


by Emily Stark

The Govenaires Drum and Bugle Corps is a non-profit organization based in St. Peter, MN, that has been in existence since 1927. They are the oldest competing senior drum and bugle corps in the world and are one of only three drum and bugle corps left in the state of Minnesota, giving the corps a unique opportunity to serve as goodwill ambassadors for St. Peter, the state of Minnesota and the drum corps activity.

The Govenaires' mission is to provide an exceptional experience to their members by teaching them advanced performance techniques in music and movement. Their goal is entertainment and the corps' motto is "Dedication to performance, pride in the corps, fun with the people." This is accomplished through teaching members advanced technique and performance skills in music, coordination, choreography and marching, all the while making sure that everyone has a great time. Emphasis is also placed on the development of pride, self-discipline, leadership and responsibility.

The corps was first organized as the St. Peter Legion Corps in 1927 and became the St. Peter Drum and Bugle Corps under the direction of Cliff Hermel in 1944. The corps went on to win many local and state VFW and American Legion titles.

Other successful Minnesota corps at this time included the Laidlaw American Legion

(Top) The first St. Peter corps in 1927; (below) the Govenaires, 1990 (photo by Beth Eckert from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Govenaires

(now known as Minnesota Brass, Inc.), Chisholm, Sleepy Eye, Litchfield, Faribault, Chaska, Pine City, Mankato and Austin Legion Corps, as well as the Hamm's Indians,

Golden Valley Raiders, St. Paul Scouts and Mapleaires. These were the days when every town, no matter how small, seemed to host at least one corps.

In the late 1950s, the St. Peter American Legion was bankrupt and Hermel bought all the drum corps' equipment. Also during this time, Hermel and his wife, Katie, created two junior corps. The Black Knights had members eight-13 years old and the Crusaders had members aged 13-21 years.

Unfortunately, these junior corps folded by 1975 due to the United States' involvement in the Vietnam conflict -- too many young men were being drafted and not returning from Vietnam. The St. Peter Drum and Bugle Corps continued to operate as a senior unit and officially became the Govenaires in the mid-1960s.

The name was changed to honor the five governors of Minnesota who hailed from St. Peter. A little-known fact, however, is that the corps initially wanted to change their name to the Vikings, but decided on the current name when Minnesota named their football team Vikings around the same time.

One of the highlights of the Govenaires' summers was the Capitol Days celebration in St. Peter when St. Peter would, for just a couple of days, revert back to being the capital of Minnesota (a title formerly reserved for St. Peter, but then switched to St. Paul in the late 1800s). The Govenaires and other local drum and bugle corps would appear in the parade as well as a solo drum and bugle contest and a "Drum Corps Revue," a drum corps show usually held at Gustavus Adolphus College. A poster from the 1960s showed ticket prices to be \$1.

In 1964, the Govenaires traveled to the American Legion national convention in Dallas, TX, representing Minnesota. They were back at this national convention again in 1976 at Seattle, in 1981 at Denver and in 1985 at New Orleans.

In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, the corps won eight state VFW championships, earning them the right to keep the VFW champions flag. The Govenaires were also 1997 inductees into the Minnesota Music Hall of Fame in New Ulm, which includes such famous names as Lamont Cranston, Judy Garland, Bob Dylan, Bobby Vee, Big Walter Smith and Dominick Argento.

In 1982, the Govenaires joined Drum Corps Midwest and have appeared at numerous DCM shows and at the Drum

Corps Midwest Championships.

Currently, the artistic and executive director of the Govenaires is John Mayer. The Mayer family has been involved with the corps for many years. John's father, Pat, began marching in the corps in 1957 and began serving on the board of the corps in 1973. His mother, Margaret, was the first woman to march in the Govenaires.

John's older brother, Mike, marched in and instructed the Govenaires, leaving in 1991 to start Chopstix Percussion, now the senior drum and bugle corps from Minneapolis, Chops, Inc. John's sister, Molly, has marched in and instructed the Govenaires' color guard for many years and has been directly responsible for the guards' reputation for high quality dance technique and innovative movement.

The involvement of the entire Mayer family exemplifies the feeling most members have of the corps as their extended "family." Many members have marched in the Govies for 10 years or more and those who have left still keep in touch and appear at shows.

Also, most of the current instructional and administrative staff of the corps are current or former corps members. The Govenaires always encourage members to become involved in the corps at all levels.

In the late 1990s, the Govenaires focused on building partnerships with local high school and college bands, as well as other local organizations. Students at MSU, Mankato now can earn college credits through marching with the Govenaires. The corps has even been known to appear at MSU pep band events, mixing their goals of recruiting and having a good time.

They also have staged a drum corps clinic in St. Peter, inviting local musicians to come and learn more about the activity. Many former members are now band directors, often sending their students to perform with the corps.

One of the ways the corps has worked to strengthen ties with its home community of St. Peter has been through performing often at home. Their first parade of the season has traditionally been the St. Peter St. Patrick's Day parade, and in recent years the corps has officially begun its season with an open house in St. Peter, featuring the first performance of the show music.

For the past 20 years, the Govenaires have also produced "Drum Corps Expo," a drum and bugle corps show in St. Peter held on or around the Fourth of July. This show is just one way the corps is active in St. Peter's "Old-Fashioned Fourth of July" celebration. The corps also marches in the parade and performs a concert in the park for an audience of thousands.

The Govenaires can also be seen performing in Minnesota Square Park for St. Peter's Memorial Day service in the spring and also at the Rockbend Folk Festival in the fall. The residents of St. Peter support the corps with a large turnout at all performances and many local businesses also donate to the corps to ensure that the

Govenaires continue to perform in town.

The corps also consistently appears at the "Thunder of Drums" show in Mankato, as well as the St. Cloud, Alexandria, Hastings, La Crosse and sometimes Wausau or Waukesha drum and bugle corps shows. The Govies can also be seen in parades across the state of Minnesota, as well as local music festivals.

In 2002, the corps found a new audience through two appearances at Harmony Park Music Gardens in Geneva, MN, for weekends of camping and appearances by local and national bands. The enthusiastic audience deemed the corps "the most fun marching band ever" after the Govenaires started an impromptu parade through the festival grounds, ending with a concert that had the entire crowd dancing, even though it was raining at the time.

With their 2002 season, the corps celebrated its 75th anniversary. Many corps alumni returned to perform at parades and shows to celebrate the success of this historic organization. Also, many alumni joined the corps' new "Friends of the Govenaires" donation program and helped financially.

With this anniversary, the Govenaires gained local publicity through their many appearances, as well as renown throughout the drum corps activity with a second-place finish in the senior division at the Drum Corps Midwest Championships.

The Govenaires are always looking to locate past alumni, as well as memorabilia and newspaper clippings about the corps.

The Govenaires' color guard has also recently become known for its innovative and accomplished dance and equipment technique and has earned many awards. In 2002, the color guard fielded its first official winter guard in the North Star Circuit.

Seven members performed a challenging show to the music *Roxanne* by the Police. The Govenaires' winter guard received first place in the senior division at the North Star Winter Guard Championships. It also won the honor of top guard in the senior division at the Drum Corps Midwest Championships.

The Govenaires' horn and drum lines consistently perform challenging music and drill, all the while keeping their sense of humor. The pit has also been known to come on the field for a brief kick-line, dance or even a juggling act. Past shows have required both the horn and drum lines to work on their movement skills by dancing with the guard.

The corps' musical style has in recent years focused on jazzy songs -- "music that's fun to play" (a recent show title). The 75th anniversary show, titled "The Wild Party," featured music from the recent award-winning musical of the same name and was the most show-stopping performance in the corps' long history, earning a standing ovation from the crowd at Drum Corps Midwest Finals.

The Govenaires have also worked with members of the local Minneapolis

band 3 Minute Hero to arrange several of their tunes for the corps to perform, resulting in some of the fastest and most interesting music the corps has played.

The Govenaires have always concluded their spiel sheet through reminding the crowd that "entertainment is our goal" and saying they hope the audience has as much fun watching the show as the corps does performing it. Every year the members are reminded that the purpose of this corps is to have as much fun as possible while putting out a high quality show (and looking like rock stars)! The Govenaires plan to be around for a long, long time.

The corps recently had the chance to interview an original member. Karl Klein, from Mankato, MN, marched in the St. Peter Legion Corps when it was formed in 1927 and for many years afterwards. He was the only member at the time who was not a veteran of World War I, but due to his background as a musician, the Legion let him join.

He described the style of the old drum corps shows as being very different from what people see today. It was more "basic military -- right, left, about face, column left, column right," (these were the orders the drum major would call out to the corps).

The St. Peter Legion corps began with only soprano bugles with no valves and Klein remembers the first time he ever heard a corps play music written for horns with one valve: "What the heck was that?" That opened up a lot of new opportunities for music for the corps to play.

The drums also were all similar -- no tenors yet. The corps played regular "street drums," just snares and bass drums. The uniforms started out as dark blue pants, a white shirt and a Legion cap. They switched to old-fashioned World War I tin hats a few years later. They had a summer "leisure" uniform for parades on hot summer days -- blue overalls with a yellow and red sash, a bright yellow shirt and a straw sombrero.

And did they have any fun? Well, since this was during the era of Prohibition, Klein "wouldn't dare mention names," but he did

recall several wild parties, as well as the tradition of spiking one's beer with a little bit of home-brewed alcohol. "Everybody had a lot of fun," he said.

The St. Peter Legion corps grew in popularity until it was performing in parades and shows pretty much every weekend throughout the spring and summer. Klein said, "Everybody wanted drum corps around. We got pretty good at riding Ferris wheels and playing as we went around." Even during the bank crash of 1929, the corps stayed together and kept performing. However, the corps' popularity started to tax on the members with wives and families due to the increasing time commitment. During the mid-1930s, the corps started to limit its involvement and cut back on appearances.

The spirit of the Govenaires has stayed intact over its seven and a half decades of existence. Klein doesn't remember if there was any money or prizes at any of the



The Govenaires, 1994 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).

competitions back in the 1920s and today the Govenaires focus on fun rather than winning, putting out the best show they can and not worrying about anyone else. It's this attitude that makes marching with the Govenaires a memorable experience and keeps people coming back to the corps year after year.

Most of the current and former members of the Govenaires (or the St. Peter Drum and Bugle Corps or the St. Peter Legion Corps) look back on their drum corps experiences and say, as Klein did, it was "one of the highlights of my life and I'll never forget it."



Emily Stark has marched in the Govenaires' color guard since 1994 and has been assistant director since 2001.

When she joined the corps, she had no previous experience in marching band or drum corps, but had danced for many years. The corps is now her extended family.

Currently in graduate school, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in social psychology and she hopes to become a college professor.

She says that throughout college and graduate school, drum corps has been an escape and her salvation, giving her an opportunity to express her love of dance and performance, while getting away from the pressures of school.

The Govenaires, 2001, at the DCM Championships, De Kalb, IL (photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of Drum Corps World).

