

Chapter 14: Movin' On

At the end of 1962, it had been ten full years since the formation of the tiny Boy Scout band, way back in 1952. What Bud Parker had started was now probably light years removed from what had been originally planned. It was also five years from the inception of the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps, the unit that had evolved from those humble beginnings. What had begun with a diverse group of people, who had a common, binding interest, had ended up, through the efforts of all, as a going concern. There were very few left of that original group, most having been replaced by new generations. This, of course, was due to age restrictions. They had helped to mould a Corps that had a brief but glorious history in its field, establishing milestones on its way and creating traditions as it grew.



Other than Al Baggs original idea of winning the Canadian Championship in two years, there had been no detailed long range planning, certainly not any that anticipated five years on top. Rather, it had been handled year by year, facing challenges that arose and most often surmounting them.

The Challenge

To reverse an old saying, there was no place to go but down and the challenge now was to try to maintain what had thus far been achieved. Two factors existed to make this goal difficult.

The first was the fact that there were more contests in Canada than ever before, due to growing interest and participation in the Drum Corps movement. This gave more units a chance to gain experience, thus improving their quality. The other obvious factor stemming from the first was that there were more Corps in the C.D.C.A.

Things could, and would, get tougher. A new, very promising Corps from Ottawa had made an appearance on the scene lately. They were the La Salle Cadets, or Cadets La Salle, and they had all the makings of a strong contender. You could never relax in this business. One of the bad things about being on top was that you hated to think about not being there, thus every move, every contest becomes vital. Because of this, it is a matter of personal opinion whether the Corps was as much fun to be in, at this stage. However, the drive for victory was the idea fostered, and I suppose that, at the time, no one would have had it any other way. The Optimists had been on the top of the heap locally for almost all of their first five years, so let's have a look and see how they managed for the next five.

Reflecting the success of 1962's show, not too many changes were contemplated for 1963's. It is always prudent to make some changes, as no presentation is beyond improvement, and fans tire of repetition. Some Corps kept certain numbers in their field repertoire for so long that they became familiar trademarks. Hawthorne Caballeros, with "España Cañi", and Blessed Sacrament, with "National Emblem" were two examples of this tactic. However, units that did this usually changed some, or all, of the rest of their show, over a period of time.

Changes for 1963

For the Optimist Corps of 1963, planned changes included using the themes from the movies “Lawrence of Arabia” and “El Cid” to open the show. “Ain’t Necessarily So” and “Chattanooga Choo Choo⁵” for the standstill contest. A first choice for the opening number, “Barabbas” did not work out. This is where judgment plays a large part in planning. It is often not known if any changes made are for the better until the season opens and they are judged.

There were other changes in the offering for this year, not all of them concerned with the content and presentation of this year's offering.

One thing that never changed was the annual proliferation of rumours that always swirled around the Corps. The most outlandish circulated this year, indeed, likely any year, was that the Optimists were going to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show. This was humorous as well as misleading. A mainstay of Sunday evening prime time CBS Television, this show often featured unusual acts. Drum Corps, however, was not usually, if ever, included. Besides, Drum Corps does not come across well under studio conditions. Even outside, where they belong, the visual effect lends itself well to television coverage, but the audio leaves something to be desired. It is the nature of the instruments. Finally, in a humorous vein, if Ed Sullivan had wanted Drum Corps on his show, he would have wanted the whole contest, not one Corps.

Mr Baggs steps down

Definitely, the most drastic change came as a surprise to some, but it was inevitable. Al Baggs stepped down as Corps Director of the Optimists Drum Corps.

This sober, somewhat aloof, but always friendly man had made a profound impression on this Corps, and much of the class it displayed was of his stamp. He had visualized and overseen the original merger that led to the existence of the Corps in its present form. His vision of a future championship Corps had given this outfit a goal, without which it might not have progressed as it did. Selecting the right people, who became infused with his ideas, and his organizational ability, provided them the vehicle with which to proceed. He was the ideal manager, seldom sticking his nose into the mechanics of the Corps, rightfully leaving that to the instructors. The success of the enterprise, due to their competence, was a direct result of his selection of the right people in the first place.

Once it was on the road to success, his guidance with a firm hand kept things under control. He stood up in meetings of a political nature for his Corps and was respected, if not always liked, by many outside of the Optimist circle. One measure of that respect, within the Corps, was always evident during meetings. If an instructor or a member was addressing the Corps, there was often a low hum of conversation and much fidgeting going on. It could distract and embarrass the speaker. When that sombre, conservatively dressed figure walked in, complete

⁵ Editor's note: “I'm in the Mood For Love” and “It Ain't Necessarily So” formed the original concert. At the Preview we got an overtime penalty and the Corps discovered that the show was too long. The easiest option was to replace concert. The Preview was at the end of May and we had less than a month to find a new concert, get it arranged and learn it before our next contest. Karl Bossert's father arranged “Chattanooga Choo Choo”. The 1963 recording at Mundelein, IL was only our second public performance of “Chattanooga Choo Choo”.

silence immediately descended and all disturbances ceased. He stated his business quietly and effectively, nobody daring to disturb the scene. This phenomenon was always evident.

Yet, Al Baggs would sit in the restaurant with everybody and be part of the whole. It was just that you never doubted who was the boss. Even those of his colleagues who did not adhere to his ideas, often had to, as the modern phrase states, “shape up or ship out”.

Mr. Baggs had been a member of the Optimist Club since he helped engineer the takeover of the band, by the club, back in 1955. Now, with his resignation as Corps Director, he was made a lifelong member of Optimist International. Both he and his wife, Gladys, had devoted much time to the Corps, and, with other responsibilities, no doubt felt it was time to step aside. Whether this was due to an overload of work or to give somebody else a chance to run the Corps is not known. There was somebody in the wings.



1965: Mr Baggs (centre) with Chief Judges of A.L. & V.F.W.

The official reason given was that he wished to devote his time to the affairs of the Canadian Drum Corps Association, working for Corps in general. Along with this, he still remained as Chief Judge of the Canadian Association, where his administrative abilities were an asset as, indeed, they had been with the Corps. Hardly anything ever went wrong when Al Baggs was in charge of the Optimists. When another capable fellow by the name of Clare Reid stepped down as Contest Co-ordinator for the C.D.C.A., Al Baggs was given that position.

The prolonged discussion of this man does not even scratch the surface of his activities within the Optimist Corps, and Drum Corps in general. That alone could fill another book. Not without his faults, and who is, he to this day, 1998, is still vividly remembered by all who crossed his path within the Corps and otherwise. To say that the success of the Corps had much to do with him would be an understatement.

On January 28, 1963, at the Ice Follies, the Corps played for the last time with Al Baggs as Corps Director. It was a poignant moment, as all had come to respect and like this man. Not given to public displays of emotion, he went as he came, quietly, soberly and with dignity. His like would not be seen again.

Now, the problem arose, who was to replace this outstanding person.

Our Staff

As often, the solution to this was somewhat surprising, if not entirely unexpected. Waiting in the wings, young, enthusiastic, intelligent, and by now knowledgeable enough, was none other than that paragon of diligence, Don Daber.

Yes, Don Daber now became the Corps Director of the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps. This Corps had been winning championships before he even knew what a Drum Corps was. When he did become aware of the activity, it was still quite a while before he ever heard of the Optimists. Now, he was the director. In the approximately three years that he had been connected, his accumulated knowledge and enthusiasm had made him a very good candidate for the position. It was also possible that nobody else wanted the job. It is easy to move into a successful enterprise, but not so easy to keep it that way.

However, the future cannot be foretold, and he willingly picked up the reins laid down by Al Baggs. It was a good job somebody did. His assumption of this task only added to a host of others for which he was responsible. As of now, Don Daber was:

- ▶ Corps Director of the Optimists
- ▶ Publicity Director of the Corps and the O.D.C.A. (Ontario Drum Corps Association)
- ▶ Director of the Booster Club
- ▶ Editor of Green Capsule Comments

The remainder of the staff stayed pretty much the same. Barry Bell and Lorne Ferrazzutti were still on horns and drums, respectively. Often, they both had capable assistance from talented, ambitious members. One of their assets was that they generally knew when and how to use it.

Ivor Bramley now became a full-time drill and guard instructor. The creator of much of that drill was still the undeniably creative Doug McPhail.

The Optimist Club, who formally confirmed these appointments, oversaw all of this. They would not neglect their investment.

As far as the actual marching unit was concerned, there were also alterations. Jim McConkey stayed on as Drum Major for another year, but now to be accompanied by one Glen Durish as an assistant D.M. Andy Henderson, a former rifleman, became the Guard Captain. The previous year, our riflemen had used genuine bayonets attached to their rifles, to give added flash to their performance. These were looked upon with some misgivings, as they were a real weapon and capable of inflicting injury. There had been incidents in which a flag was torn, and one bayonet had flown off a rifle and stuck in the ground at a contest. It could have stuck in a person. These bayonet/rifle combinations would be spun at high speed and flipped in the air to a height of six to eight feet. The people handling them were long-time veterans and good at what they did. In 1963, new people came in and a rash of near accidents that occurred when training led to the bayonets being removed. It was probably for the best.

Phil Hennings, who had been the first Drum Major the Corps ever had was now the Equipment Manager, a post he had held before.

One of the eight bass horn players the Corps had lost due to age, yes, eight out of twelve, was Richard Boehnke. He now became Treasurer/Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, and assistant to the executive. Staying around to help out when one's playing days were over, was a common thing in Drum Corps. Often it was an attempt to prolong one's days in the Corps, staving off the inevitable. It was also an indication of the attachments that developed.

Besides being Assistant Drum Major, Glen Durish was also Social Director of the Corps, which was becoming increasingly a world unto itself. A modern offshoot of this development is the tendency of Corps to play for themselves rather than for the crowd. By this I mean the choice of music. The average Drum Corps crowd is usually possessed of ordinary tastes, neither lowbrow nor highbrow, nor prone to one particular type of music. A policy of choosing a music program that only follows a theme pleasing to those playing it can result in negative reactions. An often heard comment is, "They are very good, but what are they playing?". It is not always a good idea to lose the common touch.

Other News

The Toronto Senior Corps, the Jesters, mentioned before in connection with rumoured Optimist affiliation, were still largely instructed by Optimist people. Their Assistant Director was one Bill Jay, who went back through the Optimists to the Danforth Crusaders. He was also, along with Fred Johnson, very much responsible for the creation and operation of the Optimist Bantams. Jesters' bugles were taught by Barry Bell and Lorne Ferrazzutti taught their drums. Numerous members of this Corps were ex-Optimists. Their director,



1962: Jesters at Nationals

at this time, was one Vince Macciocchi, also a bugle judge, later to become Chief Judge of the Canadian Association. The situation that had existed between these two Corps, and led to some rancour due to the number of current of past Optimist people involved, was not entirely unavoidable. Nearly all Senior Corps in Canada actively solicited Junior Corps personnel, sometimes even before their junior playing days were over. This could take the form of verbal inducement, often accompanied by lavish treatment at parties or rehearsals. If one was accorded this treatment by one Corps and then went to another, the backlash was strong and sometime long-lasting; however, it should not have been, as no one was really obligated to anyone else.

Don Daber again outdid himself in this, his busiest year yet. He produced a Drum Corps Association Directory, the first publication of its kind yet issued. It listed all the Corps in Ontario, their location, directors, instructors, etc., and was very well received all around.

In line with uniform changes of the previous year, new black and white shakos were acquired, to add new lustre to the uniforms. Along with these were to be added, later, new white pearl drums to replace the gold sparkle ones that were currently in use. The white pearl of the drums was designed to match the pearl on the new shakos, creating a more uniform appearance throughout. Many people must have wondered at the use of gold drums in the past. They were the original drums of the Optimist Trumpet Band, gold being an Optimist Club colour. Although the gold did not really fit in with the green, black, and white of the uniform, they were used because that was all there was. The more appropriate colour of the new instruments

was somewhat offset by the fact that the old “distinctive” sound of the Optimist drum line was never duplicated. Often drum lines have their own distinctive sound, and that of the Optimist was altered forever when the original drums were discarded.

Green Capsule Comments, the Corps paper created by Don Daber, was now in the hands of others, who often changed. Its size varied, but it was now always more than double its original size. The content reflected its variety. There were columns at one time or another from Chicago Cavaliers, Garfield Cadets, Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights, and Scout House. Others also contributed, sometimes on a regular basis, sometimes once. Mostly, it was about the Optimists and their capers and was widely read inside the Corps and out. People love reading about themselves. One reason for its almost professional appearance was the fact that Don Daber was a commercial artist and indirectly connected by trade to such projects. His artwork and photography produced much in the way of publicity, not only for us but all Corps, through his connection with the C.D.C.A. It reached the point of familiarity where his work could be recognized without any signature or identification.

Other winter activities that served to keep members occupied were numerous and varied. Some of them entered an individual contest in Geneva, N.Y., and two people won first place; one in the French horns class and one in the soprano class. These were Ross Cation and Joe Gianna, respectively. Mr. Gianna was an original member, not only of the Optimists but also of the Danforth Crusaders.

On a more sombre plane, Drum Corps, Garfield Cadets especially, mourned the passing of Mr. Charlie Nabors. He had been the Chief Judge of the Eastern Judges Association, mentioned in Chapter 8 in regard to his forty-eight years in Drum Corps. Garfield had reason to remember him as he had played a big part in their victory at the 1957 Nationals.

We had run into him when he presided over the 1959 Preview of Champions contest in New Jersey. His comments had always been constructive and complimentary.

The Corps had managed to fill the gaps in the line and planned to use thirty horns this year. It might be thought that people would flock to join a top Corps, but such was not always the case. Often it was touch and go whether the required number of people would be available. There were still the Bantams to draw from, which was a good source, and sometimes people from other Corps would show up to join. Right now, this was sufficient since thirty horns, a slight increase from the usual twenty-seven, did not stretch resources too much. This year, though, one Corps, St. Josephs of Batavia, would field forty-two bugles, reflecting a trend that would lead to the very large horn lines of today. Modern bugle sections are now much bigger than our entire Corps, back in the “good old days”.

Chicago Cavaliers had, this year, come out with a Corps paper of their own, appropriately called “The Green Machine”. The Optimists had been tagged with the same label, but by others, not themselves. Because of this there was no rancour between the two Corps over this issue.

Among Senior Corps in Canada, the number of Corps that had severed their links with the armed forces reflected a growing trend. To-date, they included the Kitchener-Waterloo Flying Dutchmen, the Hamilton Viscounts, the Marching Ambassadors, the Jesters, and the Guelph Royalaires. Oddly enough, the one with the most military title, “The Niagara Militaires”, had never been a military unit.

As far as instructing other Corps outside of Optimists, Optimist Bantams, and the Jesters, some of our people travelled extensively to do this. Joe Gianna and Jim McConkey instructed two Corps that required this. One was the Hamilton Optimists, more colourfully known as “The Conqueror”, and the other was the Sarnia “Lionettes”, a girls Corps. The Girls Corps, a separate division in Canada, had elected to keep things that way rather than throw in with the overall Junior “A” class of Corps. This was not necessarily good, as some of them were very capable and would have made their presence felt. The days of totally mixed male and female Drum Corps was still a long way off.

There is a question that should be asked, and its answer leads to an interesting observation about the Optimists Drum Corps. What was done with all the trophies that had been won?

Most of them had ended up in someone’s closet, usually a member of the executive, but occasionally that of an

ordinary member. Sometimes, some were put on display when there was a party or dinner but they always disappeared afterward, usually back to where they had come from. Many years later, some were stored in a building where a fire broke out. Whether they were rescued or not, they vanished forever. This situation points to the fact that the Optimist Corps never had a permanent base of operation, a Corps “home”, where such things could have been stored. They were not unique in this respect by any means, such luxuries being beyond the means of many Corps to finance. The spirit never dropped because of this and might have even been enhanced. It certainly adds a sheen to their accomplishments. All practice facilities were obtained through the goodwill of interested parties, or the machinations of people connected with the Corps. If one facility became unavailable, it was never long before another was acquired. It would have been nice to have had a place to store all those trophies, there were a lot, and to have a sort of headquarters. Although some places, i.e. Jarvis Vocational School, were used for years, these locations were always tentative; therefore, the Corps led a transient existence, the members going where it went. The Corps spirit that existed was the glue that held it together.

Out at Oak Park School in East York, the Bantam Optimists, the feeder Corps, was still a flourishing enterprise. Still instructed by members of the Junior Corps itself, it was good enough to perform parades, shows, and concerts of its own. The younger lads in this band were kept busy with these affairs, often travelling out of town to perform their routines. Although several people were involved in its operation, and these often subject to change, the unit remained under the overall direction of Mr. Fred Johnson. Under his careful management, the original purpose of the band was maintained, and that was to produce talent for the Optimist Corps itself. He never attempted to promote its independence, which, had it come about, would have altered its original concept.



1962: Hamilton Optimists, The Conqueror, first performance in new uniforms

Springtime rolled around, and with its advent came the first shows, concerts, and other affairs. For those in Drum Corps, the milder days, budding trees, and chirping, cheerful birds, served only to waken the tingling sensation caused by the proximity of a new season. It was what had kept one going during the long, cold winter, when everything was worked out. Springtime heralded the completion of preparations for another turn at the merry-go-round that was the wonderful world of Drum Corps. It was a fact that people in Drum Corps were different in outlook from most others. Those who were in the Corps, never envied those whose pleasure lay in work or school, cottage or car, house or hotel. In fact, the Corps was, for many, an escape from these things, and the sometime mundane existence that they represented. Often, even during summer holidays, from work or school, people would not travel very far away, in order not to miss Corps practice.

It is appropriate here that we jump ahead a little in time, in order to deal with an issue that arose. It was Sept.–Oct., 1963, to be exact, and the subject was the 1962 Optimists. The vehicle of discussion was a periodical similar to our Green Capsule Comments, but with a different format. It was put out by De La Salle and called “The Corpsman”.



1962: Toronto Optimists Baritones (Rome, NY)

An article by a noted member of that Corps dealt with the fact that Canada had yet to produce a “great Corps”. It went on to say that small thinking led to mediocrity, but that our Corps, the 1962 version of the Toronto Optimists, had risen above this. Considering the source, this was high praise indeed. The article, well thought out and written, praised the 1962 Corps and its accomplishments, and then criticized the Optimists in general for subsequently not maintaining the same standards. In Canada, the Drum Corps infrastructure that existed then was not really conducive to the production and continuity of “great” Corps. As previously explained, it was the combination of a rare set of circumstances that made the 1962 Corps what it was. These conditions were not always readily apparent, and it was ever necessary to adapt to altered circumstances and bend with the breeze.

The Optimists of 1963, a willing, enthusiastic and Optimistic bunch, were ready to take the field, hoping to emulate the successes of 1962.

So let’s pack our bags, park the car, wish the others goodbye, and hit the road with the Optimists and see how they made out in 1963.

And away we go!