

Boys of 76

by George Fennell

The Racine, WI, American Legion Post No. 76's drum and bugle corps, more commonly known as the Boys of 76, trace their roots back to 1916 when the Wisconsin National Guard created new units in anticipation of a war with Mexico. Border violations growing out of the continuing Mexican civil war brought most of the U.S. Army to Texas and Arizona that year.

The Wisconsin National Guard, warned of an imminent call to federal service, added to its strength by creating Racine's Battery C of the 1st Wisconsin Field Artillery, expected to train and then go straight to the border. However, it was never sent because of a lack of field artillery pieces. Almost immediately, members of Battery C started a small drum and bugle corps, used primarily in the mounting of guard posts for the army.

After the sinking of the British liner *Lacuna* by a German submarine in April 1917, a second battery for Racine, Battery F of the 1st Wisconsin Field Artillery, was created. Members of both batteries then participated in what became the Battery C & F, 1st Wisconsin National Guard Field Artillery Drum and Bugle Corps.

In July 1917, shortly after the United States entered World War I, Batteries C and F trained for Camp Douglas for training, followed by advanced training at Camp MacArthur near Waco, TX. Members of Batteries C and F's drum corps took their drums and bugles with them and enlivened the training period at both camps.

At the beginning of 1918, Batteries C and F, now of the 121st Artillery Regiment of the 32nd Division, packed up and shipped their drums and bugles back to Racine and headed to France. The Batteries then took two months of advanced artillery practice at Camp Coetquidan. Battery F obtained French Howitzers and went on to participate in three major offensives, often fighting for long periods under gas attack.

Throughout the war, Battery C trained artillery officers and observers behind the front line in France and never went to the front, fighting from May to November 1918. They met and battled 23 German divisions, capturing 2,153 prisoners, but at a cost of 14,000 32nd Division casualties. They were the first American troops on German soil, at Alaska in May 1918 and fought on five different fronts in three major offensives.

Upon their return to Racine after the war, the drums and bugles were unpacked, dusted off, polished up and put back into use. The drum and bugle corps was reorganized as the 32nd Division Association Drum and Bugle Corps, but when Racine American Legion Post No. 76 was incorporated in 1920, the outfit was put under its auspices and became known as the Boys of 76.

(Top to bottom) C&F 1st Wisconsin National Guard Drum & Bugle Corps, 1917; American flag squad for Spirit of 76, approximately 1980; Spirit of 76, approximately 1979 (photos from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Under the very capable leadership of William R. Wadewitz, Fred Maxted and Joseph Oliver, the corps became leading pioneers in drum corps techniques during this era. These three men also were members of Battery C, the original drum and bugle corps.

Wearing old doughboy uniforms from World War I, the drum and bugle corps' first competition was in Detroit, MI, in the fall of 1921, where it won the title of being the best drum and bugle corps attending the first annual convention of the 32nd Division.

In 1922, businessmen of Racine donated funds with which to purchase new uniforms. They consisted of white serge army breeches and Canadian officer's coats, white overseas caps and black puttees. To reward their faith, the Boys of 76 Drum and Bugle Corps went out and won their first Wisconsin American Legion state convention title in Beloit, WI. A few days later in Madison, they again were named the best drum and bugle corps at the second convention of the 32nd Division.

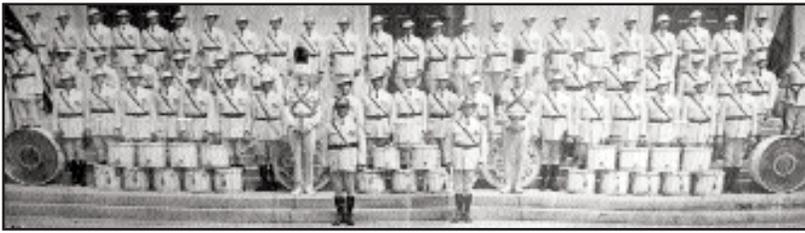
The Boys of 76 did not attend any of the first three American Legion national conventions, the first of which was held in Minneapolis in 1919. They did, however, attend the next four -- New Orleans in 1922, San Francisco in 1923, St. Paul in 1924 and Omaha in 1925 -- and won all four American Legion National Championships.

During this time, the Boys of 76 set the pace in music, uniforms, equipment and maneuvers. The Racine corps so impressed Legionnaires at the 1922 through 1925 national conventions that many went home and started drum and bugle corps of their own at American Legion posts throughout the country. The Boys of 76 sparked this drum corps movement that eventually led to literally thousands of drum and bugle corps being created at American Legion Posts.

In 1924, new nickel-plated steel helmets replaced overseas caps that had been worn. The helmets were a deep tradition. When the drum corps was reorganized after World War I, the original 32nd Division members had kept their own combat helmets. The corps had them nickel-plated and they were worn on contest fields just as they were in action on the combat fields of France. The helmets were a tribute to the men who fought and died in World War I.

Frederick F. Schulte (1891-1966), was performing professionally at 16 and in 1921 began a long and distinguished career of music education in the Racine public schools. At the same time, he was a participant in almost every one of Racine's musical organizations.

In 1924, he became director of the Boys of 76, introducing non-march music to competition and leading his group to two national championships. As a member of the Boys of 76, he placed second among the many contestants in the individual drumming contest at the 1925 American Legion convention in Omaha. In 1927, he became director of the S.C. Johnson & Sons, Inc. band and later conducted a chorus, mixed chorus and glee club for the Racine



Boys of 76, 1928 (photo from the collection of Sue Hills).

manufacturing firm.

Schulte succeeded his father, Henry, as director of the Racine Park Board Band and, from 1932 to 1957, led the Racine Symphony Orchestra. He was also associated with the Racine Kilties Drum and Bugle Corps, founded in 1935.

Until his death in 1966, Schulte was a vigorous, colorful showman who enjoyed concerts and parades as his father had before him. Frederick F. Schulte Elementary School, a Racine Unified School District School located in the suburb of Sturtevant, was dedicated in 1968.

The Boys of 76 continued to attend national American Legion conventions through 1931 and remained a contender for championships throughout most of that era.

At the 1926 American Legion championship in Philadelphia, the announcer stated just prior to the final scores, "Prepare yourself for a surprise." The surprise was a new national champion and the Boys of 76's winning streak of consecutive national titles ended at four. The Boys of 76 placed third.

In 1927, the American Legion held its national convention in Paris, France. After raising \$20,000, including a \$5,000 donation from the State of Wisconsin, 52 members left for Europe. They went by train to Quebec. On the way, the train stopped in Montreal on Wednesday, September 7, where the entire corps got into uniform and performed for the first time before an audience outside of the United States.

In Quebec, they boarded the S.S. Mont Royal and sailed to Antwerp, Belgium. En route, practice drills were held on the deck as the ship was one of the largest ocean-going steamers. After arriving in Antwerp, the corps put on a performance and then boarded a train for Paris. After a stop in Brussels,

Belgium, where the drum corps also performed, they arrived in Paris, serious about winning the

national championship. That was not to be the case, however, as the Boys of 76 finished in fifth. Leaving Paris, the corps took a train to Cherbourg, France, where they boarded a steamship for Quebec. A train brought the drum corps from Quebec back to Racine.

In 1928, the American Legion national convention was held in San Antonio, TX, where the Boys of 76 finished 10th. At the American Legion national convention held in Louisville, KY, in 1929, the corps placed 15th out of the 118 senior corps that competed. This was the largest number of senior corps that ever competed at an American Legion national convention.

At the Louisville American Legion convention in 1929, the Harvey W. Seeds Post No. 29 of Miami, FL, filed a protest against the Boys of 76, claiming their bugles were illegal. The Miami representatives got Walter E. McDougale, chairman of the trophy and awards committee, out of bed to protest the Racine corps' ability to play regular music.

But Jack Costello, president of the Boys of 76, was prepared. He had already received a ruling from McDougale on July 15 that stated the bugles of the Boys of 76 were the only drum and bugle corps that was able to play music such as *America* and *Over There*. It was apparent that the Racine corps was ahead of its time, but it was expected that by the following summer scores of drum corps would have similar capabilities.

After placing seventh in prelims out of 60 competing senior corps at the 1930 American Legion convention in Boston, the Boys of 76 took second in finals, just missing the national championship by two-tenths.

In 1931, the corps went to Detroit, MI, for the American Legion convention and placed first in prelims with a whopping score of 99.10. Again, 60 senior corps competed in prelims.

However, the Boys of 76 dropped to fourth in finals. Their 99.10 score is the highest prelim score ever given at an American Legion national championship.

The Chicagoland Music Festival, sponsored by the *Chicago Tribune*, was hailed as the largest such

event in the United States. It consisted of many separate contests in all musical categories such as bands, choruses, quartets, soloists and, of course, for the first five years from 1930 to 1934, a senior drum and bugle corps competition. These contests were at various theaters and parks throughout Chicago, always on the third Friday and Saturday in August. The winners of each category performed at the awards ceremony held Saturday night at Soldier Field.

The significance of the Chicagoland Music Festival senior drum and bugle corps contest was not only the size or caliber of the competing senior corps, but also that it drew a large number of senior corps from all over the Midwest, including many of the region's American Legion state champions. It was also significant because it was open to all senior drum and bugle corps, regardless of affiliation or sponsorship, at a time when this type of contest was unheard of.

The Boys of 76 competed in the first four contests at the Chicagoland Music Festival, from 1930 to 1933, and handily won all four. They did not attend the fifth and last senior corps contest held in 1934.

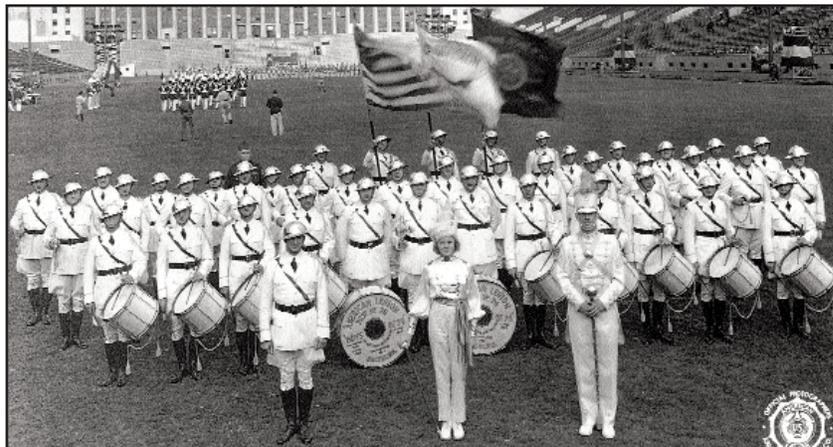
After winning the 1930 senior corps contest at the Chicagoland Music Festival, the corps performed their winning show in an exhibition at the awards ceremony before 150,000 spectators jammed into Soldier Field. This set a new attendance record for the venue, breaking the previous record of 135,000 who saw the Dempsey/Tunney fight in September 1929.

The Boys of 76 didn't attend the 1932 American Legion convention in Portland, OR; however, they did attend them all from 1933 until 1941 with the following results: 10th place in 1934 at Miami, FL; 18th place in 1935 at St. Louis, MO; 43rd place in 1936 at Cleveland, OH; did not compete in 1937, only marched in the parade, New York City, NY; 13th place in 1938 at Los Angeles, CA; 10th place in 1939 at Chicago, IL; 14th place in 1940 at Boston, MA; and ninth place in 1941 at Milwaukee, WI.

The Racine corps did attend the 1933 American Legion national convention held in Chicago, and it was the element of time that shattered their hopes of making finals and a chance at regaining the national title. In the preliminaries, the Boys of 76 were penalized two points for exceeding the drill period by a few seconds, which reduced their score to 90.81. Without the two-point penalty, they would have had a spot in the top 12 to compete in the finals.

The Boys of 76 Drum and Bugle Corps President said, "It was a keen disappointment to us to be eliminated from the finals. The convention was a dandy and the drum corps was outstanding in both the parade and the preliminary competition. Time played a big part in our defeat, but we are not disheartened. The drum corps will carry on and we will be in Miami next year."

In 1941, the Boys of 76 went back to its old white uniforms with the nickle-plated helmets and discarded the West Point



The Boys of 76 at the 1939 American Legion National Convention in Chicago, IL, at Soldier Field (photo from the collection of the Racine Heritage Museum).

uniforms that they had worn since 1931.

On September 13, 1941, at Racine's Horlick Field, the Boys of 76 sponsored their first drum and bugle corps contest. Because the Legion national convention was to be held September 15-18 in Milwaukee, just 30 miles north of Racine, the Boys of 76 billed their contest as an American Legion national championship review. Three senior and three junior corps competed for \$1,000 in cash prizes in front of more than 3,000 spectators.

The junior drum corps contest was won by the Norman J. Cornwall Squadron No. 275 of Chicago, followed by the Racine Boy Scouts in second and the Alonzo Cudworth Squadron No. 23 of Milwaukee third.

Square Post No. 232 of Chicago won the senior contest, followed by the Charles Hagestrom Post of Wisconsin Rapids, WI. The Bendix Aviation Post No. 284 of South Bend, IN, finished third.

Although the American Legion national convention and its national championship drum and bugle corps competition were not held from 1942 to 1946 because of World War II, it was still business as usual for the Boys of 76. They continued appearing at local functions and parades throughout the war.

On June 17, 1942, the Boys of 76 met British and American war heroes at the entrance to Washington Park in Milwaukee and escorted them to the band shell where a program was carried out.

Thousands attended this rally to honor the war heroes who were on tour. The 45-member Boys of 76 played a 15-minute concert under the direction of John Opferkuch in the shell as part of the program.

In 1947, with the addition of 15 World War II veterans to their ranks (men who served with the Boy Scouts and Kilties), the rejuvenated Racine Boys of 76 Drum and Bugle Corps re-entered state and national competitions at the American Legion convention for the first time since 1941.

At the 1947 American Legion preliminary competition held at Randalls Island Stadium in Queens, NY, the Boys of 76 went on at 9:15 AM, fifth of the 37 competing corps. They finished in a tie for 13th place with a score of 86.45, therefore just missing a spot in the finals. The finals included the top 11 corps from prelims, plus the previous year's champion that automatically received a spot.

The corps of 64 men still wore its white uniforms, nickle-plated helmets, black Sam Brown belts, puttees and shoes, the same uniform adopted back in 1922. Officials in charge were Wilbur Hansen, president and drillmaster; Fred Heinisch, vice president; Elmer Hillburg, treasurer; Dick Buckley, secretary; Fred P. Helm, business manager; John T. Opferkuch, music instructor; and Edward Bezucha, bugle instructor.

The Boys of 76 finished seventh place in finals at the 1948 American Legion convention championship in Miami, FL. In 1949, the corps stayed home from the Philadelphia American Legion national convention in order to use their funds to purchase new bugles.

From 1950 through 1964, the Boys of 76 competed at every American Legion national championship and placed as follows: third place at Los Angeles, CA, in 1950; seventh place at Miami, FL, in 1951; ninth place at New York, NY, in 1952; tenth place at St. Louis, MO, in 1953; twelfth place at Washington, D.C., in 1954; twelfth place at Miami, FL, in 1955; fifth place at Los Angeles, CA, in 1956; twelfth place at Atlantic City, NJ, in 1957; thirteenth place at Chicago, IL, in 1958; seventh place at Minneapolis, MN, in 1959; sixth place at Miami, FL, in 1960; second place at Denver, CO, in 1961; second place at Las Vegas, NV, in 1962; seventh place at Miami Beach, FL, in 1963; and third place at Dallas, TX, in 1964.

The Boys of 76 were the featured "Drum Corps of the Month" in the June 1952 issue of the Chicago-based magazine *Midwest Corps News*. They also were the drum corps pictured on the cover of *Midwest Corps News* for the April 1953 issue.

On July 5, 1952, the Boys of 76 hosted the Tri-State Association's first drum and bugle corps contest. The association was composed of senior American Legion drum and bugle corps within a 100-mile radius of Chicago. Some of the other senior corps involved in this association were Skokie, IL, Port Washington, WI, La Porte, IN, and Commonwealth Edison of Chicago.

On July 3, 1956, the Boys of 76 made their debut at their own contest at Horlick Field in Racine in new uniforms which consisted of gray trousers with a navy blue stripe down the side, a navy blue satin shirt with a white

cross-sash, a white cummerbund and white sash. The steel helmets were replaced by navy blue shakos with 12-inch white plumes. The whole corps wore white bucks. The uniform shirts, sashes and cummerbunds were made by Mrs. Robert K. Anderson of Racine, while the trousers and shakos were manufactured by Racine's Badger Shirt Co..

The new uniforms marked the end of an era when they were solely an American Legion member corps. The 1956 edition included many new members who had prior experience in one of Racine's three junior corps, the Boy Scouts, YMCA Kilties or the Armenian Youth Federation. The Boys of 76 for 1956 consisted of 50 playing members and eight in the color guard. Only two of the playing members were members of American Legion Post No. 76.

In 1956, nine Racine men and 20 in the state of Wisconsin were judges who belonged to the All-American Association of Contest Judges. The concentration of judges in Racine was not surprising, since this city had long been a stronghold of drum corps activity. Although there were several small judging associations, the only national group at this time was the All-American Association of Contest Judges.

The nine Racine judges were: Dr. Ralph C. Pierce, who also was the state's chief judge, Frederick Schulte, John Opferkuch, James Rome, Wallace J. Nelson, James McCreadie, Christopher R. Prentice, Fred Heinisch and Arthur L. McCallum. All nine were involved with the Boys of 76 at one time or another as a member and/or an instructor.

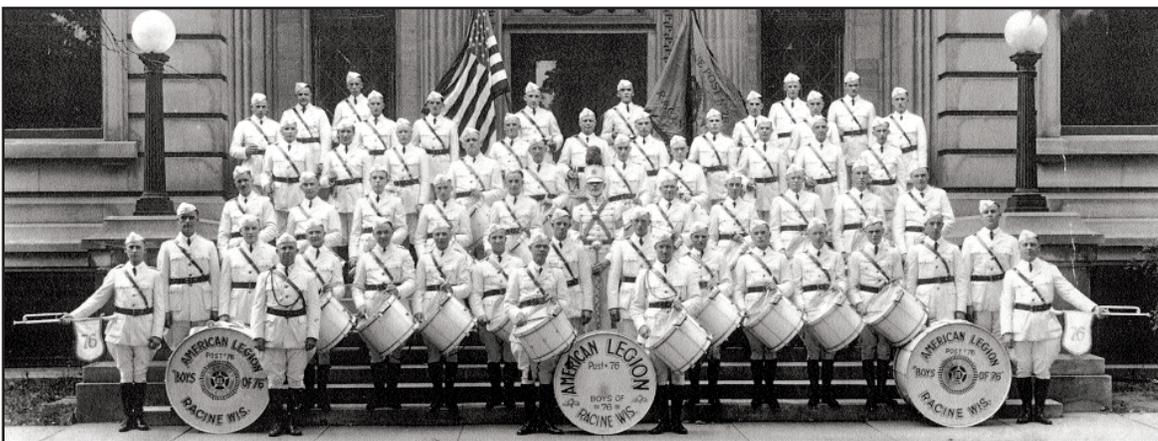
While representing the Racine Catholic War Veterans Post No. 1792, the Boys of 76 won the Catholic War Veterans national convention championship held at Marquette University's stadium in Milwaukee on August 16, 1957. Rain interrupted the contest twice and the Boys of 76 did not take the field until nearly midnight.

This was an open contest, so the Boys of 76 had to not only compete against senior corps, but also compete against junior corps, including YMCA Kilties, Racine Boy Scouts and Milwaukee Militaires, to win this title.

The Boys of 76 were the drum corps on the cover of the May-June 1962, issue of *Badgerland Corps Life* magazine. This issue also featured an article on the Boys of 76 on

Page 4. It stated that, for 1962, the Boys of 76 would play *Band of America March, Georgia, Dancing in the Dark, March of the New World Symphony, If I Loved You, Old Devil Moon* and *Bye Bye Blues*, all arranged by their musical director, Jerry Harris. Jan Krueger was the drillmaster.

The 1922 Boys of 76 before they introduced chrome helmets (photo from the collection of the Racine Heritage Museum).

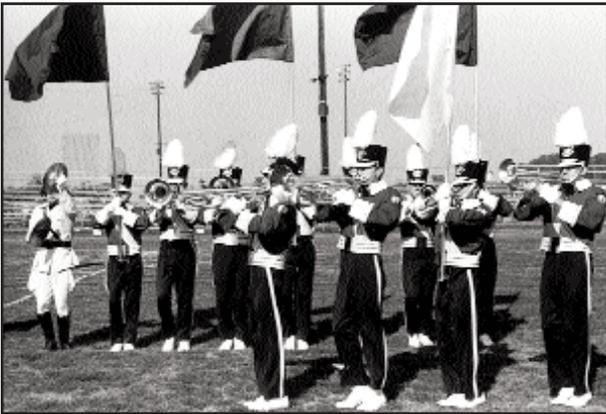


New red, white and blue uniforms, patterned after those worn by officers of Gen. George Washington, were worn by the corps for the first time in 1962.

On September 5, 1965, the first Midwest Senior Association championship was held in Racine. Seven senior corps competed out of the 13 that were members of the association. The Boys of 76 placed third behind the second-place Kenosha, WI, Kingsmen and the winner, the Maumee, OH, Demons.

In 1967, the Boys of 76 were inducted into the International Drum Corps Hall of Fame, joining five other senior corps, five junior corps and six individuals. On July 3, 1967, at the Boys of 76 annual contest in Racine, WI, they were presented the plaque before 5,000 people by Larry Grabowski, President of the International Drum Corps Hall of Fame which was associated with the Chicago-based magazine, *Drum Corps Digest*.

For the 1968 season, the Boys of 76 marched 56 members, which was on the small side when compared to the national championship-contending senior corps of the era. Their break-down included 29 horns, 11 percussion, nine working flags, five in the



Boys of 76 at the 1966 American Legion Nationals in Washington, D.C. (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

American section, a commanding officer and drum major. More than 50 percent of the members were from Milwaukee. The Boys of 76 were still a true senior corps, however, and admitted no one under 21 years of age.

Up to now, there has been no mention of how the Boys of 76 did at the Wisconsin State American Legion convention competitions. That's because the Racine corps had attended all but six of the competitions from 1922 through 1964 and they had never been defeated. However, at the 1965 championship held in Waukesha, the corps' 42-year streak ended when they fell to the Kenosha Kingsmen and finished in second place.

In 1966, the Boys of 76 regained their Wisconsin State American Legion convention title in Eau Claire by decisively defeating the Kenosha Kingsmen, but the Boys of 76 lost their title for the second time in three years when the Kenosha Kingsmen defeated them at the American Legion state convention in Madison in 1967.

The 1968 season saw the Kenosha Kingsmen successfully defend their title at the Wisconsin American Legion state

convention in Appleton and, for the third time in four years, the corps finished second.

At the 1969 American Legion state contest at Milwaukee County Stadium, the Boys of 76 defeated two-time defending champion Kenosha Kingsmen to win back the title.

The 1970 Wisconsin state Legion contest was rained out, but in 1971, the Boys of 76 won yet another Wisconsin State American Legion title in Wausau. The Boys of 76 would never lose another Wisconsin State American Legion title, as it was now the only competing senior corps left in Wisconsin.

On July 10, 1971, the Boys of 76 competed in prelims at the North American Championship held in Milwaukee, WI. They were the only senior corps competing against a strong line up of junior corps. The Boys of 76 finished in a very respectable 17th place.

For the 1972 drum corps season, Al Guerrera became the corps coordinator for the Boys of 76, something the corps had never had. Gone after 13 years was music director Jerry Harris, who was replaced by John Steinke. The corps, however, did only parades in 1972, except for competing in Green Bay at the Legion state championship.

Also, 1972 was the first year they allowed women in the corps, but only in the guard. After a very successful recruiting effort that fall, the corps returned to competition in 1973.

The Boys of 76 appeared on the cover of the November 1973 issue of *Drum Corps America*.

In 1975, the Boys of 76 changed their name to Spirit of 76 to better reflect that women were now in all sections of the corps.

On September 29, 1975, the Spirit of 76 presented Maynard Ferguson in concert at Racine's Prairie School Field House as a fund-raiser. His music, such as *MacArthur's Park* and *Eli's Comin'*, was arranged and played by many drum and bugle corps in the 1970s.

After 1964, the Boys of 76 would attend only four more national American Legion convention championships. In 1968, the Boys of 76 finished in second place at New Orleans, LA; in 1969, they placed fourth at Atlanta, GA; in 1975, the Spirit of 76 also finished in fourth at Minneapolis, MN; and in 1977, the Spirit of 76 took first place at Denver, CO, winning their fifth and final American Legion national title.

The American Legion discontinued their junior and senior drum and bugle corps national competitions following the 1980 national convention in Houston, TX.

Drum Corps Associates held its first championship in 1965. The Boys of 76 first attended a DCA Championship in 1970 at Rochester, NY, and finished ninth in finals. Thus, the Boys of 76 became the first Midwest senior corps to make finals at that championship event.

The Boys of 76 would not be as successful at future DCA Championships, as they never would make finals again.

In 1971, the Boys of 76 took 16th place

and then didn't attend another DCA Championship until 1974 where they finished 14th. In 1975, the Spirit of 76 went east to the DCA Championships with its best corps in many years, only to finish a disappointing 11th. Only the top 10 made finals in 1975.

The next year, 1976, the Spirit of 76 finished in 17th place and then didn't attend another DCA Championship until 1981

when they placed 14th. In 1982, the Spirit of 76 finished in 14th place again. After not attending the DCA Championship in 1983, in 1984 the corps competed at its last DCA championship and took 17th place.

The Drum Corps Midwest Championships were first held in 1978; however, a senior corps championship wasn't added until 1981. The Spirit of 76 placed second in the senior corps division of the DCM Championships in 1981, 1982, 1984 and 1985, each time losing to Minnesota Brass from St. Paul, MN. In 1983, it was a different story as the Spirit of 76 won their last major title by winning the senior corps championship at DCM.

The Spirit of 76's last year as a competing senior corps was 1985. After that, they continued as a parade unit for a number of years until they ended operations completely sometime around 1993.



George Fennell played trumpet from 1962-1964 in the Racine Saints Band. Because of his exposure to drum and bugle corps, he became interested in the Kilties, joining the Kadets in 1964 and marching until 1966. He participated in the Kilties from 1967-1971.

He served in the Air Force at Lackland AFB and the Air Force Academy in their drum and bugle corps. In 1986 and 1992, he marched in the Kilties reunion corps and helped organize the new senior corps. He also marched in the Spirit of 76 in 1987 and the Kilties in 1997.

Currently he lives in Racine and is a member of the Racine County Sheriff's Department. His hobbies include drum corps, military history, sports and travel.



Spirit of 76, approximately 1984 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).