


Sky Ryders, 1976 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

by Steve Vickers

While the history of the Hutchinson, KS, Sky Ryders begins in 1955, the story really began 32 years earlier when the local American Legion post started a senior drum and bugle corps. Founding director Jack McCarroll invested \$125 of his own money to purchase equipment.

It was entered in state American Legion conventions in 1924 and 1925, but disbanded in the fall of 1925.

Three years later another corps was formed that existed for 15 years. During that time it was one of the largest units in the state, presenting 15 to 20 bugles, 10 to 15 in the drum line, plus two or three in the American flag squad.

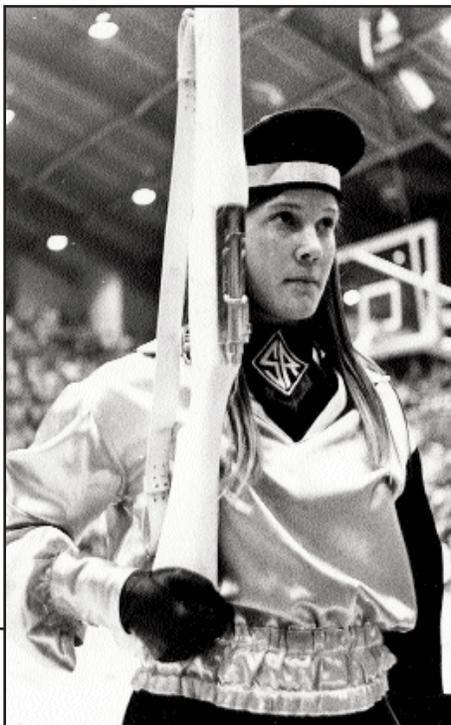
Overlapping the senior corps during part of this time period was a junior corps that performed in Kansas from 1932-1939. Another junior corps was started in 1940 and lasted for only two years.

Then there was another junior and senior corps toward the end of World War II, but these two groups were also short-lived.

That brings the chronology up to 1952 when the seeds were planted that led to the establishment of a new junior corps appearing for the first time in an American Legion convention parade in Salina. It started out being called the Lisle Rishel Post 68 Drum & Bugle Corps and performed in makeshift uniforms with equipment from the 1940s once used by the junior and senior corps.

In 1954, Ken Fairbrother, an officer at the Hutchinson Naval Air Station, took over. He had been a member of the Hawthorne Caballeros. Music came from the "Ludwig Drum Corps Manual" and included *Over There*, *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *You're in the Army Now*.

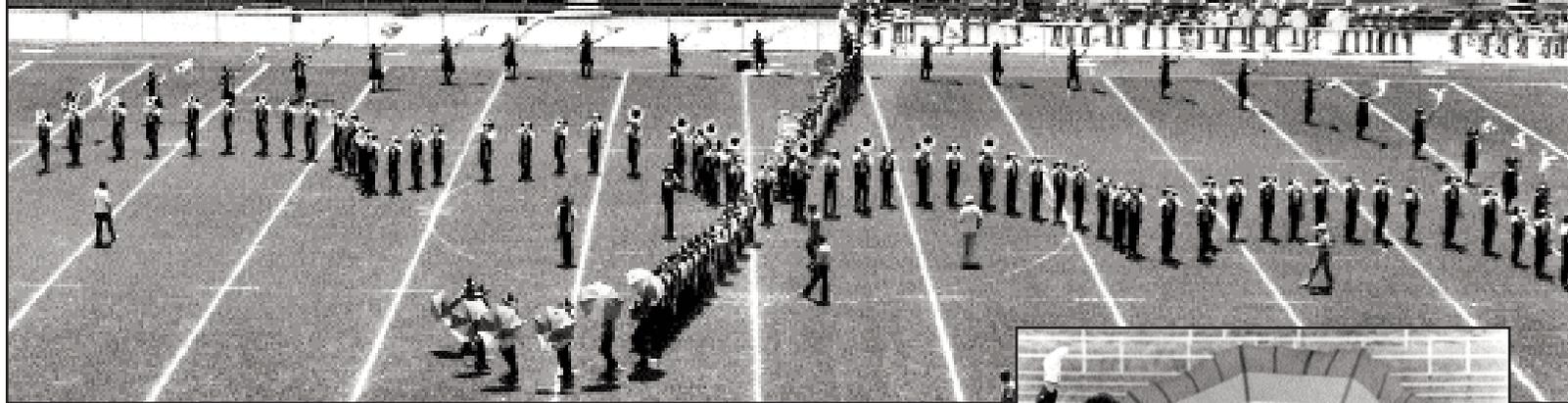
Sky Ryders



(Top) Sky Ryders, 1986 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World); (above) Sky Ryders, 1975 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World); (left) Sky Ryders, 1968 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

A reorganization in January 1955 resulted in the corps being led by H.D. "Prof" McCosh, a local band director. He told the members and parents it would take about four years to produce a state champion. His estimate was exact. The group adopted the name Sky Ryders and the first American Legion state Championship was won in 1959.

The Great Plains Drum & Bugle Corps Association was also formed in 1955. During its 25-year existence, the following corps took part in shows: *Kansas* -- Argonne Rebels and Rebel-Heirs from Great Bend; Sky Ryders and Jets from Hutchinson; Silver Sabers from Salina; Continentals, Scarlet Lancers, Phantoms and Continental Ambassadors from Wichita; Plainsmen from Emporia; and Trailblazers/Traildrivers and Blue Brass from



Sky Ryders, 1980, during *Here's That Rainy Day* (photo by Ed Ferguson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Overland Park; *Oklahoma* -- Legionettes All-Girl from Enid; Valiant Knights from Enid; Sooner Cadets from Oklahoma City; and Young Tulsans from Tulsa; *New Mexico* -- Continentals from Albuquerque; *Nebraska* -- Admirals Senior Corps and Young Admirals from Lincoln; and corps in Grand Island and Kearny; *Colorado* -- Blue Knights from Denver; and Centennial Grenadiers Senior Corps, also from Denver.

Over the years, some outside corps visited including the Troopers, Santa Clara Vanguard, Cedar Rapids Grenadiers and Cedar Rapids Cadets, Flamingos, Garfield Cadets and the Air Force Academy Enlisted Corps.

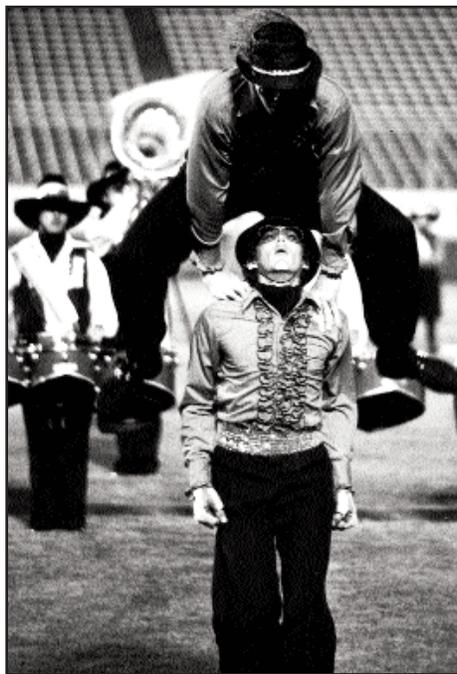
The early years were lean for the Sky Ryders, sometimes with less than two dozen members on the street or the field, but the organization slowly began to thrive. They decided to play music based on the idea of the sky to fit their name. The initial repertoire featured *Blue Skies*, *Over the Rainbow*, *Off We Go* and *Ghost Riders in the Sky*.

At times rehearsals were held in the morning and again in the evening at the state fairgrounds on the north end of town. Members were determined and were willing to work hard to achieve their dreams.

To provide more opportunities for local youth, additional instruments were purchased from a senior corps in Atwood, KS. This gave the Sky Ryders an added incentive to improve. In 1957, the corps took third place at competitions in Emporia, Great Bend and Wichita, KS, as well as at a show in Grand

Island, NE. The group's main competition was the Continentals from Wichita and the Argonne Rebels from Great Bend.

Starting in 1959, the corps began piling up honors. By winning the state American Legion contest, they traveled to the national convention in Minneapolis, MN, where they earned 10th place in finals, less than a point behind the Racine Kilties. The foundation of



(Above) Sky Ryders, 1980 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World); (left) Sky Ryders, 1982 (photo by John Wacker from the collection of Drum Corps World).

as state champion and also captured the Missouri state title. Members raised \$25,000 for their trips that season that included an appearance at the American Legion Nationals in Miami, FL, where they placed sixth, behind the Chicago Royal Airs and ahead of St. Lucy's Cadets.

The 1960 season included being featured on the Fleetwood recordings from the Miami championships.

Over the next eight years, the Sky Ryders steadily improved and often participated in American Legion National events. In 1961, they traveled to Denver and placed fifth, with the Troopers just ahead and state rival Argonne Rebels right behind.

a national reputation was being established.

That first nationally competitive corps was dressed in navy blue uniforms and had 30 horns, 12 percussion and a small color guard. Music was written by member John Simpson.

During the summer of 1960, the corps repeated



Sky Ryders, 1984 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Sky Ryders, 1978 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

The 1962 season included two national championships trips. The first was to the American Legion Championship in Las Vegas, NV, where the corps finished fourth, again just behind the Troopers by two-tenths of a point. The second trip was to Minneapolis, MN, for their first appearance at a VFW national event where they earned 16th place.

The next season concluded at American Legion Nationals in Dallas, TX, where the corps placed third, just six-tenths behind the Hawthorne Muchachos.

The Sky Ryders also won Kansas American Legion state titles in 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962 and 1964; Great Plains Association titles in 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1964; a Colorado State American Legion state title in 1964; and Missouri American Legion titles in 1960, 1961, 1962 and 1964

In 1965, the corps entered what turned out to be one of the largest VFW National Championships in history, where they ended up in 18th place. That was the show where 15 corps advanced to finals and the title event was held inside McCormick Place because of torrential rainstorms that flooded Soldier Field in downtown Chicago.

The 1966 season was a difficult one for the Sky Ryders. In fact, the corps almost folded



Sky Ryders, 1984 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

strong and took the 10-hour bus trip to that region on three consecutive weekends in July.

The summer concluded with a Kansas American Legion title and an appearance at American Legion Nationals in Atlanta, GA, where they finished seventh, between the Hawthorne Muchachos and Racine Scouts.

For the 1969 season, the corps' brass instructor, John Simpson, brought arranger Larry Kerchner in to produce part of the

corps' book. They stopped using French horns and began using mellophones for the middle voices. They were one of the first corps in the country to make that change.

Several weaker seasons followed in 1970 and 1971, but then Drum Corps International

The corps was still populated totally by local talent and the numbers weren't sufficient to justify national participation aside from the July 4 trips to Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa.

As membership began to filter in from outside the immediate area, the corps started to grow and improve. The Sky Ryders re-entered national competition at the 1977 DCI Championships in Denver where they placed third in the class A prelims.

The following season, the corps moved into open class and began a steady climb. In 1978, they placed 32nd at DCI, again in Denver; 22nd in 1979 at Birmingham; 17th at the 1980 show back in Alabama; and 14th at the first DCI Championship outside the United States in Montreal.

It was the team of director George Tuthill and brass technician John Simpson who put together the strong programs during that period of time, anchored in popular tunes and large contingents of talented young people, many from the nearby states of Oklahoma and Texas.

Tuthill came to Kansas from the East Coast where he had been involved with a variety of leading junior and senior corps, including the Hawthorne Caballeros. He was



Sky Ryders, 1985 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

for lack of members. Had it not been for an influx of members from their feeder corps, the Jets, the season might not have happened.

The Jets had been established in the late 1950s to train new members. I joined the corps just out of seventh grade in 1961 and spent five seasons there before being named director in 1966 when I was a junior in high school. I was good at recruiting and during the winter of 1966/1967, I had more than 100 young people involved ages 11-16.

Some of the Sky Ryders' strongest seasons up to that time were in 1967, 1968 and 1969. The corps added girls to playing sections in 1967 and purchased a new set of matched Getzen bugles. Yearly trips to Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin and were planned over the Fourth of July when the corps competed against the strongest corps in the Midwest.

In 1969, in fact, the corps was particularly

came along and the Sky Ryders took part in the first title show at Whitewater, WI, where they finished in 20th.

It was at this point that the corps again stayed close to home during the next three seasons.

Sky Ryders, 1986 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).



hired to be director and set out to get the corps into DCI's top 12.

Kerchner's unique and melodic arrangements were popular with drum corps fans and began to get the attention of judges as well. His presentations were clear and put the melody out front with beautiful counter-melodies and full chords backing up the tunes.

In 1980, the corps performed *Enough is Enough, Night Streets, Here's That Rainy Day, Firedance, The Storm, Rainbow Connection and Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. They followed up in 1981 with *Faces, Overture From the Royal Mongolian Sumo Foolsball Tournament, Firedance, Storm* and a medley of *Here's That Rainy Day and Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

Then in 1982, the goal Tuthill set out to accomplish was realized. The corps had a great season and topped it off by finally achieving top-12 status and performing in Olympic Stadium on August 21. Support from back home included *The Hutchinson News* having a reporter traveling with them, and the finalist spot earned them a huge photospread and story the next day.

A Spanish flavor permeated the repertoire and included *Faces*, a medley of *Quien Sabe, Macarena* and *Dr. Macumba*, and another medley of *Come In From the Rain* and *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. The corps' huge, unfolding rainbow was becoming a trademark along with Kerchner's new treatment of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* that closed each production.

It was the 1983 show that brought particular attention to the Sky Ryders. Kerchner produced an unusual arrangement of *Home on the Range* in a jazz tempo and,



in fact, was nominated for a Grammy award as a result. Unfortunately, because the DCI records were not commercially available to the public, the nomination was disallowed, but it was still great recognition for the corps and for their talented arranger.

The 1983 repertoire consisted of a medley of *Quien de la Macarena, Here's That Rainy Day and Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, although the season had started



out using a wonderful closer of *Heart Light* and the theme from the movie "E.T." Judges and fans had become accustomed to *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* concluding the show and the pressure to change it back was too great. The corps finished 12th that season at the DCI event in Miami.

In 1984, Tuthill was gone and at Atlanta, GA, the Sky Ryders dropped out of finals at 17th after a still strong appearance that featured a second version of *Home on*

the Range, Journey from Mariobronn as a percussion feature, a medley of *Quien Sabe* and *Macarena*, along with a new closer of *Claire's Song*.

The summer of 1985 was a little stronger and the corps moved up two spots to 15th with the first of two "Wizard of Oz" productions.

The next three years became endearing for the Sky Ryders and drum corps audiences. The corps presented three extremely popular shows based on well-known and tuneful musicals.

They started the series with a significantly improved "Wizard of Oz" production in 1986. It featured the wicked witch on a bicycle and she eventually "melted" into the AstroTurf at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, WI,

(Top) Sky Ryders, 1985; (above) Sky Ryders, 1988; (right) Sky Ryders, 1987; (below) Sky Ryders, 1987 (photos by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).



spectacular flags and color guard costumes representing yards and yards of lamé, and an increasingly strong offering from the percussion. The corps bounced back into DCI Finals with their highest ranking (ninth) and even managed to bring tears to the eyes of many spectators at the end of their finals performance.

Alumni Dale Antoine began a four-year run as director of the corps, having been with the organization since the early 1970s, first as a member of the Jets and then the Sky Ryders. He brought together an extremely talented team of designers and instructors led by Tommy Keenum who assembled a group of young people to flood the field with a rainbow of color through costumes, flags, props and equipment.

An even more unique show followed for the 1987 season when the Sky Ryders served up "West Side Story." The brass section was in all-white uniforms; the percussion wore black and the drum major wore gray. The movie score had been presented many different ways over the years by a variety of corps, but this production was the most unusual to date.

The boys in the guard were the Sharks and the Jets, and the girls were their girlfriends. By the end of the show, the boys were dressed in a rainbow of lamé sports jackets and the girls wore matching prom dresses. They all had matching pairs of flags that filled the field with an explosion of color.

Again, there were tears in the eyes of many in the crowd in Madison for an emotional ending when "Tony" and "Maria" ran out of the stadium at the end.

The 1988 show revolved around selections from "The Sound of Music" and again had a wide variety of colorful costumes, flags and props. During *Do Re Mi*, some of the guard unfurled lyrics for the crowd to sing along and others used huge, sparkly musical notes.

The DCI finishes in 1987 and 1988 placed the Sky Ryders in 12th and the three seasons



Sky Ryders, 1989 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

were led on the field by popular drum major Brady Massey, who charmed audiences with an infectious smile and expressive conducting that added to the corps' popularity.

An abrupt change in musical style followed in 1989 when the corps switched to a cadet design for their uniform and played *March From the Symphonic Metamorphosis* and selections from "Carmina Burana." The new, darker direction wasn't popular with audiences or the judges and the corps



Sky Ryders, 1989 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

dropped to a semifinals tie for 14th at DCI in Kansas City's Arrowhead Stadium.

Financial difficulties were piling up on the organization, partially because local membership from the city of Hutchinson and even from Kansas was dwindling and support was difficult to secure. The organization was compelled to declare bankruptcy, but was still able to continue.

By the spring of 1990, however, the future looked bleak. At a board meeting on April 30, a decision was to be made about folding the corps. Fortunately, a proposal was made to move the corps to Dallas by a man who had wanted to start a new corps in Texas. The board voted to allow the takeover and a month later, on Memorial Day weekend, the Sky Ryders of Texas began rehearsals.

Because the change had taken place so quickly and unexpectedly, the new director, Paul Proctor, didn't have a chance to set up long-term fund-raising. Bingo was an option, but not for at least two years because of local laws that called for new organizations to exist for a minimum period of time.

The 1990 season brought a brighter look to the corps, with the black pants of 1989 replaced with white and a repertoire that included *Savannah River Holiday*, *Wonderful Town*, *Turkey Trot*, *March for the Boston Symphony Orchestra* and *Liberty Fanfare*. The first year as a Texas corps yielded a DCI finish of 19th, so the corps was holding on after a challenging transition.

The 1991 season would bring the DCI Championships to their hometown and a return to the type of show the corps had been so successful with in 1986, 1987 and 1988. The music came from the Broadway hit "Camelot" and was strong enough to get the Sky Ryders back into finals in the 12th position. Fans were happy and the move to Dallas was beginning to result in a stronger program for the membership.

In 1992, another Broadway show was tapped, bringing the tuneful "Brigadoon" to the field. Plaid material was added to the shakos and a matching sash added an

appropriate look for the Scottish production. But money woes and a smaller corps landed the corps in 15th place at the championships, during DCI's 20th anniversary celebration in Madison, WI.

The corps was existing almost entirely on souvenir sales, appearance fees and member dues. It was getting more and more difficult to pay off bank loans for the buses and maintain the schedule that a DCI touring corps was required to fulfill.

A risky change of direction to a more contemporary musical

show in 1993 caused further slipping down the rankings at the season-ending DCI Championships in Jackson, MS. Two-thirds of the show was based on Edward Gregson's *Connotations* and the balance featured David Diamond's *Second Symphony, 4th Movement*.

Once again, drum corps fans and the judges didn't buy into the concept and the

corps did not achieve the finalist spot the members had hoped would come their way.

The off-season that followed was filled with rumors about the corps' declining financial status, but camps were scheduled and a show was planned for the 1994 season.

At the weekend of rehearsals in March, the corps still had about 80 members in attendance. By the next scheduled camp a month later, because of inaccurate information spread by several staff and members, the number dropped to less than a dozen and that was the end.

The corps had finally been able to start a bingo operation in the fall of 1993, but because it takes time to get a game established and producing a significant amount of revenue, it was too late.

Management was forced to declare bankruptcy for the organization a second time. All of the buses, equipment and uniforms were sold and the proceeds were applied to the debt.

Proctor was determined not to leave the Sky Ryders' name with a bad reputation, so he kept the bingo game operating to pay off the substantial debt for a number of years after the corps called it quits. Eventually all of the bank loans were paid off.

In 1996, a group of drum corps alumni, including a former director of the corps when it was in Kansas, attempted to restart the corps in Kansas City. The group got the corps off the ground with a new set of drums and a set of bugles paid for by a foundation.

The new edition of the Sky Ryders, with the blessing of Proctor, marched in a number of parades in 1996 and 1997 and started running a Drum Corps Midwest-sanctioned competition in the suburbs of Kansas City. The groups' geographic location made the show an ideal stop on the tour for corps heading to "Drums Along the Rockies" in Denver and it was an ideal fund-raiser for the fledgling organization.

After the founding director moved to another part of the country, the board brought George Tuthill back to run the corps. He had spent a dozen years in Salem, OR, running the Argonauts and then a summer youth band organization.

Unfortunately, too much ground had been lost prior to his arrival and Tuthill and the

(Right) Sky Ryders, 1990, at the DCI Championships in Buffalo, NY (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Sky Ryders, 1990, at the DCI Championships in Buffalo, NY (photo by Jim DeVine from the collection of Drum Corps World); Sky Ryders, 1992 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World); Sky Ryders, 1993 (photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of Drum Corps World).



board were unable to salvage the organization. Without ever getting onto the field, the Sky Ryders folded again, at least as a drum and bugle corps.

Former member Ann Duncan wasn't willing to let the name die at that point, so she started a winter guard which still exists. The non-profit Rainbow Booster Club, had been allowed to move from Dallas to Kansas City, continues to be the corporate sponsor of the Sky Ryders.

While the guard has kept the contest going over the years, having moved it to

Haskell Indian University in Lawrence, KS, about 35 miles west of Kansas City, there won't be a show in 2003. The board may bring the show back for corps heading toward Denver and the 2004 DCI Championships.

Out of the dozen or so drum and bugle corps that called the Great Plains home over the last 50 years, the Sky Ryders managed to stay alive the longer than most (the Blue Knights and Troopers are still active). Thousands of young people experienced being part of the corps, many from the city of Hutchinson with a relatively small population of 40,000. More were touched by the organization as they traveled from nearby

states or participated when the corps had a brief stay in Texas.

The Sky Ryders transitioned from being a totally local drum and bugle corps to competing on the international stage. Like the Bridgemen, Velvet Knights and many others, they presented a particularly entertaining brand of music and visuals that stood out among the thousands of corps that have existed over the last eight decades.



Sky Ryders, 1997 (photo by Roger Ellis from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Steve Vickers joined the Sky Ryders' feeder corps, the Jets, in 1961. He was director of that group during his junior year of high school in 1966, then marched with the Sky Ryders through his age-out year in 1970. Graduating from the University of Kansas with a bachelor of science degree in journalism in 1971, he was on the staff of the Sky Ryders until accepting the position of editor for Drum Corps World, then based in Golden, CO, in June 1973. A year later he purchased the publication. The newspaper was relocated to Madison, WI, in 1979.

He was primarily responsible for bringing the DCI Championships to Madison, WI, in 1985 and served as chairman of the local organizing committee in 1985, 1986, 1987, 1992, 1999 and 2002.

From 1986 to 2000, he participated on the board of directors for the Madison Drum and Bugle Corps Association, Inc., assisting with publicity and fund-raising.

In addition, he is secretary/treasurer of the 21st Century Drum & Bugle Corps Foundation, Inc., an organization that assists new junior corps starting in the United States.

His other interests include the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, attending plays and musicals in New York City and travel. He lives in Madison, WI.