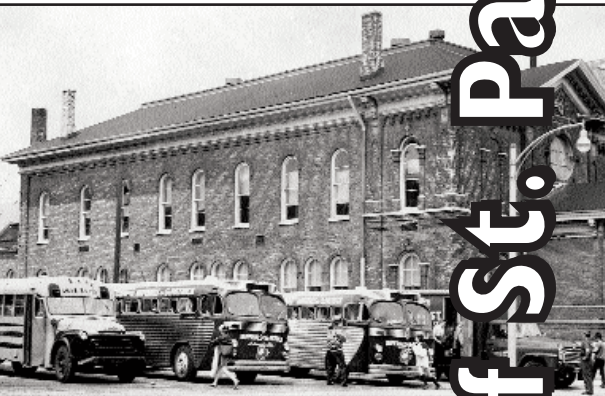

by Roman Blenski

The beginning of the Pioneer corps goes back to the summer of 1961 at St. Patrick's Grade School located on the south side of Milwaukee, WI. The pastor of the parish, Francis McGarry, along with the nuns of the school; Sr. Beno; and Sr. Christoval, the school's principal, were conducting a flag-raising ceremony for the students. It was mentioned that all they needed was a bugler and a drummer to enhance the ceremony. That became the genesis of the corps.

The following fall, the corps' first instructors were recruited at a solo and ensemble contest in Milwaukee. They include Lee Boudreau (drums), Gary Czapinski (marching and maneuvering plus the color guard) and Roman Blenski (brass). They lived in Milwaukee and were all members of the Norwood Park Imperials from Chicago, IL. The name of the fledgling corps became the



St Patrick's school and the corps' vehicles, 1965 (photo from the collection of Roman Blenski).

Imperials of St. Patrick.

The corps' membership was exclusively from the fifth through eighth grades of St. Patrick School. Although they were all beginners, the Imperials of St. Patrick entered their first competition in February 1962. At that time there were 10 corps in the Milwaukee area. Through creative fund-raising, they purchased their first instruments and received a generous donation of green band uniforms from Walter Kendon, the band director of Westmont High School in Westmont, IL.

Roman Blenski was appointed director in 1962. The Imperials of St. Patrick successfully competed in the Badgerland Circuit and the Illinois Association in classes C, B and A, with an average of 50 appearances and 90 members

Imperials of St. Patrick/Pioneer



Imperials of St. Patrick, 1968 (photo from the collection of Roman Blenski).

yearly until 1972. The corps started off the season with early season rehearsal camps, purchased its own buses and competed yearly at the national competitions, a first for any Milwaukee-area corps.

While the world of drum corps shifted its leadership from the veterans to Drum Corps International, changes were also taking place at St. Patrick's Parish. Parishioners seemed envious of the traveling and activities of the corps. The operating costs of the corps were escalating. Fund-raising efforts were not keeping up with the rising costs of running the corps. The instruments were wearing out and the constant repair costs became overwhelming.

In the neighboring suburb of Cedarburg, the Thunderbolts corps was having challenges of its own. They had a shortage of volunteer management as well as members in their percussion section. It was a strain to be competitive.

Their history goes back to 1953. The Thunderbolts were organized by Cedarburg High School's band director, William Loebel. He was a person ahead of his time. Loebel taught his students to become a summertime corps. He acquired sponsorship of the Mercury Outboard Motor Corporation; hence the name the Mercury Thunderbolts. Because of the outstanding training of Loebel's students, the musical excellence was above and beyond many others in the 1960s.

The merging of these two organizations was difficult. The success that came out of this process was due mainly to the determination and cooperation given by Tom and Sally Vasey, John Sadowski, John Schoenknecht, Art Hageman, Charles Frank, James Mueller and Jack and Mary Lippold, among others.

In 1972, the Imperials of St. Patrick and the Cedarburg Thunderbolts decided that merging the two corps together would

Pioneer, 1976 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).



provide for a stronger organization with a good number of members. This turned out to be correct. The merger resulted in a huge corps membership of more than 140.

The brass line, under the direction of Bill Schultz, was talented and played extremely well. Tom Sorensen led the very competitive drum line. Mac McGrath was the drill instructor. Ellen Johnson and Marie Novak were the color guard instructors. The two corps each began the season competing separately for one contest. After that, the three-week merger moved quickly. There was no time to agree on a new name. "What do we call this thing?" they wondered. "The thing" became the transitional name for the corps in 1973.

That year the corps' success shook the Midwest corps scene. Besides taking the Badgerland Association title, they were the finalists in four out of the six national competitions they entered. The cadet corps retained their respective names: the Imperial Cadets of St. Patrick and the Cedarburg Thunderbolts.

Their ages during this training process ranged from 11 to 14.

The corps' new direction was enhanced by an opportunity that settled the official name. Kathy Gaulke, a young member who was fund-raising door-to-door, spoke to Jack Dreyer. He wound up giving her his phone number. He told her to tell her leader he wanted to sponsor the corps.

At first this was not taken seriously, but it aided financially as the corps evolved into a touring unit. As an appropriate gesture in honor of Dreyer's company, Pioneer Container Company of Cedarburg, WI, the corps adopted the name the Pioneer.

New uniforms were purchased that included green suede jackets, white hats and white pants. The color guard wore yellow. This was the corps' first and only attempt to visually project the concept of a Pioneer. These attributes -- and an excellent horn line -- became the trademark of the corps.

In 1974, at DCI in Ithaca, NY, the corps won an associate membership into DCI. They also retained the membership in 1975 at DCI in Philadelphia.

The winter guard program, under the direction of Sandy Ramos with the help of Jack and Mary Lippold, did exceedingly well for many years until the year-round demands of the corps called for a much-needed break.

The music of Broadway became Pioneer's repertoire from 1976-1983. The corps was also fortunate to have during those years some of the finest drum majors in the activity. The applause and enthusiasm of the crowds was the motivation needed for the



Pioneer, 1978 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps to improve.

Alexander's Ragtime Band, "Cabaret," "New York, New York," "42nd Street," "Pippin" and "Annie" were played with emotion and enhanced by great soloists. The first alumni were returning at this time to teach and assist the corps.

In 1978, the corps purchased bright yellow jackets that increased its visual presence. The jackets were designed by the corps' commander, Larry Madrano.

The most memorable trips were in 1977 and 1983 to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras Parades in mid-winter, along with competing at the new Drum Corps Midwest Championships in De Kalb, IL. In 1983, the corps advanced into the DCI Quarterfinals, despite being a small corps.

The Thunderbolt Cadets became an independent entity that evolved into a successful winter guard for several years.

During this time, the corps' support base was drifting back to Milwaukee. Also, Wisconsin legalized bingo. Pioneer was among the first organizations to begin running bingo games at the Burnham Bowl in West Allis, WI.

After the 1984 season, the corps experienced a heavy membership and management turnover. The financial base was also weakened and the corps decided to take the 1985 season off. The cadet corps, Pioneer II, continued to perform.

Beginning with the 1986 season, the corps began rebuilding its entire base of operations. The members were young and eager to learn and excel. Even though Pioneer was among the smallest corps in DCM, its level of performance allowed it to earn membership by placing in the top 20 each season under the reins of William Strube and Murray Davis.

In 1988, a new corps motto, "Better Every Day," was adopted. It definitely sums up the drive that has motivated the corps to succeed for the past 15 years and proudly continues to be used today.

The 1989 season fostered a series of successes. Michael Cesario designed an Irish military-style uniform with a white battle jacket, green plaid sash and black pants that gave Pioneer a serious presence on the field. The corps received sponsorship from the Milwaukee Boys and Girls Club and with the increase of our bingo opportunities, the financial base became more solid.

Pioneer alumni



Pioneer, 1996 (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

were added to the teaching staff. Two alumni, Roman Blenski III (visual and management) and Sandra Blenski (program coordinator and color guard) were instrumental to the continued growth of the corps.

The following eight seasons personified a segment of the corps' prayer that has been used since 1969, "taking the pain of losing and the joy of winning all with a smile."

Instrumental to the success of these years was going back to the corps' Irish roots to perform some of the best music Pioneer has ever played. It helped to give the corps three DCM Division III championship titles, three DCM and DCI division II championship titles and numerous U.S Open and Canadian Open championships.

Pioneer won the DCI World Championship in 1991 in division III, 1994 in division II (undefeated) and 1995 in division II. It was in 1992 and again in 1996 that the corps brought an undefeated season to a crashing halt by tenths of a point as they finished in second place at the DCI Championships. These were truly character building moments for the entire organization. Other honors included being twice voted the most improved corps and in 1994, Roman Blenski III was voted director of the year.

On St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1995, Pioneer purchased a six-acre plot of land next to the Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport for future use.

The success from these "Better Every Day" building years earned the corps membership in the ranks of the coveted DCI Division I. Since 1997, the corps has toured for the entire season. They have placed 16th through 22nd, featuring show music from "Riverdance," "Brigadoon," "Oliver" and the theme shows, "Irish in Your Face" and "Irish in the Civil War."

Pioneer experienced an extraordinary high while performing the music of "Brigadoon" at the Field of Dreams. This certainly added a great touch with one of the most brilliant and emotional finishing performances of a season at the Madison, WI, DCI Semifinals.

During these times there were great organizational strides that permitted the corps to take on several exciting projects. The corps had its own football-size rehearsal field built along with an observation tower for the teaching staff. A 56 by 100-foot building was erected that serves as a garage for the vehicles and also serves as an activity center. All of this was made possible through the efforts and success of volunteer bingo workers and the chairwoman, Susan Blenski.

As a division I corps, Pioneer travels in three motor coaches, an equipment semi-tractor/trailer, a food serving semi-tractor/trailer and a staff passenger van.

The uniform changes that have taken place since 1997 include a green military jacket along with a white and orange Irish sash that was again designed by Cesario. This originally was outfitted with khaki colored pants and white spats that are now replaced with black colored pants with no spats. The white "hardy" hat has been replaced with a U.S Marine-styled one for the 2003 season.

The membership is diverse, having young people from throughout the world including from Japan, Holland, South Africa, Canada and the entire United States. These extraordinary students have sought out the Pioneer.

The corps manager is John-Michael Hines. The personnel director is Murray Davis. The executive directors are Roman and Susan Blenski.

"Better Every Day!"



Roman Blenski has participated for 48 years in the drum corps activity as a corps member, instructor, manager and administrator. He began musical performance as a percussionist at Notre Dame

High School in Milwaukee and joined the Gladiator/Starlite Corps. He met his wife, Susan, a trumpet player, and served as assistant manager and drum major.

Blenski aged out of the Norwood Park Imperials as a baritone player and taught brass for the St. Matthias Cadets and Imperials of St. Patrick in 1962. Since then, both he and Susan have served in every capacity as needed for the corps that is known today as the Pioneer.

He served on the board of the Illinois Drum Corps Association, Badgerland Association and Drum Corps Midwest. He has been the executive director of Drum Corps Midwest since 1979 and was the DCI Division III/III coordinator from 1988 to 2002. He is the executive director of Pioneer.

Blenski is a member of the DCI and World Drum Corps halls of fame and was recognized with the ODCA Legion of Honor. He holds an associate of arts degree, with honors, from the Milwaukee Area Technical College and a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

His hobbies include being an avid reader and world traveler and a Civil War historian. He spends his free time, when available, with his family whom he credits his enjoyment and success in his life. They include Susan; his daughters Suzanne Schueller and Sandra Fugh; his son, Roman III; and his eight grandchildren.

Blenski would like to give special gratitude to the Pabst Brewery Company for 36 years of employment and for allowing him to pursue his dreams. His personal philosophy is, "I am for those means that will give the greatest good to the greatest numbers."



Pioneer, August 13, 1999 (photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World).