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by Dave Borck

The Norwood Park Drum and Bugle Corps was formed in 1928 by William Widmayer, who was their director and first instructor. The corps was a community-based parade corps, located on the northwest side of Chicago.

The corps was one of 14 started by Widmayer at the request of local community leaders, but Norwood Park was the only one that survived into the 1950s.

Widmayer was born in New Britton, CT, in 1872 and moved to Chicago as a young boy.

He started as a drummer with the Lincoln Turners Drum Corps in Chicago at the age of 14. He later became a drummer in the Illinois National Guard band. He was also an accomplished musician and singer, once being a voice student at the Chicago Musical College.

Widmayer remained active with the corps for many years after his retirement. Following World War II, additional instructors were



Norwood Park Imperials, 1949, at a Chicago parade (photo from the collection of Wayne Mounsey).

brought on, but Widmayer was still instructing the cadet corps until 1951, when he was 79.

In 1933, a fife section was added. It remained until 1947, when a lack of interest and competitions forced its removal. During the 1930s, the corps marched about 100 members. They placed well in local American Legion sponsored parade contests from 1936-1945. A cadet corps was formed in 1940 to assist with training new youngsters.

During World War II, the corps was kept busy with funeral and burial services for service men and women who had been killed. This was an almost daily duty, sometimes with several services in one day. The corps also appeared in many parades, bond drives and other patriotic events during the war.

The corps remained a community-based parade corps, focused on local appearances and community activities, until 1945, when field competition beckoned. The corps

entered local, state and national competitions, placing well during this period and also becoming a national contender.

The corps was the Illinois State American Legion champion from 1947-1950 and placed seventh at the American Legion Nationals in 1949, fourth in 1951, 11th in 1952, 12th in 1953 and 14th in 1954.

Instructors for the late 1940s included Fred Specht of the Commonwealth Edison senior corps; Emmett Sahrig, instructor of the University of Wisconsin Band; Ed Riemer; and Bob Badal.

The corps' repertoire from one of the late 1940s years was an original opening, *The No Name March; Land, Sea and Air; Repasz Band; The Land We Love; This is the Army; Stars and Stripes; America; Maroon and Gold; and The Norwood Park Youth March.*

The corps changed uniforms several times during this period, but always retained the corps colors: maroon and gold. During this time, the corps was limited to 32 playing members for competition.

Besides Widmayer, many parents influenced the corps, acting as corps presidents, quartermasters, treasurers fund-raisers and giving much time and energy to the corps. Parent involvement remained an important part of the operation through its entire existence. Family names such as Ricklefs, Grana, Saiger, Maass, Minor, Vergin, Shannon, Mounsey, Olsen, Schuessler, Will and many more will long be remembered as part of the corps' history.

Another important support group for the corps was the Mother's Club, made up of corps mothers, mothers of former members and some interested women. Operating both as a social group and a corps support group, they conducted many social and fund-raising events, including the famous annual Cherry Tree Social.

Another person with a special impact on the corps was Joan Purse (later Briske), the talented and award-winning drum major from the late 1940s into the early 1950s. In addition to her leadership duties on and off the field, she wrote many of the maneuvers used by in the early days of field competition. Later, she was the primary instructor of the cadet corps for many years, helping to instruct younger members.

One member wrote about this period, "1950 was one of the peak years for the corps, as they won almost every one of the contests they entered. Their fiercest competitor was the Austin Grenadiers. The state championships in 1950 brought about an unusual occurrence, as there were two ties for the top spots: Norwood Park and the Austin Grenadiers for the American Legion title and Logan Square and Gladstone Park for the Sons of the American Legion title. All four corps had to repeat their entire 15-minute drills. The tension was unbelievable. Norwood and Logan Square were victorious."

Some of the songs Norwood was well known for during that year included *Summertime, Jealousy* and *The Barn Dance.*

At the end of the 1962 season, the corps

lost many members due to aging out or to military service.

At the start of 1953, there were no more than 10 members total, but strong recruiting and inclusion of former 'B' corps members brought the corps back. By 1954, they had regained their stature, and in 1955 and 1956 were able to regain state champion status, winning American Legion State both years.

Among the influential individuals pushing growth and change in the Midwest during the mid-1950s was Frank Arsenault, a major drum instructor from the East Coast who moved to Chicago in the mid-1950s and began instructing Norwood Park, the Chicago Cavaliers and Skokie Indians. All of these corps would go on to feature excellent drum lines, precision rudimental drumming, expanded use of the new tenor drums and new visual effects.

A former member wrote of those days, "I wish I had a dime for every time we marched down Michigan Avenue in Chicago. One hot Fourth of July, we stopped on the bridge over the Chicago River. When called to attention, you could hear 'schluck, schluck' as our shoes had become one with the tar on the wooden planks. It was also not uncommon for drum corps to break step and 'route step' across the shaky bridges to prevent damage.

"Then there was the time in Miami (1957) during a tropical rain when we played *Moon Over Miami*. When we finished, from around the corner the Cavaliers played *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. The drums got deeper and deeper in tone until the heads broke (before plastic heads)."

Norwood Park continued national contention during the late 1950s, with instructors such as Arsenault, Dick Brown, Rick Maass, Riemer and Lee Dreuth. The corps was the Illinois State Champion again in 1955 and 1956 and it finished seventh at the Legion Nationals in 1955 and second at the VFW Nationals in 1956.

The corps finished sixth at the VFW Nationals in 1957 and seventh in 1958 as well as placing seventh at the American Legion Nationals in 1958 and sixth in 1959.

During this time, the corps introduced some innovations to drum corps, such as the star/circle burst (1958), the use of dance moves (cha-cha, 1959) and the use of "working" flags in the field drill. These were the brainchild of drill writer and marching instructor Rick Maass.

Typical of their music in the 1950s were *Moonlight and Roses, Moon Over Miami, 76 Trombones, Lida Rose* from "The Music Man," *You'll Never Know Cha-Cha* and *Jealousy*.

Another member described the feeling of attending his first national contest in 1958: "We left Chicago and drove to New York by bus . . . it seemed to take forever. We stayed downtown at the Henry Hudson hotel and could go to Times Square when we had free time. We practiced at a field on the Bay, looking out over the Statue of Liberty. This was the field St. Vincent's Cadets used.

"Following our practice, we went to their

# Norwood Park Imperials

hall and listened to their music practice. The next day, all the corps were lining up for the dreaded inspection, done in Central Park. It was interesting to see the corps doing this.

"The Cavaliers were near us, as were the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights and the Holy Name Cadets. And what a feeling stepping onto the field for finals at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn! A great stadium, a great crowd and all those great drum corps to see -- unforgettable!"

In the early 1960s, there was a new surge for the corps, having adopted the name "Imperials" in 1957. Stronger management and better planning were introduced by corps manager Bob Briske, who would later go on to do significant work with DCI, and business manager Don Dennstaedt. Maass followed as corps director from 1964-1967.

Instruction staff included Maass, Brown, Brian Pennington, Gary Czapinski and Bill Strauts.

The 1960s were the real "hey-day" of drum corps activity in Illinois, with at least 30 corps attending the VFW and American Legion state championships each year. Contemporary corps were the Chicago Cavaliers, Belleville Black Knights, Skokie Vanguard, Chicago Royal Airs, Phantom Regiment and a host of smaller units, not to forget the Wisconsin powers just over the border like the Madison Scouts, Racine Kilties and Racine Scouts). There were many well-attended -- and strongly contested -- corps contests in the Midwest each summer!

The Imperials continued to place well in state, regional and national competition, but titles eluded them during the 1960s. They finished seventh at the 1960 and 1962 VFW Nationals and third at the 1961 American Legion Nationals. After not attending the 1963 national competitions, choosing instead to appear at the National Dream invitational in Bayonne, NJ, the corps finished 21st at the 1964 VFW Nationals, 10th in 1965, 11th in 1966, ninth in 1967 and 12th in 1968. In 1969 the corps once again did not attend a national competition.

In 1963, when the corps decided to forego



Norwood Park Imperials, 1968, at VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

national competition and instead attend the prestigious Dream Invitational, they also competed in a contest in Selden, Long Island, NY, the day before the Dream, on August 18, 1963.

A member wrote, "It was a great thrill to be included in the Dream contest, along with the St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, Garfield Cadets and Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights. It was great fun to watch them and then to perform before the 26,000 fans in the stadium. They were really great drum corps fans, too! They gave us a great reception. But, the tension was probably too much for us and our show was really 'off' due to nerves. Too bad that we were so new to this level of corps activity!"

Typical of the corps' music in the 1960s was *Jealousy, Dancero* and *How High the Moon* (1960); *String of Pearls, Moonlight Serenade, Song of the Volga Boatmen* (Glenn Miller medley) and *Queen of Sheba March* (1962); *God Bless America* (1962-1963); *Helena Polka, Harlem Nocturne* and *Old Man River* (1963); *Columbia, Gem of the Ocean* and *Night and Day* (1965); *On a Wonderful Day Like Today* and *Malagueña* (1966).

One of the most important people in the history of the corps was Maass, whose work spanned almost 30 years. He marched in the corps as a drummer and then as a baritone bugler from 1940 to 1951. He then became the drum major for a year or two.

After aging out, he became a drill instructor, becoming the head marching instructor and program director by 1957. He taught the corps until 1964; then he became the director until 1967. His influence was felt in all aspects of the corps and by all the members of the corps

whom he taught.

He became a judge as well, working for the Illinois All-American, then the Central Sates Judges Association. When DCI was formed, Maass became a DCI judge for that organization and was their first chief judge, in charge of all DCI judge selection, qualification and training.

The corps continued with its primary focus on community presence throughout its life. The Imperials never really tried to recruit members from other areas, although some did join. Eventually, membership declined in the 1970s. The corps lost its state and national competitive presence, moving to competition in the new DCI Division II/III.

While the corps became smaller, it did not lose its community and family focus. The corps fielded about 45-50 members, but remained very musical and competitive for its size. Parents remained an important source for corps direction, such as Rudy Vergin, the president in some of the final years. He had

four children in the corps and worked hard as business manager, then corps president, to keep the Imperials a valid and functioning unit.

Changes in membership, location and interests resulted in a dispute regarding management in the 1983-1984 period. The corps officially disbanded in 1984.

Music played during the 1970s included *Victory for All, Summertime* and *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1970-1971); *American Overture, Blues in the Night* and *Birth of the Blues* (1972); *New World Symphony, MacArthur Park* and *John Brown's Body* (1973).



The Imperials, approximately 1980 (photo by Steve Linsenmayer from the collection of Drum Corps World).



David Borck was a snare drummer in the Imperials from 1958-1963 and an assistant drum instructor through 1971. He was a CSJA and DCI judge for 26 years. He is now retired from his job as an

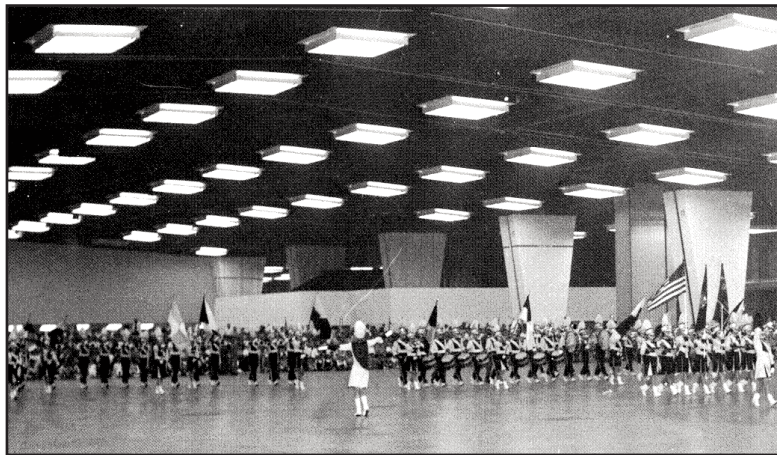
administrative services manager, and he lives in Arlington Heights, IL.

Significant assistance and materials were supplied by the following people:

Wayne Mounsey, snare drum, 1939-1949. He also marched with the Skokie Indians senior corps. He is a retired purchasing and fleet management executive and lives in Roselle, IL.

Dale Bowman, French horn, 1951-1956. He is a retired aerospace engineer who now runs a management training business. He lives in Lompoc, CA.

Tom Cushing, soprano bugler, 1954-1959. He also marched with the Skokie Indians senior corps and is now employed as a commercial artist and lives in Griffith, IN.



Norwood Park Imperials at McCormick Place, 1965, VFW Nationals (photo by Dave Borck).