arrangers and instructors out of the business in favor of the high salaried, degreed "professionals." DCI mandated that



Audubon Bon Bons alumni chorus, April 20, 2002, Bill Bernert conducting (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Audubon Bon Bons, 1973 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps tour and it dictated the style to be used in order to succeed.

Audubon finally realized the approach to "entertain first" could no longer succeed at any level. The Audubon All-Girls Drum and Bugle Corps, the Bon Bons, folded in 1977.

The young girls and women playing instruments in today's corps are now respected for their ability and their contributions to their horn and drum lines. It is a given now, that had to be earned through years of frustrating disappointment in two different eras of competition. This task had to be fought and won to open the doors for females.

Drum and bugle corps are not male-dominated anymore. Most corps are very pleased to have female talent in their

ranks.

In 1994, Audubon's Alumni Association formed the Audubon Bon Bons Alumni Chorus. The chorus is a reminder of the diligent effort that pioneered a female's place in the drum and bugle corps world. It qualifies Audubon as a huge history-maker in the roots of drum and bugle corps.

Audubon Bon Bons Alumni Association prides itself in its part of the history of drum and bugle corps. More than 800 young girls passed through the ranks. They were the first -- and arguably the most notable -- all-girl drum and bugle corps in the history of the activity.

The corps was inducted into the World Drum and Bugle Corps Hall of Fame as "the Greatest All-Girl Corps of all Time."



*William "Rip" Bernert started out as a soprano in a Haddon Heights, NJ, VFW drum and bugle corps in 1940, before moving on to the Howard C. McCall American Legion Corps in Philadelphia in 1944.*

*He was a soloist when the corps won the 1947 American Legion National Championship in New York City. In 1951, he joined the Archer-Epler Musketeers as a soprano and became their drill designer and instructor in 1952. He continued in that capacity until the corps disbanded in 1966. Bernert was also the horn instructor for most of the Archer-Epler years.*

*His drill design, music arranging and instructing career began with the Audubon All-Girl Drum and Bugle Corps, the Bon Bons, in 1950 and continued until the corps disbanded in 1977.*

*He did drill design and musical arrangements as well as instruction for the Rochester Gray Knights, Reading Buccaneers, Pittsburgh Rockets, Miami Vanguards and New Orleans Stardusters, to name a few.*

*Since 1994, he has been co-director of the Audubon Bon Bons Alumni Association and the arranger, teacher and conductor of their alumni chorus. Bernert was inducted into the World Drum and Bugle Corps Hall of Fame in 1979 and the New Jersey Drum and Bugle Corps Hall of Fame in 2000.*

*He was employed by a major engineering and construction company for 38 years as a construction project and site manager. He retired in 1992.*

*For the past 17 years, he has been an assistant varsity basketball coach for two high school girls teams that have won seven state championships. Bernert has been married for 41 years to the Bon Bon's Rita Macey, the 1957 VFW National Champion snare drummer. They have three children.*