


St. Kevin's Emerald Knights

by Paul Flaherty

The observations that follow are based on my experiences with one of the finest and most entertaining corps to perform in the quest for fame and glory in the 1950s and 1960s.

St. Kevin's was started in 1947 as a drill team by Father J. Joseph Kierce, who had been transferred to this new church parish in Dorchester, MA, from the Immaculate Conception Church in Winchester, MA.

"I.C." had a powerhouse drum corps named the Queensmen. Father Kierce immediately made the move to have a drum corps in St. Kevin's parish. Thus, there was another CYO corps on the scene in Boston, MA.

St. Kevin's stumbled around football fields for years in class C. They finally captured the class C title in 1954 and moved up to class B where it looked like they would be stuck for another seven or eight

their craft.

The corps took the field by storm in 1956. No, it wasn't the best corps on the judging sheets, but it was the mover and shaker, placing in the first or second position at every contest throughout the year.

In the 1950s, there were two major circuits operating in the New England area,



(Above) St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, 1962, at the National Dream in Jersey City, NJ (photo from the collection of Bob BellaRosa/EasternReview); (below left) St. Kevin's Emerald Knights on the inspection line at the 1958 VFW Nationals in New York City (photo by Walter Ermel from the collection of Ron Da Silva).

Coast was exposed to St. Kevin's.

The corps ventured to its first nationals in Atlantic City, NJ. From the opening strains of *Pagliacci* to the final notes of *Sleep*, the crowd was with the corps. *Tiger Rag/One O'Clock Jump* with solos by "Buzzy" Bergdoll had the convention hall swinging. St. Kevin's became an instant crowd favorite.

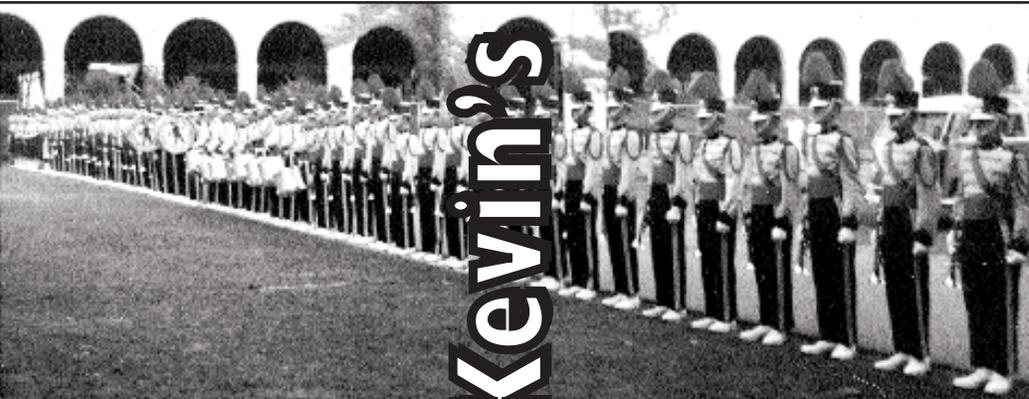
Interestingly, the corps was lucky to be in the final 10 at all. St. Patrick's of Jersey City, NJ, suffered a penalty, thereby opening the door for St. Kevin's to capture the final spot in the night show. Taking quick advantage of the momentum, St. Kevin's moved up to a seventh place finish.

The summer of 1958 was another growing and thriving year for the corps. The ranks were expanding with new talent. Bergdoll and Fisher churned out a program that was different and innovative in its design.

The concert, *Volga Boatmen*, was performed with a French horn duet aptly handled by Buzzy Bergdoll and Larry Bell. It was during this tune that Fisher decided the horn line should place its horns on the ground and perform rhythmic clapping.

Of course, the judges went crazy because at the time there was a rule stating the loss of one-tenth of a point for dropped equipment. At the conclusion of the judging, because it was such a trauma for the judges, Fisher argued that the equipment was, in fact, *placed* not *dropped*, thus there should be no loss to the corps. Thus new rule was entered into the books titled "deliberate placement." This was not the last time St. Kevin's would create a change for the activity.

St. Kevin's placed fourth at VFW Nationals in 1958. During this year, the corps was joined by a new director/manager, Ed Rooney.



years before maybe being good enough to move up to class A.

It was then that the magic hit for St. Kevin's. Sometime in the middle of 1955, Director Bernie Beaulieu put together the team of Frank Bergdoll and Cliff Fisher. When I say "magic," it was magic. Bergdoll, a firefighter, taught bugles, and Fisher, a telephone repairman, taught drums and marching.

The corps became an entirely different machine with everyone treating it very seriously. There was not a gloomy face in the crowd. By 1955, people were starting to learn

St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, 1960, at VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo from the collection of Paul Flaherty).

which created sort of a dilemma for St. Kevin's at the end of 1956. Because the corps had been one of the front-runners throughout the year, one of the circuits moved the corps into class A. The other circuit left the corps in class B, which meant they had to learn two routines for 1957, one for class A and another for class B.

The 1957 season in class B was a clean sweep from beginning to end. The corps went undefeated. In class A, it was not a clean sweep, but it was the makings of what was to come. This was the first year the East



He immediately made some noticeable changes, the most evident being removal of the gold from the uniform. He replaced it with red. This was the birth of the name "the Christmas tree corps" because the uniform was now a combination of red, white and green.

In 1959, St. Kevin's became the sole reigning champion in the New England area, winning all of the New England area competitions and then heading South to Roosevelt Stadium for their first time at the National Dream competition. They won the contest and the hearts of everyone in New Jersey.

That was the start of the reigning "big three" Jersey corps from 1959-1964: Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights, Garfield Cadets and St. Kevin's Emerald Knights. No, that's not a mistake. The whole New Jersey drum corps society opened their doors to St. Kevin's and welcomed the corps as an official "Jersey" unit, an honor that was a first and has not been afforded since.

OK, I've been saying, "New England, East Coast, Jersey"; let's move to 1960 when the whole United States had an opportunity to see the corps they had been reading about.

St. Kevin's was having another banner growing year. With the advent of new instrumentation, Bergdoll was able to put together a musical repertoire that is still touted as one of the greatest routines ever. The corps was trading wins and seconds throughout the year, and then came the VFW nationals in Detroit, MI.

Talk about omens. St. Kevin's stayed at the Cavalier Motel, attended Mass at the Blessed Sacrament Church and lined up for the parade on Garfield Avenue. Is that eerie or what?

First in the prelims and rolling to a national championship easily . . . HEY, what's going on here? Who are those people on the other side

of the sideline? Wham, bam, tick-tick-tick-tick . . . there goes the national title. Should have been more careful in lining up on the starting line. However, St. Kevin's went on to capture its second straight National Dream title.

In 1961, the Dorchester corps was in the mix with Blessed Sacrament, Chicago Cavaliers, Cambridge Caballeros, Garfield Cadets, Belleville Black Knights, Chicago Royal Aires, Madison Scouts, St. Vincent's Cadets and the Kilties. Once again, St. Kevin's



St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, 1962, at the National Dream (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

captured the National Dream trophy, winning the title three years running. St. Kevin's placed sixth at the VFW Nationals in Miami, FL, and won the "Drumfest."

St. Kevin's was in the mix again in 1962. They won some, they lost some. They placed fifth at the VFW Nationals in Milwaukee, WI, and again won the "Drumfest."

In 1963, the corps once again started to move toward the top of the mix. Bergdoll's horn line was at its best. The corps won the "Drumfest" again, but did not attend the VFW Nationals because it was too far away in Seattle, WA.

There were few age-outs from the horn and drum lines, so they remained mostly

corps was losing by points, not tenths. Everyone kept working, practicing seven days a week, and the corps slowly moved up in the rankings.

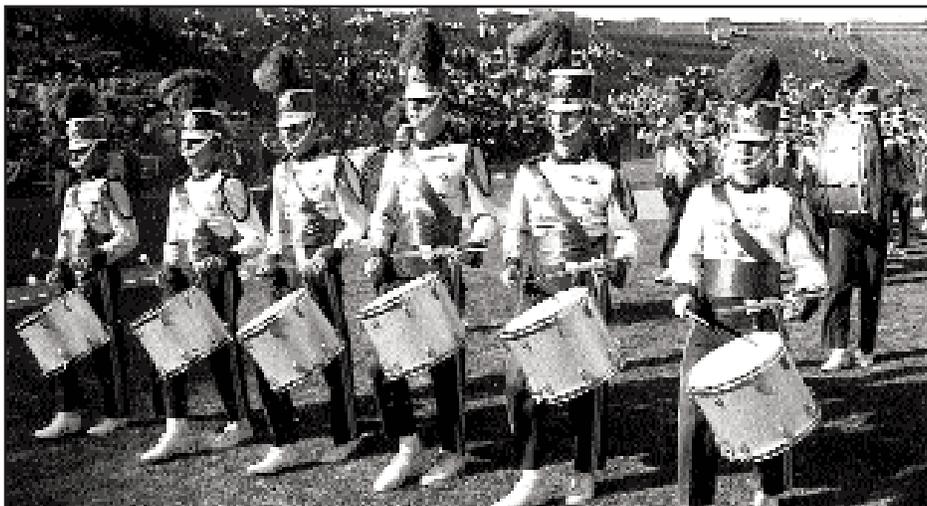
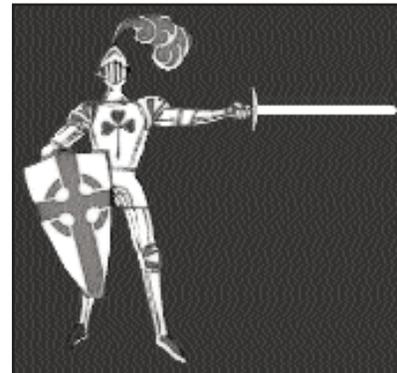
At nationals time, the character of the corps came through. Bergdoll and

drum major.

The corps still had Sheila Kennedy Flaherty as a color guard instructor. She was the person who introduced the big working guards to the drum corps scene -- another first for St. Kevin's.

The corps held together after drafting some younger kids from the feeder corps, the Gems, early in the season to fill the ranks. They didn't have the luxury of a break-in period. They had to learn immediately.

The beginning of the year was a disaster. The year was a disaster. The



St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, 1964, at the National Dream (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

intact for 1964. The corps had a new, big sound and tough charts, but a line that was capable.

Then there was trouble in the ranks -- physical fighting, dissent, dissatisfaction, degeneration of a foundation -- resulting in the loss of Rooney, Bergdoll and Fisher.

The corps needed a new manager and Ray Latnick stepped in to do the job. Alumni George Oliviero, John Flynn, Jack O'Brien and Paul Flaherty became instructors and Walter Vosburgh was appointed the new

train them to eventually become Knights.

The St. Kevin's Emerald Gems graduated its members into the Knights. Generally these kids ranged in age from 11 to 14. The St. Kevin's Emerald Chips was the baby corps, where 6 years old was a good starting age.

The managers, instructors and quartermasters for these corps should be commended, because they never saw their corps hit the big time. Their joy was in maintaining the Emerald Knights in the top echelon of the drum corps scenes.

Fisher were back in the fold and the corps was on its way to Cleveland, OH, for VFW Nationals.

The corps was happy with a tie for third in the prelims and fifth place in finals. Once again, St. Kevin's captured the "Dream" championship. At the end of the season, Rooney rejoined the corps.

During these years, St. Kevin's was fortunate to have a feeder system, which was established to continuously take young kids early and

Although the Gems were a feeder unit, and usually feeder units were in class C, they were blowing away their competition to the tune of 57 straight wins, so the circuits moved them up to class B. Within two years they were winning again and did not stop

The one thing that remained a constant was the music. Once again, Bergdoll had put together a repertoire that would challenge any corps today. I say that with the deepest respect for the talent of the kids today. Dig through your old 33s and if you're lucky

titles.

The corps did travel to Jersey City for the VFW Nationals at which they tied the Madison Scouts for 10th place. This was the last time St. Kevin's ventured out of Boston to attend a national championship. The die

was cast and the future was inevitable.

The corps was still pumping and not quitting in 1967. The character and enthusiasm of the kids never left. Everyone was working to succeed, but to no avail. It was just not coming together.

The nationals were scheduled to be in Boston. How could St. Kevin's not be there? What could they do to ensure they would maintain the unbroken streak of having been in the finals of every nationals they had attended? The corps selected the best of what it had and drove every rehearsal in that direction until it was top caliber competitive quality.

History shows the corps was successful by pulling down a fifth-place finish in the prelims, which placed the corps in the finals. No one was more surprised

than the sixth- and seventh-place corps in prelims. In fact, there were a lot of surprised people that day.

St. Kevin's went on to finish seventh in a field of seven in the final competition. That



St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, 1965, at VFW Nationals held inside McCormick Place in Chicago, IL (photo from the collection of Paul Flaherty).

until the Knights drained them of their personnel. The Gems started their winning ways again two years later.

I was the horn instructor for the Gems for many years and the proudest moments of my life came when Bergdoll came down to review the kids to see if any were ready for the Knights. One year, he took 21 horn players.

One kid played the full contra part of *South Rampart St. Parade* as his audition piece. Some of those Gems and Chips are playing today in the alumni corps.

The 1965 season was the beginning of the end for the Emerald Knights. It was not a quick downhill run, but rather a slow change eating away at the core of the activity in Dorchester, MA. The corps was still a national competitor in 1965, but you could see and feel the changes taking place.

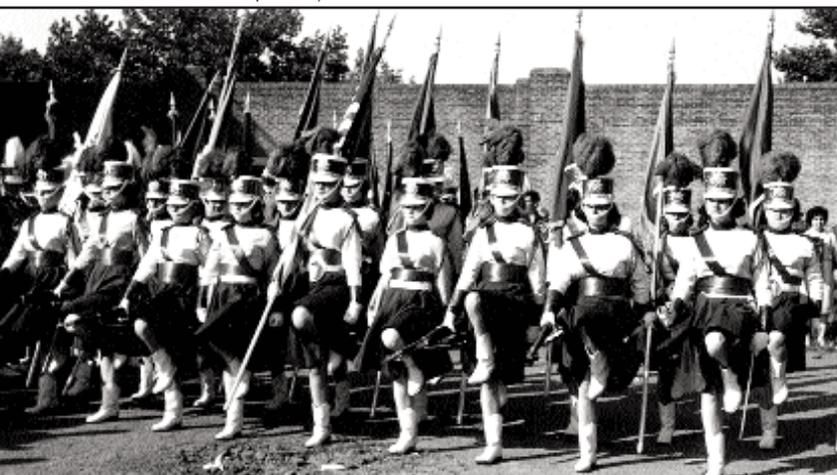
you'll have a recording.

The 1965 National Dream is one of the tracks on St. Kevin's "Millennium 2000" CD and if you listen to it, you'll understand why I make such a brash, challenging statement. When the corps comes off the line to *Stars and Stripes Forever*, goes through tunes such as *Seahawk/Columbia*, *South Rampart St. Parade*, *Charmaine* and *This Nearly Was Mine*, you'll hear it.

Although the corps struggled through the year, it once again traveled to Chicago, IL, to attend the nationals held indoors at McCormick Place. St. Kevin's again was in the finals, finishing 11th.

The pressure of Vietnam decimated the ranks in 1966. The corps had a hard time, but it managed to regroup at the end of the season and capture another CYO title. If you

St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, August 9, 1964, at the National Dream (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).



check the records, you'll probably find that St. Kevin's dominated the CYO circuit from 1957 through 1966. There were losses of the title, but not too many.

Along with those titles were a plethora of VFW, American Legion state titles and New England



St. Kevin's Emerald Gems (photo from the collection of Paul Flaherty).

was the last nationals St. Kevin's ever competed in.

The summer of 1968 was another tough year for older personnel and still more difficult for the new kids. The older members



(Left) St. Kevin's Emerald Knights Alumni (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) St. Kevin's Emerald Knights Alumni, November 2001, at a concert on Boston Common (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

still had their memories, but the younger, newer ones wanted to make memories. It was not to be. At the end of 1968 season, Rooney, Fisher and Bergdoll resigned. Flaherty was appointed director and his job was not going to be easy.

The 1969 season was the final year of existence for the St. Kevin's Emerald Knights as a junior corps. It was finished; the fat lady was standing in the end zone and through it all the kids never gave up. The 1969 corps hit that starting line with as much zeal and enthusiasm as any of its predecessors. Unfortunately, the horn line was down to 24 players and the drum line was lucky to muster eight or nine players at any given time.

There was a merger at the end of 1969,



but that's another story for another day . . .

At the corps reunion sometime around 1996, one of the members of the 1969 corps, Jim Powers, took the podium to say what it meant to be a member of the 1969 Emerald Knights. It made for a fitting climax and the entire audience at the reunion was truly moved by his comments.

To Father Kierce, God bless you and keep you. Our prayers are with you and we hope you'll continue to be well. It was you who made the United States aware there was a church in Dorchester, MA, that had a very famous drum and bugle corps. As the junior drum and bugle corps is gone, so is the St. Kevin's church.



St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, July 27, 1963, in Garfield, NJ (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Paul "Flabo" Flaherty joined St. Kevin's in 1955 and graduated rather than aged-out in 1959. He remained with the corps as an assistant music instructor/drill instructor under Frank Bergdoll and Cliff Fisher.

At the same time, he was the music instructor for the Gems feeder unit for many years. Today some of his wards are standing alongside him in St. Kevin's Alumni.

It has been said his blood runs "GREEN," and has ever since he joined. He was with the corps through the crescendo of growth and the decrescendo of the decline.

He is now director of the alumni corps which was formed in 2000 to play some tunes for a planned millennium reunion. There have been reunions taking place in five year breaks since 1979.

Good night all you "guys and gals," as Ed Rooney would say. I hope I did you proud.