

Chapter 21: 1971 – Strange But True

The unusual title of this chapter does not refer to Ripley's believe it or not, but to the coming year in Canadian Junior Drum Corps. The Optimists would be a part of this somewhat comic scenario. At the moment, though, things appeared to be quite normal.

The Optimist Cadets were now under the direction of Vern Johansson, now and forever, a stalwart Optimist. The Optimist Lancers, the newly created feeder Corps in Etobicoke, were now a going concern. They were under the direction of Dick Brown. With two feeder Corps in operation, it would appear that the Optimist Drum Corps would have a healthy excess of people in the near future; however, things would not turn out quite that way. The new sponsor, The Optimist Club of York-Toronto, would do things in a slightly different, but no less effective, manner than the previous sponsor. The Corps executive and instructional staff would see only few changes.



1971: Paul Thompson and the Toronto Optimists

Don Daber was still the corps director, beginning his ninth year in this position. Bugles were now under the direction of Paul Thompson, a graduate of the Cadets and the Optimists. He had taken over from Barry Bell in 1969. Was Barry finally fading out of the scene? Not exactly! He would always remain a supporter, fan, advisor, and club member filling a valuable but now accessory role. As with Lorne Ferrazzutti, his departure left a big hole to fill and whoever replaced him, would have a challenging job. The man to do this was Paul Thompson. Again, as with Lorne, Barry Bell cannot be dismissed so briefly. Barry was one of the founding members, the main bugle instructor until now and, without a doubt, the main driving force behind the Corps. He was



1971: Toronto Optimists

mostly responsible for changes that moved the Corps from its effective but dated origin into more up-to-date methods. This enabled the Corps to compete successfully at a higher level. Beyond this, his dedication was undeniable, never missing any rehearsal other than for personal, health, or

economic reasons. His enthusiasm seldom flagged and, if it did, not for long. He was one of the original Drum Corps “nuts”, one of those who would always talk Corps before, during, and after rehearsals. In this respect, he had lots of company. If his personal life suffered due to this, it was not generally known. In his younger days, he was almost “one of the boys” associating with, even sometimes living with, Corps members. Many people were given opportunities to instruct, some even to arrange, but he always remained



1971: Toronto Optimists rifles

in control. This indicated, rightly or wrongly, that, more than anyone, this was his Corps. For most people, through all the years, it was “rightly”. Those who broke away, independently, with some results that we have discussed, should have cause to look back once in a while, and remember where they got their start. Again, as with Lorne and others, I could go on indefinitely, but we must carry on. This tale is about the whole Corps, not one individual. No one is indispensable but some are more indispensable than others are. He easily fits that category.

Drums, this year, were still under the direction of Ron Kaiser. He also taught other corps, notably the Optimist Midlanders of London, Ontario, no relation to the Toronto Optimists. Ron is still remembered by them to this day, no doubt because of his effectiveness and exuberant methods.

Drill was still handled by the old pro, Jack Roberts and the Business Manager was still Cliff Billington. The Drum Major was, again, Mike Arsenault, and the Guard Captain, Greg Oxenham.

For the first time in history, girls were to be allowed into the Optimist organization. They would form a colour guard/drill team for competition purposes, preparing to enter circuit competition. More than this, if not enough boys could be found for the Corps guard itself, they would become part of the secondary colour section of the Junior Corps.

This development can be looked at in two ways. Either it was the Optimists’ way of keeping abreast of the times, this being the age of Women’s Liberation, or it was simply the lack of enough boys being interested in order to fill the necessary need. One is tempted to suspect the latter but, whatever the reason, it would turn out to be nothing but beneficial.



1971: Toronto Optimists

Canadian Drum Corps Association

The Canadian Drum Corps Association this year had a meeting in Lindsay, Ontario. This was a different meeting from usual. Held on January 29th and 30th it was considered one of the worst ever. The seminars were dull and many member Corps were dissatisfied with the whole set-up.

What had happened to bring this about is unknown. In the past, people had come from all over to attend Canadian conventions, including the United States. Partying aside, they were very good. They would be again, in the future, but right now something was wrong.

As a result of the general dissatisfaction with the current C.D.C.A., four Junior Corps pulled out of its ranks. They were not happy with the way the association was being conducted, concluding that it was not doing enough for its member Corps. As far as is known, this was the first time such drastic action had taken place.

The four Corps that left the C.D.C.A. were The Toronto Optimists, De La Salle, Midlanders, and Les Compagnons D'Embrun. These were long time members whose absence was to help cause a strange year in Canadian Drum Corps. In an attempt to cure the problem, if it could be found, Al Tierney was elected as commissioner, for one month, to investigate and, if possible, remove the reasons for this upheaval.

It was, however, too late this year for any good to be done. The four Corps were out and events would proceed without them. Officially, that is.



1971: Toronto Optimists in a parade with tymps on wheels



1971: Toronto Optimists on parade

The first evidence of this strange scene appeared at the now familiar Individuals Contest. There were two sets of competitors, producing two sets of results. One set was under the auspices of the C.D.C.A., the other was unofficial, as were the results. The Canadian Junior Drum Corps movement was split, not down the middle, but indisputably divided.

At the individual and small group contest, those not now in the

C.D.C.A. were designated “open class”. The “open class” snare drum category was won by Larry Blandford of the Optimists. Dana Burrage on solo tenor and John Baye on solo rudimental base also won their events, with the Tim Tom drum duet placing second. All of these were Optimists.

Those who took part under the auspices of the C.D.C.A. received much higher scores than those in the “open class”, indicating two standards of judging. Not a healthy situation at all.

There were to be more unusual things due to this unusual situation. One of them took place on April 24th – 25th. The three Ontario Corps, De La Salle, Optimists, and the Midlanders held a combined seminar/concert weekend. It was sponsored by a new record company called “Corpdisc”. Three knowledgeable instructors were hired whose names remain unknown as of this date, to conduct the seminars. After this, the three Corps held a concert at De La Salle College. Such things would help to cement the rift that had appeared, and help pave the way for later events. Coincident to this, it was also pushing the Optimists and De La Salle into co-operating more closely than would surely be normal. As the old saying says, “Politics makes strange bedfellows”.

One week prior to this, Toronto’s only Colour Guard Contest took place. At this contest the Optimist guard placed second, behind the New York Squires. The girls, all new, had done well.



1971: Toronto Optimists colour guard in competition (St. Mike’s)

The Corps itself had not been idle. They still were intent on regaining the title, as they always would be. A new off the line number, “Victory at Sea”, was being used. St. Vincent’s had used this number in 1958, at Batavia. Most of today’s Corps had probably never heard of St. Vincent’s. The brass arrangement was by Truman Crawford, with Jerry Shelmar of Boston doing the percussion. Most winter activity was confined to parade work at Winter Carnivals.

A new Junior “C” circuit was formed this year. It consisted of seven Corps and included the Optimist Lancers, Optimist Cadets, and the Sparkies. The Sparkies were the feeder Corps of the Scarborough Firefighters Junior “A” Corps. The other Corps in this new circuit were the Kitchener Dutch Boys, Hanover Girls, the Cardinals, and the Durham Girls. Some of these Corps had bright futures ahead. They would have regular contests in their own class, which was a “standstill” category. The Optimists Cadets, now four years old, would now be able to compete at their own level at more than just the Provincial and National competitions.

If there was dissatisfaction with the C.D.C.A., its sponsoring and fostering of such initiatives must surely note as a plus in its favour.

The 1971 Season

A loss to Scarborough Firefighters

Not the first contest of the year but a most revealing one, took place on June 12th, in Ottawa. The Scarborough Firefighters, in their Junior “A” debut, defeated the Toronto Optimists. This was not the upset it would have once been but still a good start for a new Corps. The Optimists, past eleven year champions, were not used to losing to new Corps, especially when still attempting to improve, even renew, their status. This lesson would be acted upon. De La Salle, who were really to come into their own this year, won the affair. They posted a five point margin over La Salle Cadets. Scarborough was third and the Optimists fourth. Five Corps took part so at least they were not last, if that were any consolation.

From here on the Canadian Drum Corps season was underway. It would get hot and heavy throughout the summer. More surprises lay ahead and, in Canada, things continued with the split in C.D.C.A. unhealed.

Some established contests would remain unaffected by this situation, usually those that were international in composition. Such affairs mostly used dual judges associations, disputes in one of them being papered over for the duration. But they are, of course, still there.



1971: Scarborough Firefighters (CNE)

Shriners International

The first of these was the Shriners International, in its seventh performance in Toronto. Now an all junior affair, it featured some of the best from the United States and Canada. Based on the results of the last contest, the Scarborough Corps should have been a participant, however, these things are booked long ahead of time and the Optimists were in it.

This was the biggest contest of the year, so far, for the Optimists and it was a chance to re-polish their image. It would also be a good indication of what possibility, if any, existed for this Corps to regain the Canadian title.

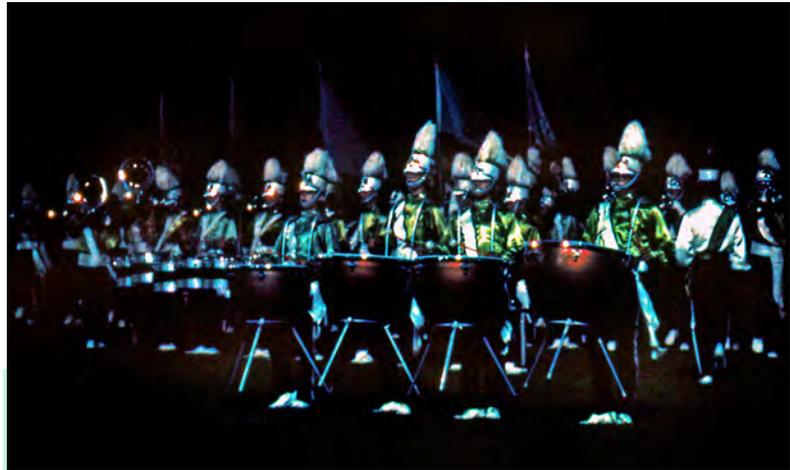
In the past, the Optimists often had done well at this show, even though such shows had been dominated by American Corps.



1971: Toronto Optimists (Shriners)

In 1966, they had won the junior division of what was then a senior/junior combined contest. They were third in 1967 and fourth in 1968. A slow decline was more apparent in 1969 when they were second last. Now, what would happen?

Here is what did take place. They placed a lowly second last again, in a mixed field of Canadian and American Corps that included both De La Salle and La Salle Cadets. They were the last place Canadian Corps. It appeared that current trends would continue, unless the rebuilding effort began to bear fruit. In the past this would have been a disaster, but not so much now. Maybe, even, par for the course. But the season was young. There was still time.



1971: Toronto Optimists

As has occurred before, information now thins out somewhat. It is there, somewhere, but time and resources lacking, no apologies are offered.

The Optimists were off to Garfield on July 10th – 11th. Despite their lesser place in the scheme of things, they were still invited to good contests. Right after this, on July 13th, came the 5th North American Invitational, a show on a par with the Shriners show. It featured such luminaries as the Casper Troopers, Chicago Cavaliers, and the Santa Clara Vanguard. The Optimists did not pull off any surprises. All that we know is that De La Salle placed fifth.

Now about halfway through the season, the Optimists had not scored any notable successes, nor shown any sign that such lay in the near future.

As the Optimists left on July 14th for Michigan, De La Salle took off for the Eastern seaboard, and three big contests. Their constant exposure to top-flight competition would bear dividends. A contest on July 24th demonstrated this. Called “Scarborough Fair”, De La Salle cruised to an easy victory; however, an interesting highlight was reported that the Optimists had showed improvement.



1971: Toronto Optimists initiations

Alhambra Invitational

On August 2nd the same factors appeared, at the Alhambra Invitational Parade and Contest. Another top-notch line-up with eleven Corps, it was won by the 27th Lancers. A strong second was De La Salle. They were now doing what had only been rarely done before, beating top American Corps, in this case, the Boston Crusaders. On a positive note, from our perspective, the Optimists were considered the surprise Corps of the evening. The surprise was that after a terrible start to the season, they were finally starting to improve, showing potential.



1971: Toronto Optimists

De La Salle cemented their growing reputation by defeating the Chicago Cavaliers, on their own turf. This definitely established them in the top ranks of North American Drum Corps. It probably proved them to be the best Junior Corps to ever come out of Canada thus far. Although the Optimists had scored some notable successes during their long reign, they were now being surpassed.

CNE Invitational

The next big contest, the Canadian National Invitational Championship Contest, was, again, won by De La Salle. For the Optimists, though, this was a landmark, as they were only 4.2 behind Del. A big change compared to the fourteen-point spread of earlier times. It was at this show that the new, improved Optimists recorded their first win over the La Salle Cadets. They had not beaten them for quite a while. It was not that La Salle was down. It was because the Optimists were coming up.



1971: Toronto Optimists (CNE Invitational)

Now, things began to get confusing, as a result of the still not repaired split in the Canadian Drum Corps Association.

An organization by the name of the Canadian Open National Commission sponsored the Canadian "Open" Junior "A" Championship. This was the outfit set-up to run a contest for those Corps who had left the C.D.C.A. Although it was called a Junior "A" Championship, the real title would be the one awarded by the C.D.C.A. since they were still the ruling body. No information being available for this affair, we move on to ever more murky situations.

Ontario Provincial Championship

The Ontario Provincial Championship was held on August 21st, two weeks after the “Canadian Open Junior “A” Championships, a reversal of decades old form. This was followed one week later by the “Showcase of Champions”, featuring nine Canadian and one American Corps. Held at the CNE Stadium, it was a good show with all the Corps at, or near, their peak form. It was a pageant, not a contest, so no titles or championships were awarded.



1971: Toronto Optimists

Canadian National Invitational

The next day, August 29th, was held what was considered by many to be the closest thing this year to a true Canadian Junior “A” Championship. The Canadian National Invitational saw six Canadian Juniors vie for victory. These were De La Salle, Optimists, Scarborough Firefighters, Les Compagnons, Midlanders, and La Salle Cadets.

Four of these units were, of course, the four that had resigned from the C.D.C.A. earlier this year. Because of this, they could not participate in the C.D.C.A. Championship, which always had been, and would be, the true Canadian title. So, although this would be thought by many to be the championship, it could not, and would not, be one.



1971: Toronto Optimists (CNE)

Not surprisingly, De La Salle, who were virtually unbeatable in Canada or anywhere, won it this year.

An encouraging performance, after a dismal beginning to the year, saw the Optimists in second place, only four points behind mighty Del. Three points back, in third, was La Salle Cadets, with the plucky Scarborough Corps only six behind the Optimists.

Canadian Championship

Two weeks later came the “true” Canadian Championship. “True” as in “official”. The winner of this would go in the books as the Canadian Junior Champions for 1971. It was predicted to be a flop but was not, even though only 7,000 fans attended.

Held in Ottawa, Ontario, the hometown of La Salle Cadets, the local crowd finally got to see their heroes become Canadian Junior “A” Champions for the first time. In the past, they had come so close, more than once.

La Salle Cadets were now the official C.D.C.A. National Junior “A” Champions for the year 1971. They did it by defeating the Scarborough Firefighters by eleven points. De La Salle was the defending champions, but were not in attendance to defend it. If they had earlier hoped to establish a dynasty, as had the Optimists, they would have to begin again.

For the Optimists, also not in attendance, it was an opportunity missed to regain the new distant title, no matter how fragile the chance of it occurring.

This is the way things were during that confusing year, and to continue in this manner would be to the detriment of all. Something had to give.

This, to all intents and purposes, was the end of the Canadian Drum Corps season. It had seen the Optimists hit their lowest point ever. It had also seen them pull themselves up to within four points of the De La Salle powerhouse during the course of the year. If ambitions and hopes remained unfulfilled, at least the progress made was encouraging. The Corps



1971: Toronto Optimists

spirit that had always existed was still there. Without that, they would not have done what they had. It was a reason for taking an optimistic outlook when looking ahead to 1972.

There is always next year.