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by Jud Spena

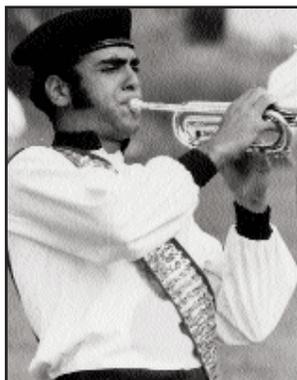
September 1964, Watkins Glen (population 2,716) in Schuyler County (population 15,000), rural upstate New York's Finger Lakes Region. It was announced in school and in the paper. The American Legion was forming a drum and bugle corps for boys. No experience necessary. Instruments and



instruction would be provided. It was free.

This corps, soon named the Squires, took root in its small

(Top to bottom) The first Squires corps in 1965; a group photo in 1971; the author in 1971 (photos from the collection of Jud Spena).



town and grew from 30 or so pre-teen boys struggling to get themselves on the street, to become perennial state champion and national contender.

Watkins Glen's first corps got started in 1933 when the Boy Scouts and the

Legion started the first corps, the Legion Cadets, active into the mid-1950s.

In 1949, a senior corps was formed in nearby Montour Falls, the Seneca Chiefs, active until 1965. Both marched in many local parades and entered field competition less regularly. Each was successful in its own right.

The "Cadets" ventured into state competition, placing second in 1937, fourth in 1938 and fifth in 1940. When the national conventions came to New York City (1947)

and Philadelphia (1949), the Cadets took part. The Chiefs competed in the New York Canadian Association.

Vern Alling, Chuck Calhoun and Carl Isley started the corps; three dads, growing up in the activity, who wanted to provide the same outlet they had enjoyed for their kids and a new generation. Calhoun and Isley grew up in the Glen and were veterans of the Cadets.

After returning home from the service in the late 1950s, the three marched in the Geneva Appleknockers, a successful and innovative senior corps of national stature. Their modest aspirations -- to provide a constructive activity for the county's boys and a group that provided pageantry and entertainment at parades and social outings. What happened over the next 17 years was as remarkable as it was unpredictable.

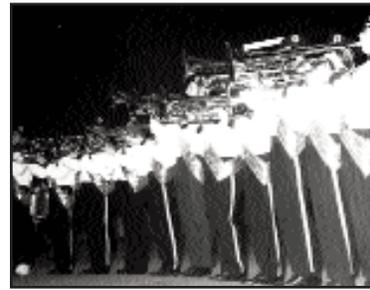
The time was ripe. Since there had been a corps in the Glen for the past 30 years, drum

corps was a household word around town. The baby boom was in full flower. The boys needed something to "keep them off the streets." Many of the former corps member's kids were at the right age.

On Saturday mornings, 40 to 50 boys gathered at the American Legion to practice. Everyone learned to march in close order, military style.

Before instruments arrived, the drummers practiced on pads. Absent much musical experience, the learning process was slow and tedious. When bugles finally arrived, Calhoun and Isley patiently taught the music through a combination of music reading and rote learning. Music was marked with V's and O's (valve and open) placed under the notes.

As spring came, the corps hit the streets for practice. With its drums, bugles and



Watkins Glen Squires, March 4, 1972, at a standstill in Rochester, NY (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

flags, the corps created quite a stir. Eventually marching by just about every house in town, people came out to the sidewalk to watch this new corps march by. Kids would follow along on bicycles, neighborhood dogs would chase the young marchers and howl along, mimicking the blare of bugles.

The first uniform was makeshift, simple and inexpensive. Black shoes, white socks, black pants and white shirts with a red ascot and black beret. The berets and ascots on this group of young kids created a very "continental" and very "cute" appearance. As a result, the corps was often referred to as "the little kids from Watkins Glen."

The corps debuted on Memorial Day, 1965. Music was simple, recognizable and largely patriotic. *In a Little Spanish Town, Grand Old Flag, Happy Wanderer, Walk Right In, This is My Country* and *Colonel Bogey*, to

name a few.

The Squires continued as a parade corps for five seasons. Parents car-pooled to get the members to parades. Membership was local. Just about all of the members were, if not from the Glen itself, residents of the Watkins Glen School District.

Field competition was limited to two or three times a year. In 1969, last place (19th, score 20.33) at the New York American Legion Championship led to reorganization and a change in direction to emphasize field competition. This event, in and of itself, (where one judge wrote, "what are you doing here?" and one irate fan yelled, "Get 'em off the field!"), became the basis of an obsession for the members.

New instructors were hired and the corps joined the Penn York Circuit, an association of roughly 30 corps. The corps bought school buses. The "banana boats," as they were "affectionately" referred to, would eventually take these "school bus cadets" to all corners of the drum corps world.

The corps also sponsored its first field competition, "Echoes in the Valley," at



Watkins Glen Squires, 1974 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Watkins Glen Central School's Alumni Field. Hundreds turned out for the Sunday afternoon event, packing the bleachers, lining the sidelines and filling the grassy end zone, many on blankets and lawn chairs.

The 1971 season was a landmark. The Squires, its newly-formed feeder corps, the Pages, and its competitive winter color guard made appearances in every month of the year, totaling 65; 13 field contests, 23

experienced their first success in field competition, winning seven contests. They made their first trip to Boston for the World Open, qualifying for the class B finals in fifth (last) position and climbing to third in the evening finals. The corps and the community, more accustomed to being near the bottom, were thrilled.

Local radio, prompted by on-the-road reports from 16-year-old member and budding journalist Steve Rondinaro, kept supporters up on the Squires' success and promoted a reception. An estimated 1,200 people turned out to welcome the corps home, accompanied by a motorcade of fire trucks and police cars with sirens blaring and lights flashing. In August, the corps won its first Penn York Class B championship.

Much of the corps' success could be attributed to drill instructor Solon "Hardy"



Watkins Glen Squires, 1976 (photo by Moe from the collection of Drum Corps World).

parades and just about every social event around town imaginable, including church bazaars, basketball and football games, firemen's fairs and the U.S. Grand Prix.

The corps made money and became

squarely ensconced in the community. Local audiences loved the corps' catchy songs, including *Conquest*, *God Bless America*, *Man of LaMancha* and a "stripper"-style *My Wife the Dancer*. Everyone knew the Squires.

The corps

Carrasas. He was another link to the Geneva Appleknockers, having been their drill instructor in their most successful years. Similarly, for St. Joseph's of Batavia, he led them to some of their highest placings in national competition in the mid-1960s.

His skillful drill writing and strict instruction gave this young corps a considerable competitive advantage. While strong in all captions on their level, the Squires were often competitive with national-caliber corps in marching and maneuvering.

The Squires continued to grow in size, popularity and stature in the drum corps world. In 1972, the corps put two winter guards into competition, made its first run at a state championship, placing a strong third, and returned to the World Open to win the class B title. In 1973, they made their first tour (10 days), winning class A titles at the American International Open and U.S. Open. In addition, the corps won the Penn York Championship, won 13 of 20 contests entered including the state championship prelims, and just missed winning the state title.

Interestingly, the corps was unable to take part in two contests in July as "Summer Jam," the world's largest rock concert (to that time) brought over 600,000 people to the Glen. The state police closed all roads and, for three days, vehicular movement in and



Watkins Glen Squires at a show in 1976 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

out of Watkins Glen came to a complete halt.

In 1974, the corps moved into open class. The fact that DCI held its championship a mere 25 miles away in Ithaca added to the excitement. Membership grew to 99. The Pages, 68 strong, brought total membership in the organization to 167. For the first time, a number of members were drawn to the corps from other communities, somewhat unique for 1974 and an indication of the corps' growing popularity outside of the Glen.

Another indication of the corps' growing stature was the large audience that attended the annual spring concert. This event, featuring the full corps, the Pages, small ensembles, the color guards and novelty acts, drew nearly 1,000 people into Watkins Glen's high school auditorium.

The move into the open class was inauspicious. The Squires found themselves buying tickets to see finals of the major contests. Once again the corps placed second at the state championship (to Auburn's Purple Lancers, New York's one and only DCI finalist). At Cornell's Schoellkopf Field, in its best performance of the year in front of a largely partisan Thursday afternoon prelim audience, the corps managed 24th place and associate membership in DCI.

As an interesting anecdote and window to the times, with the annual tour just finished, most corps members were back at summer jobs. DCI required those members to take off another afternoon. The corps assembled at noon at



(Above) Watkins Glen Squires, 1974 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Watkins Glen Squires, approximately 1979, at DCI Canada in Hamilton, ONT (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

the school for a quick warm up and dash to Ithaca for prelims. At least one or two members had to miss the contest because of work. They were home for supper.

Twenty-fourth place created momentum into the next season. Membership grew to over 100. Off-season, the Squires traveled as guests to the New York State Elks Convention at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills. Summer competition now included DCI East, Kentucky's Bluegrass Nationals as well as the U.S. and American International Open.

Music included swing arrangements of the *National Emblem March* and *London Bridge is Falling Down*. Audiences loved them.

By mid-season, the Squires had won their first state championship. Veteran members who had experienced 1969's last-place finish were elated. Celebrating for the rest of the weekend included a daylong party at Seneca Lake. In the following weeks, the Squires surprised their competitors as well as themselves with high finishes at DCI East (4th), American International (6th) and the U.S. Open (5th).

Judges at critiques were talking in terms of the top 12. Staff, management and corps members were as baffled as they were surprised by the sudden emergence onto the national scene. At DCI in Philadelphia, the Squires placed an impressive 13th, just six tenths of a point from the finals.



GE judge Dave Richards, emotionally charged by the performance, proclaimed on tape to colleague Shirlee Whitcomb, "They're not the little kids from Watkins Glen today!" Outsiders looked upon it as a disappointment, while the corps basked in the glory of the near-miss. The Squires had come full circle. No one was disappointed in that.

In many ways, 1975 was the high water mark. Nonetheless, the corps continued to grow. More effort and energy was focused on making the DCI Finals.

Members from out of the area were actively recruited. Summer employment was provided, often in nearby vineyards or on dairy farms.

Music became more sophisticated. Titles such as *Moorside March*, *Polovetsian Dances* and *Alexander Nevsky* replaced popular show tunes and patriotic songs. Summer travel expanded to the point that the corps was on the road for the majority of the season.

Competitive success continued as the Squires won three more state championships, earned DCI Associate status five consecutive times (a record) and placed in finals of most major contests entered, including DCI East, DCI North and the Key to the Sea.

The high point in the existence of the corps came at the rain-delayed 1977 U.S. Open. Performing after midnight, the corps placed third, within hailing distance of the Crossmen and champion Seneca Optimists.

In 1978, the Squires performed the *Star*



Watkins Glen Squires, 1977, at the DCI Championships in Boulder, CO, during prelims (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

*Spangled Banner* and halftime for the Buffalo Bills at Rich Stadium. Earlier that summer, the National Anthem was filmed and used for the nighttime sign-off on television stations in Rochester and Elmira, NY.

By 1980, the membership had become so dispersed that fewer than 15 percent were local residents. The strains on finances and human resources caused large turnovers and diminished local support. At the end of the 1980 season (after competing in class A with 53 members), the corps changed direction in an effort to re-establish its local roots. It was, to a great degree, quite successful.

In 1981, 92 Squires completed a competitively successful summer with second place at the state championship and finalist appearances at the DCE Championship, U.S. Open, American International Open and Key to the Sea. At season's end, the corps, using a staff member's credit card to pay for gasoline, limped home from Montreal. A bus

breakdown precluded the season's would-be final performance at an NFL football game in Syracuse's Carrier Dome.

The Squires never made it to the 1982 season. Time had finally caught up with the corps. National level competition, with its overwhelming demands on finances, logistics and human resources, were too much for the small community that had so proudly supported the corps.

The Squires were the quintessential small town drum corps that rose above its modest roots. Amazingly, the corps placed first or second in almost half of the over 200 contests entered. Among 82 firsts are equally impressive strings of four state championships (in a time when that really meant something), five DCI top 25

finishes, numerous finals appearances at the major "open" contests and DCI regionals and a near-miss for the DCI Finals. By any measure, the Squires were a very successful competitive drum corps.

More importantly, the corps gave its members an experience of a lifetime, its community a sense of pride. For many (including me), the musical experiences would lead to careers as band directors, professional musicians, arrangers and judges.

For all, the value of teamwork, the thrill of public performance and the knowledge that hard work and perseverance do lead ultimately to success were lessons well-learned by the hundreds of young men and women who so proudly wore the uniform.

Watkins Glen's Squires, founded by three dads whose purpose in doing so was "to keep the boys off the streets," achieved its goals and much more.

Watkins Glen Squires, 1978 (photo by Jim DeWitt from the collection of Drum Corps World).



*Jud Spena was born and grew up in Watkins Glen, NY, joining the Squires at the age of nine in 1964 when the corps was formed and marched until aging out in 1975. He stayed as an instructor and program coordinator until the corps broke up in 1982.*

*He chose a career in music, receiving degrees in music from Mansfield University of Pennsylvania (BS) and Ithaca College (MM).*

*A band director and music department chair in Binghamton, NY, his elementary bands have consistently earned top honors.*

*He has judged marching and concert competitions in New York, Pennsylvania and Kentucky and is a guest conductor often for countywide festivals for young bands. He is a professional trumpet player, performing with the Glimmerglass Opera and Rome Festival orchestras. He is currently a member of the Binghamton Philharmonic.*

*Wife Rebecca and children, Samantha, Lucy and Michael, are all musicians.*