


(Top) Director Bob "Sully" Sullivan speaking to the corps in the late 1960s; (above) the 1931 St. Joseph's Drum, Fife & Bugle Corps. (from far left, Margaret Branche, Director Edward Sullivan, the Rev. T. Bernard Kelly and leader Donald Susat); (right) Father Kelly; (below) at a late 1960s field contest in New York (photos from the collection of Ben Wilt).

St. Joseph's of Batavia

by Ben Wilt

The original thought of converting a boys choir at St. Joseph's School to a drum corps belongs to Sister Mary Mercy, for many years director of St. Joseph's School of Music. She submitted her idea to the Rev. T. Bernard Kelly, who approved and told her to go ahead.

Sister Mary Mercy contacted a band director she knew in Niagara Falls, a Mr. Dana, who at that time was director of the Shredded Wheat Band. Dana was not at liberty to come to Batavia, but suggested to Sister Mary Mercy that she contact Edward W. Sullivan, director of the Batavia American Legion Band which was in those days state champion and in 1926 came in sixth place at the nationals.

Kelly took over and signed up Sullivan. A close friendship of many years was formed. All through the winter of 1931, rehearsals were held Thursdays nights in the school. Sister Mary Mercy would write the music on the blackboard during the day and Sullivan would teach at night.

Meanwhile, Kelly was working at securing instruments and uniforms. How he did it no one remembers, but it must have been quite a feat because 1931 was in the midst of the Great Depression.

The first appearance of the corps was at the dedication of the new addition to St. Jerome Hospital. It is the south wing of the present hospital in Batavia. The next appearance was the Memorial Day parade and St. Joe's was in many of them every year.

Members always looked on the Memorial Day parade as the "Big One," the one pointed to all winter long . . . the start of the season.

The corps went to church picnics and two or three parades that year, one being in Ellicottville, Kelly's hometown, during "Old Home Week." We took part in that parade for many years. Kelly not only enjoyed, but also was thrilled at the prospect of bringing his drum corps back to his hometown. There was no question, it was Kelly's drum corps and we were his boys. He was business manager, equipment director, moderator and buyer, all in one.

His "truck" was the back seat of his car where he carried one bass drum, 10 snare drums, two pairs of cymbals, a couple of rifles and flag poles stuck out the window. In the front seat he carried his straw hat, his prayer book and two or three well-blackened cornob pipes and he was in business.

Kelly had another friend, the late Buell J. Fuller, former supervisor from Bethany, who operated a school bus. Fuller hauled us around the country for years. He became more than a bus driver; he was one of the gang and we suspect on many of the trips he was lucky to get gas money.

Year after year, we gradually became better. In 1936 and 1937, we were winning parade after parade. In 1938, Sullivan



St. Joseph's of Batavia at the 1964 World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

decided to branch out. We were going to the VFW Nationals in Columbus, OH. Adam Miller spearheaded a drive to raise the money. Sullivan taught a drill -- mostly flanking movements.

We had a great time riding out to Columbus on the bus. We had housing at the



St. Joseph's of Batavia at the 1966 VFW Nationals in Jersey City, NJ (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Knights of Columbus home, with a swimming pool. A caterer brought in our meals; everything was rosy. That is, until we stepped on the field for prelims. St. Joe's first appearance at the nationals in 1938 had all



the elements of a good drama. It was tragic, it was humorous and it was educational.

Here we were, never before having been in a competition of any kind, standing on the starting line of the American Legion Nationals. We were scared stiff.

First was the inspection, the judges getting their white gloves all dirty wiping off the inside of our drum hoops. How did we know you weren't supposed to have bathing beauties painted on the drum heads?

Haircuts? We needed the money for spending. The starting gun went off and we headed down the field. The drum beats were bouncing around the stadium like ping-pong balls in a bingo machine.

We heard a whistle. The drum section counter-marched back toward the starting



St. Joseph's Drum Corps, c. 1940 (photo from the collection of Ben Wilt).

A few key men met and discussed the situation thoroughly. It meant forming a separate organization to take over the corps and relieve

first.

Needless to say, we were eliminated in the prelims. The Columbus trip wasn't entirely lost as our drum major, Joseph Burns, won the national junior championship. In 1939, the corps went to the VFW Nationals in Boston and placed eighth in the finals.

During the war years, the corps spent most of its time marching down Main Street in Batavia, sending off its members to military service. Sullivan kept his own private Honor Roll and 95

Kelly's mind. We presented this plan to Kelly, stressing the fact that his wish would be law. He agreed to the plan.

The first few years were difficult. It was one thing to form an organization and still another to run a drum corps. The first director was Edward W. Sullivan Jr. who directed the corps in the summer of 1950 and did not care for it.

Robert Bishop took over the job and ran the corps until 1958.

Robert F. Sullivan (pictured in the top left corner on the previous page) then took charge of the corps. While he was in the Air Force for three years, Harry Bishop, John Sherwood, Richard Grimes and Ward Cole, respectively, were the directors.

After his tenure in the Air Force, Robert Sullivan again took over the reins and slowly, steadily improved the corps, year after year.

During the early 1950s, St. Joseph's Association sponsored many contests which brought corps to Batavia and made the small city aware of what a good corps could and should be like. Corps such as St. Vincent's, Liberty Bell, Holy Name and St. Mary's of Nutley set an example and a goal for the



St. Joseph's Drum Corps, c. 1935 (photo by from the collection of Ben Wilt).

line, the fifes and bugles kept on going toward the finish line. We heard another whistle and everybody counter-marched, even the judges. We were headed back toward each other.

Reilly's pass-through maneuver was nothing compared to that impending collision. The problem was, who was going to turn, the big drummers or the little fifes? Right on the brink of disaster, the fifes and bugles counter-marched and we were a smooth marching unit again.

We finished our drill and left the field. It was the first "St. Joe's Recovery." We had a few after that, but none will ever equal the

percent of the original Father Kelly's Boys were in the service. He kept the corps intact during the war years. There were two or three parades a year and rehearsals were cut down, but kept going.

After the war -- 1946-1949 -- a few members went down to the rehearsals to give Sullivan a hand with the corps, but were unable to stir up any excitement or enthusiasm among its members.

In the fall of 1949, Sullivan died of a heart attack. It was a sad blow for many of us. He had not only given 18 years of his spare time for no remuneration, but he also became a close friend to us after we grew to manhood.

Kelly was especially saddened. He felt that, without Sullivan, he could not carry on the corps. This was an alarming note to us. Many of us had sons who we wanted to see play in the corps.



St. Joseph's Drum Corps, c. 1950 (photo by from the collection of Ben Wilt).

Batavia corps.

In those days, St. Joe's was a parade corps, but long range plans were formulated to move the corps onto the competition field. In 1951, the association formed a second corps as a feeder unit.

In this "peanut" corps, youngsters began their training at the age of six. It took nine or 10 years, but the "big" corps began to receive a new breed of corpsmen -- a breed with goals extending far beyond the



Late 1960s at the corps' annual spring concert (photo from the collection of Ben Wilt).



St. Joseph's of Batavia color guard, late 1960s (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

boundaries of Batavia.

The association realized its own inability to instruct at a level necessary to help the corps toward its new goals. We began a search for higher caliber men of outstanding ability and character to provide the professional instruction necessary. The association was very proud that its selections became much more than just instructors. They became an integral part of St. Joseph's and the corps, in turn, became a part of them.

Credited with bringing St. Joseph's to prominence are writers and instructors Ed Cozzalino and Al "Corky" Fabrizzio (horns); Larry Darch, Victor Cionetti and Richard Mercurrio (drums); and Vinny Radford, Hardy Carassas and Lloyd Simpson (marching and maneuvering). St. Joseph's stood on the threshold of a world of which most corps only dream.

During the last few seasons of their existence, they at one time or another successfully matched competitive talents of the No. 1 corps from every section of the United States and Canada.

After 40 years, the call to keep St. Joseph's alive and active echoed through Batavia 12 months a year with as much resolve and as much enthusiasm as ever. Winning a contest or a title was a sweet reward for long hours of hard work and certainly to St. Joe's this was an important goal, but

more important than anything else, St. Joe's liked being St. Joe's!

Hundreds of corps graduates were actively working in support of this goal as members of St. Joseph's Drum Corps Association. There were in excess of 20 association members who were directly and actively



St. Joseph's of Batavia in a Memorial Day parade, late 1960s (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

participating in the administration of the corps in the late 1960s. Most prominent were the Rev. Francis Schwartz, moderator; Robert Sullivan, president and business manager; and James Allen, corps director.

Indicative of the caliber of young people who were marching in the corps was the fact that several held seats on the association's board of directors. Many of the young people marching in the corps were sons or daughters of corps graduates.

Membership in St. Joseph's drum corps was not restricted by race, religion or background. The only requirement was a sincere desire to contribute to the corps merely by being a good member.

The purpose of the corps was to provide a worthwhile, constructive activity for the young people. The only overt instruction provided was directed toward development of a winning corps. Somehow, though, without conscious intention, each member seemed to draw from the others and came away a great deal richer for the experience.

In Batavia there was a burning desire to reach the top and to make St. Joseph's the best drum corps possible. However, win or lose, you can be sure that St. Joseph's had done their best.

Much of the preceding information was derived from an article in the June 23, 1971 edition of *Drum Corps News*, author unknown.

Shortly after the article was written, at the conclusion of the 1971 season, "Mighty" St. Joe's ceased operations as a competitive junior corps. The 1972 season was the first year of the newly-formed Drum Corps International organization. The cost of competing on a national level within DCI was prohibitive for a small town, church-affiliated corps. Like many other corps of that era, St. Joe's became a casualty of progress.

During the decade of the 1960s, "Mighty" St. Joe's (as they were nicknamed by their peers), rose to national prominence. They won their first of eight New York State American Legion titles in 1963. In 1964, the



St. Joseph's of Batavia at the 1968 VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps first broke into the top 10 in national competition by finishing sixth at the VFW Nationals in Cleveland, OH. St. Joe's finished second in the World Open and fourth at the VFW Nationals in 1968.

Most notable of the corps many achievements were the following: eight-time New York State American Legion Champions; 1963, 1965, 1966 and 1967 New York-Canadian Champions; 1971 Canadian Open Champions; and the 1968 VFW National Champion drum line.

The alumni stayed active in organizing banquets and some of the former members started a new division III junior corps in Batavia called Genesee Quest.

In 1981, in honor of our 50th anniversary, the alumni held a St. Joe's reunion weekend in Batavia which included a Memorial Day parade down Main Street where the alumni marched behind the Rochester Crusaders.

The banquet was held in the St. Joe's School cafeteria where we had held practice every winter for 40 years. What a perfect location to help bring back the memories created in that same room. More than 200

St. Joe's Alumni were in attendance.

In 1991, after 20 years of inactivity, Mighty St. Joe's Alumni Corps was established by former members. Wishing again to enjoy an activity that meant so much to them in their teenage years, the corps was founded and Robert "Sully" Sullivan, was named director. The first rehearsal was held in December 1991. There were 32 people in attendance.

Now in its 12th year, the corps has more than 200 people involved. The goals of the organization are to furnish its members with opportunities to perform on a non-competitive basis and to try to put the "good times" back in drum corps.

We have brought back some of the music we were known for in the 1960s and also from other famous corps of that era.

Although the corps now calls LeRoy, NY, its home, members come from numerous communities to participate. There are

members from Canada, Pennsylvania and Western New York. Membership is not restricted to former members of St. Joseph's, but is open to anyone 21 years of age or older.

Just as the Sullivan family has provided leadership and a goal to achieve since 1931, the St. Joe's organization has stood the test of time. This is St. Joseph's *family* concept of which we are so proud. Everyone connected with the corps, however indirectly, is considered a vital part of the whole."



Ben Wilt has been involved in drum corps since he was 13, starting with the Emerald Cadets in 1959. He marched with the Rochester Grey Knights in 1962 and joined St. Joseph's of Batavia in 1962, marching until going into

the Air Force in 1966. He helped organize the Rochester Phoenix in 1974 and was a member of the board until their disbandment in 1977. In 1991, Wilt helped organize Mighty St. Joe's Alumni Corps. He serves as the director of public relations and is vice president of the corporation. He plays lead/solo baritone in St. Joe's and their Mini Corps, The Ghost Riders.

Wilt's wife of 36 years, Sharon, along with their two sons, Joe and Scott, are all marching members of St. Joe's. Joe moved to San Francisco in 1997 where he is a charter member of the Renegades. He still comes home a couple of times a year to perform with his St. Joe's family.



"Mighty" St. Joe's Alumni (the author's wife Sharon) at the 2002 Drum Corps Associates alumni show in Scranton, PA (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



"Mighty" St. Joe's Alumni corps performing in 2002 at the DCA Championships in Scranton, PA (photos by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).