


by Brian Tolzmann

Unlike the other drum and bugle corps featured in this book, the Hormel Girls Drum & Bugle Corps from Austin, MN, did not attain their greatest fame with their on-field performances. This unique unit, probably the first truly professional drum

In June 1947, Jay Hormel developed an all-woman drum and bugle corps, with the first order of business being the corps' preparation to compete at the 1947 American Legion Nationals in New York City. (Hormel had been a drum and bugle corps fan for quite some time and the Hormel Company had provided food to corps members at all the American Legion National parades dating back to the 1937 convention.)

This formidable task was handed to Dale Schamber, who at the time was the SPAM luncheon meat product manager. He managed the impossible, recruiting and auditioning 74 women, representing some 35



Hormel Girls

and bugle corps, comprised of former WACS

(Women's Army Corps), WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), SPARS (women's reserve of the U.S. Coast Guard) and Marines, began as a publicity vehicle for George A. Hormel & Company, the famed maker of Hormel Chili, Dinty Moore Beef Stew and SPAM.

World War II had been profitable for the company, thanks mostly to the consumer demand for their canned meat product, SPAM, but like many of the country's businesses, Hormel needed to re-establish its pre-war marketing efforts.

In 1945, when company president Jay C. Hormel realized that it was largely SPAM keeping Hormel in the national limelight, he decided to organize a promotional musical ensemble called the Hormel Girls.

The troupe was originally comprised of 20 former servicewomen, all with musical ability. In groups of six, these women traveled to fairs and benefits, spreading the musical word about Hormel and its products, demonstrating both vocal and instrumental talents.

\$50 REWARD



WANTED—A GIRL LIKE THIS

\$50 reward payable \$25 to the individual and \$25 to his Legion post or her Auxiliary unit, if some member gives us a lead on a girl who qualifies to join the Hormel All GI Girl Corps.

A girl with musical ability preferred . . . yes she can be a tap dancer, monologist, singer or what have you, provided she does have talent of some kind and an attractive personality. She must be eligible for Legion membership.

The job demonstrating and sampling Hormel products with a group of girls who sometimes perform as a Drum and Bugle Corps and who appear as an entertaining unit at meetings and functions, including radio performances, in the area in which the group may be working.

If you know the right girl, send us her name and address. As soon as we hire her, we will send you and the treasurer of your post or your unit, each a check for \$25.

GEO. A. HORMEL & CO., AUSTIN, MINN.

different states.

These former servicewomen with musical talents and sales abilities began an arduous five-week training session that included 11 hours a day of marching, bugling and drumming rehearsals.

The Girls received a rather rude welcome to the world of drum and bugle corps competition.

They made



(Top) A recruiting poster for the Hormel Girls; (above) the Hormel Girls march in a Racine, WI, parade during the late 1940s (poster and photo courtesy of the Hormel Company).



(Top to bottom) One of the white Chevrolets in the Hormel corps' fleet; an enthusiastic bass drummer; marching in a New York City parade (photos courtesy of the Hormel Company).

front-page news around the country during their rehearsals for those 1947 nationals. The corps was stationed for an entire month at the Eastern Military Academy at Shippan Point in Stamford, CT, as Jay Hormel had made arrangements to rent the academy's facilities.

"Music with the Hormel Girls"



Your invitation will be in the mail shortly. Watch for it. Meanwhile, please keep this supper party in mind. Wives invited, naturally. We hope you can come.
The Hormel Girls

A promotional poster for the group's radio show and review, c. 1949 (courtesy of the Hormel Company).

Neighbors complained about the noise and a lawyer was even hired in a plan to take the academy to court. At the last minute a settlement was reached where they could do their marching on the grounds, but had to move music rehearsals to a nearby field.

Featured in their 1947 field repertoire were such numbers as *The Hormel Girls Theme*, *Light Cavalry Overture*, *Minnesota Rouser*, *Tiger Rag*, *Cuddle Up a Little Closer*, *Pennsylvania Polka*, *Lullaby of Broadway* (which featured an amazing soprano solo) and *Give My Regards to Broadway*.

The Hormel Girls Theme, which was composed by famed theater organist Eddie Dunstedter, opened each performance that the corps or orchestra ever did. Dunstedter appeared on many of Bing Crosby's hit recordings of the 1930s and he did many of the Hormel Girls' arrangements.

The 1947 corps had an all-star instructional staff, which included Fred Bachrodt of Chicago, Don McGee of Chicago, Clyde Stocking of Kentucky, Clarence Lake of New York and William Esser of Ohio. Many staff members were judges in the All-American Association.

The Hormel Girls (nicknamed the SPAM-ettes) sponsored by SPAM Post No. 570, scored an 86.80 at the 1947 American Legion prelims and just missed making the finals by 0.35. But they did make their mark in history as being the first all-woman senior corps to compete against men at a national

championship. Jay Hormel was so proud of how well the Girls did, they all got bonuses.

The drum major of that 1947 corps was Donna Mae Baldenecker-Burr, who owns a place in the history books herself. In 1942, at the age of 22, she became the first woman bugler in the U.S. military. Baldenecker-Burr, who was educated at the Minneapolis College of Music and was a private trumpet student of former Sousa Band member L.L. Whitbecker, was asked by Jay Hormel to join the corps as its first drum major.

Baldenecker-

Burr remembers, "When I returned from those 1947 nationals, Jay asked me to go on the road with the Hormel Girls, but I told him I was married."

Hormel said, "Bring him along; we'll hire him at the same pay scale."

"I then told him I also had a baby," she remembers.

Hormel responded, "Bring the baby, too. We'll hire a nanny!"

"The three of us stayed with the Girls until Christmas," Baldenecker-Burr said. "The Hormel Girls was a wonderful experience. We were treated royally. I'd do it all over again!"

Today, known as Donna Mae Smith, she continues playing her trumpet at military functions around the country. Much of her story can be seen today at the Women's War Memorial in Washington, D.C., where she is a charter member.

The taste of success in 1947 drove Jay Hormel to organize 20 members of the drum and bugle corps into a touring, singing and selling team that traveled to Cleveland, Dallas and New Orleans, where the corps led five Mardi Gras parades early in 1948.

Next, Hormel had prime-time radio in his sights. He dispatched the troupe to Los Angeles for on-the-air training. Louise Mulvany became the group's choral director and Eddie Skrivanek led the orchestra.

In March 1948, the show "Music With the Hormel Girls" aired over a single Los Angeles radio station. By late May, the show had

attracted 20 California stations that were a part of the Mutual Pacific Coast Network.

From there, "Music With the Hormel Girls," which featured operettas and musical comedies along with other music, went nationwide Sundays from 6:30 to 7:00 PM on the Mutual Broadcasting System.

Ratings for the radio program at this time showed more than six million listeners tuned in each week.

An interesting note about the early Hormel Girls Orchestra: their director, Eddie Skrivanek, was one of Hollywood's busiest music men. He is probably best known for playing banjo on the musical score for the 1936 film "Show Boat" and his guitar playing on the score for the 1946 Academy Award-nominated "Duel in the Sun."

The ladies spent much of the summer preparing for the 1948 American Legion Nationals in Miami. The Hormel Girls came to the field on October 21 as national celebrities and they didn't disappoint the nearly 41,000 fans who jammed into the Orange Bowl.

That crowd remains as one of the largest ever to attend a drum and bugle corps contest.

The Hormel Girls grabbed ninth place at finals with a score of 89.366 and earned the fourth highest general effect score on the judge's sheets, topping, in that caption, such well-known all-male corps as the Hawthorne Caballeros, the 1946 national champion Connecticut Yankees, Yankee Rebels and Boys of 76.

The women were also quite proficient in marching, as their seventh place would attest.

As good as the Hormel Girls were at finals that year, they were even better at prelims, where they scored an impressive sixth place overall, out of 35 corps entered, including a fifth in general effect (where they even defeated the overall first-place Jersey Joes) and sixth in horns. This 1948 Legion showing proved to be the greatest ever for any senior women's corps.

The winter/spring of 1949 found the group continuing their radio broadcasts and touring, as well as preparing for the 1949 American Legion Nationals in Philadelphia.

That 1949 Legion show would be a bit disappointing for the women, as their 12th-place score of 88.983 (out of 22 corps) fell eight-tenths behind the 10th-place (and last finalist position) Syracuse Brigadiers.

Once again, the Girls showed their all-male counterparts some genuine caption strength in horns with their eighth-place bugle score, beating the likes of the Hawthorne Caballeros, Yankee Rebels, Geneva Appleknockers and Connecticut Yankees.

This 1949 contest would be the last for the Hormel Girls, who, much like the Star of Indiana organization 45 years later, decided that their future was in touring as a performance group, not as a competitor.

The Hormel Girls traveled 30,000 miles per year, attending numerous food shows, performing at hundreds of supermarkets and concert venues across the country, as well as

doing their weekly radio program.

The group performed popular music of the day, which meant big band dance charts and ballads, with a few marches thrown in from time to time. Each radio program lasted 30 minutes and contained five Hormel commercials. At its peak, the program was on 227 stations coast-to-coast.

When they weren't on the air, the Hormel Girls traveled with a great deal of advance work orchestrated in each city. Radio stations and newspapers announced the Girls' arrival while Hormel salespeople bought local radio and newspaper advertising. Because they rode in a caravan of 35 brand-new white Chevrolets, there were tie-ins with local car dealerships.

Whenever possible, the governor of the state being visited would greet the corps, creating much excitement. Huge crowds were guaranteed and many went away with an armload of purchased Hormel products.

The personal touch was extremely important for the Hormel Girls. They often went door-to-door in cities they visited.

Laura McAndrews-Mabley, a bass drummer and the third Hormel Girl ever hired, remembered her spiel: "Good morning! My name is Laura and I am one of the



The Girls performed at a New York City train station in 1947 during their Legion trip (photo courtesy of the Hormel Company).

Hormel Girls. Here is my picture. If you can spot me at an area supermarket this weekend, I will give you a free Hormel ham."

The Girls would also have their photo printed in ads in local newspapers. Mabley continues, "One time a young boy came into the supermarket and handed me my picture, at the same time asking for a free ham. I explained that we had a policy stating that only adults could get the free hams. The boy said that his mom was out in the car with his brothers and sisters and she couldn't leave them alone, so she sent him in to claim the prize. I smiled and gave him the ham. He went outside with it tucked under his arm."

McAndrews-Mabley was a drum corps veteran even before her days with the Hormel

Girls. She played drums with the Great Northern Railway Drum & Bugle Corps from St. Paul, MN. Great Northern was one of more than 50 corporate drum and bugle corps in Minneapolis/St. Paul in the late 1940s.

Throughout the early 1950s, this sophisticated and complex promotional plan traveled the country and broadcast the Hormel name nationwide. The caravan was an immensely successful, although expensive, undertaking. The traveling fleet would have rivaled even today's DCI corps.

Along with the 35 cars, the Hormel Girls had five equipment trucks, a portable radio studio, music arrangers, stage managers, radio engineers and choreographers. The Girls also had six complete uniforms.

Each of the Hormel Girls earned \$55 per week, plus \$30 in expenses, hotel bills and gasoline. The performers earned 10 days off, all expenses paid, every three months. The Girls performed on regular band/orchestra instruments and on occasion some even used bugles in concert.

Two other Hormel Girls of note were Martha "Martye" Awkerman and Lois Cronen. Awkerman, a trumpet player, played solo cornet with the Air Force Band and broke a 40-year tradition to become the first female member of the famed Long Beach Municipal Band, the oldest professional municipal band



The Hormel Girls marched in the 1947 American Legion Convention parade in New York City (photo courtesy of the Hormel Company).

**This is a picture of
one of the
HORMEL GIRLS**

Eleanor G. Cotton "Hormel"

**There are 60 of us in this area
I may be the one in your Food Store**

TUESDAY
from 11:00 A. M. to 1:00 P. M.

**A SPECIAL PRIZE TO ANYONE WHO FINDS ME AND GIVES ME
THIS CARD! . . . The sooner you find me—the bigger the prize!**

YOU MAY WIN A HORMEL HAM



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includes segments of the Hormel Girls as part of a historical compilation.

The 1948 American Legion Nationals finals performance by the Hormel Girls was also captured on record. Drum corps recording pioneer George Mader, who hailed from New Jersey, recorded the Girls at the Orange Bowl and sold copies of the record, advertising in all the drum corps periodicals of the day. Anyone having this record today would be in possession of a

than 80 former members who receive regularly published newsletters. The Hormel Girls were indeed a marketing phenomenon, a national treasure to be sure. They hold a unique place in both American and drum and bugle corps history.

Special thanks go to the media relations department of the Hormel Company for their cooperation in allowing full access to their photo archives, providing the photos used in this chapter, as well as granting permission to reprint a segment of their 100th anniversary book. I also want to thank members Laura McAndrews-Mabley, Donna Mae Baldenecker-Smith, Marilyn Ritter and Norrairie Handke for their invaluable help.



Brian Tolzmann marched in the St. Paul Mounties and then the Rivermen from Stillwater, MN, and has been a fan of the drum and bugle corps activity for more than 25 years. He is a research archivist at the Minnesota History Center. Over the years he has collected

statistics and information about the drum corps movement and was a contributor to "A History of Drum & Bugle Corps -- Volume 1."

For more than 20 years he has written a regular column in Drum Corps World called "The Amazing World of Drum Corps."

He lives in Forest Lake, MN, with his wife and two children.

in the country.

She was the only woman coach horn soloist in the United States. (A coach horn is the fanfare bugle played to signal the beginning of a horse race.)

Cronen, who was later on the music department staff at Cal State Northridge, played trombone with the Hormel Girls. Her musical career is quite impressive, putting in stints with the orchestras of Frankie Carle and Alvino Rey, as well as Ina Ray Hutton's All-Girl Orchestra.

"Music with the Hormel Girls" also appeared, for a short time in the 1950s, as a 30-minute, nationally-syndicated TV program.

Due to the national coverage of the Hormel Girls, Hormel's sales force expanded and its sales more than doubled during this time span. The corps ceased operations after its February 1954 radio show, when television began taking over as the medium of choice for advertisers throughout the country.

Today there are eight surviving 16-inch transcriptions of those Hormel Girls radio broadcasts that are heavily prized by historians. These recordings are each 30 minutes long and feature June Knight and the "60 Piece All-Girl Orchestra" as they were heard over CBS during the spring of 1953.

Currently, one video distribution company also has a videotape for sale titled "Roadshow Shorts," which

collector's item.

The Hormel SPAM Museum in Austin MN, opened in late 2001 and has an exhibit dedicated to the Hormel Girls. The museum has drawn more than 100,000 visitors from 50 countries and all 50 states.

The Hormel Girls held reunions in 1983 and 1991 and have a mailing list of more



The Hormel Girls in a late-1940s parade in Racine, WI (photo courtesy of the Hormel Company).