

Chapter 29: 1979 – “TAPS”

There was lots of news around this year, but most of it was about other Corps, not the Seneca Optimists.

Offensive Lions had a big recruiting campaign and were stepping up rehearsals to four a week during the winter. Gary Czapinski was writing M&M for the Cavaliers. These outside instructors came if you hired them. At \$1,000 a weekend, plus food, accommodation, etc. they did not come cheap.

Marie Grana was now with Madison Scouts. Oakland Crusaders were said to be quite strong compared to the last two winters. They still had Harry Clark on drums, with Terry Kirkpatrick. On horns they had Peter Byrne, on guard Debbie Miller. If those names seem familiar, they were. Peter Byrne and Debbie Miller used to be with the Seneca Optimists. What had happened? They had not been the first instructors to leave. Sam Kays had left the year before, and others. It was part of a slow decline, the roots of which are difficult to pinpoint.



1978: Seneca Optimists waiting for the Santa Claus parade to start

At the end of last year, the Krescendos people had gone back to their own Corps. It had been fun for them but it was only for the summer of 1978. They reformed their own Corps. This left the Seneca Optimists where they had been at the beginning of the 1978 season, with about sixty people, all experienced and all used to top level competition. The way things looked right now, they would have to become a Junior “B” Corps to get on the field.



1978: members of the Seneca Optimists

An alternative was to do what the Boston Crusaders had done after their decline and concentrate on having a top quality small Corps, forgetting about size. They had done this very successfully but had to accept that they would never win big shows with a small Corps. It seemed that both of these choices were not acceptable to the remnants of the Seneca Optimists. More importantly, neither was presented as a possibility that could have led to a rebuilding operation. Why was this?



1978: Seneca Optimists in Toronto Santa Claus parade

Well a lot of strange things went on during the winter that might shed some light on things. And a lot of things did not go on. First of all, the Corps got another new Corps Director, Mr. Ric Brown. He had been around a long time, beginning with the Toronto Optimists in the guard then as a bass drummer. He had stayed on during the years and ended up with the Seneca Optimists. Here, Ric served as Assistant Director, under Al Tierney. Always known for an independent mind, to quote Al Tierney, Ric was “a tower of strength”. He was also a gofer, which we all were at one time or another. On the night that Ric was formally handed the reins of control, it was obvious that nobody wanted the job more than he did. It was also obvious that nobody else wanted the job. It takes a certain quality to take over an enterprise that is seemingly in decline. Ric had that quality, combined with eagerness, which makes it even harder to explain subsequent events.

All this took place at a huge meeting, held at Seneca College, and a really odd thing took place. Some people were dissatisfied with the Booster Club and its performance. Why, I don't know. The result was that the incumbent leadership was voted out; however, nobody was voted in! Probably nobody wanted in. So, on one vote, there was now no Booster Club. There had been, as we have now seen, a falling away of instructors, executive, players and, now, the Booster Club. The whole complex was coming unravelled. It was as if there was writing on the wall and everybody was reading it.

Before Christmas, Seneca Optimists had put on a terrific display in the Toronto Santa Claus parade. They were captured in a spectacular T.V. shot that gave no hint of any disturbance ahead. To anybody outside the Corps, everything must have looked very solid.

It was after this that things started to slide. One indication was the 1979 Individual and Small Group Competition. In the percussion caption, Seneca had one entry, to fifteen for Oakland. Brass saw no Seneca entries, as



1978: Seneca Optimists in Santa Claus parade

against nine for Oakland. Colour guard had four Seneca entries, as opposed to seven for Oakland. Other Corps had entries, but I have used the Oakland Crusader figure because these two Corps were nearly always equal in such events. Clearly something was wrong.

At Symposium 7, held on January 19th, 20th, and 21st, no one who was connected to the Seneca Optimists was doing anything. There were just people who had been. It was as if they no longer existed. Well, of course they still existed. People were still coming to practice every week. More than enough to keep things going. The problem was, there was nothing going to keep going. Instructors were few, absent, or non-existent. People who came out found no unified activity going on. Many people came



1978: Some Members of the Seneca Optimists

from other Corps, either to watch, or join. Nobody took them in hand to get them enrolled; in fact, the machinery for it did not exist. So, potential recruits, interested enough to come down, were allowed to drift away. Probably to go and join another corps.

Regardless of all this, at this stage there still was a Corps; they had been booked into a lot of contests, including D.C.I. contests. It was as if a big spirit would suddenly come along and set things on the right track. That was not likely to happen, the “spirit” all having long gone. This situation was to reach absurdity before real evidence of the state of things became apparent.

As the winter wore on, things got worse. Fewer people began to come out, as enthusiasm dwindled, and what spirit there had been began to dissipate. A partial explanation of this could be that after a merger, and a temporary amalgamation, there was no spirit, or tradition, to build on. Constant mergers can dilute the identity of the Corps, to the point that you are not in “A” Corps or “B” Corps, but just a corps. There was no long tradition to maintain, no spirit to whip up in the name of one’s Corps. Also, there were many more things to do these days than in older days, and people were not so inclined to stay with an ineffective organization as they once might have been.



1978: Some Corps members of the Seneca Optimists

Another major factor contributing to this was that there were no local smaller Corps around to gobble up. The two big Toronto Corps had merged them out of existence.

All of this discussion is speculation. What was reality was that a major rebuilding job was necessary. This could take years, and even then was not a sure thing. The calibre of Drum Corps today was such that no one was going to come up and win in one year as the 1958 Toronto Optimists had done.

For such a process to take place, a dynamic personality was needed, someone with the foresight and knowledge to know what it would entail. When things go wrong like this, it is convenient to blame the one at the top, the Director. In this case, this must be looked at again.

The past versions of this Corps had more than enough people for everything. Everyone wanted a piece of it. Now, the Director was virtually alone. There was Jack Watt, the Business Manager, an Equipment Manager, and a few others like Harold Bradley and myself. None of us did much because, "It wasn't our job". It wasn't, but one man could not do everything. So, eventually, things came to a head.

There had been a news conference held, at which was announced the Drum Corps International Canadian Regional Drum and Bugle Corps Championships. What that mouthful really meant was the first "D.C.I. Canada". D.C.I. granted the O.D.C.A. a charter to run this first annual contest. The Seneca Optimists were represented at this news conference and, as if everything were all right, they were booked into it.



1978: Some members of the Seneca Optimists



1978: Some members of the Seneca Optimists

They were, once again, booked into D.C.I. East, at Allentown, PA, on August 10th and 11th, along with Oakland Crusaders and Offensive Lions. They now came under the listing of "Associate" Corps, a category created by D.C.I. for those who had not made it into the top twelve.

Contests in Canada, on their schedule included Ajax, Welland, Hamilton, Toronto, and the Ontario Provincial and Canadian National Championships, along

with D.C.I. tours, of course. In fact, they had a schedule lined up that was the equal of the previous two years. Why! Because when these shows were booked, there was every indication that there would be a Corps on the field, and there could have been. But over the long winter months, it had been allowed to slowly dissipate, no action being taken to halt or reverse the trend. Most of the members were now more interested in playing hockey.



1978: Some members of the Seneca Optimists

Realization of the true state of affairs began to surface. One indication was in "Corps Fax '79". This publication, the brain child of Don Daber, could have been given to someone who knew nothing about Canadian Drum Corps. After reading it, they would have known all about them. How they operated, were judged, celebrated, competed, and anything else. The second half of this booklet was a directory of all Corps in Canada that had bothered to send in information, which was just about all of them, including some American ones. Each Corps had a picture and underneath it was a complete listing of its officers, instructors, and a phone number where they could be reached. You could have organized a contest with this book alone.

Under a fine picture of the Seneca Optimists on parade, the total information given was a Toronto postal box number. Under this, the barren statement, was "No information available at time of publication.

It was time for something to happen, and it did. A meeting at a private home was held in early May, where the absurdity of the whole situation was brought clearly into the open. In attendance were four or five members of the executive, waiting for the Director to take charge and chair the meeting. He began by stating how they were attempting to get the "Judy Garland" theme music for the off-the-line number. This



1978: Some Seneca Optimists corps members

piece, a medley actually, had been played years before by the Toronto Optimists. The absurdity was, that by this time of year, the Corps should have been outside marching and playing, polishing the show that had been learned over the winter. They were still trying to get music. There was no show. Such things were the responsibility of a Music Director, but there wasn't one, at least not officially. Something had to give, and it did.

One of the members blew up, blaming Mr. Brown for letting the Corps trickle down the drain. He accepted full responsibility and immediately stepped down. I think he was relieved. The job was beyond his scope at this time. Although no one person was totally to blame, he became the man whose name would be associated with the whole debacle. This is not absolutely true. There were many factors involved, beyond the control of any of us.



1978: Some Seneca Optimists Corps members

None of us would have done much better. Maybe all of us, like the members, had, after all, had enough. To Ric's credit, he picked up the reins that no one else was willing to hold and gave it an effort. He rates an "A", if only for that. When things had settled down, Jack Watt now became the Director. Things carried on for a while, but nothing much changed. Seneca had already pulled out of a May 12th concert because they were not ready... for anything. Ric Brown became driver on the equipment truck. He seemed a lot happier.

Mr. Watt, the Director, answering a request from the community services people, took on a person to work with the Corps who was serving a sentence of community work. He was about as interested in it as the Corps members themselves seemed to be, which, now, was very little. One weekend, at Seneca College, a group of the executive was inside discussing the state of things, wondering whether it was worth the trouble trying to keep anything going. A decision was reached.

Two corps members were seen walking across the large parking lot. It was a gorgeous day, with not a cloud in a clear blue sky. This was a parking lot that once was full of cars, thronged with people. In the distance sat the Corps equipment truck, alone, forlorn, still crammed with the instruments and paraphernalia of a Drum Corps.



1978: Some members of the Seneca Optimists

Two of the executives walked over to meet the two members who had turned up for practice. They were the only two. Disappointment was evident on their faces when informed the Corps was now disbanded.