

Chapter 3: September 1957, East Meets West

Now here we were, in the gymnasium of Jarvis Vocational School, located just south of the intersection of Jarvis and Carlton streets, in the heart of Toronto. This location, the practice place of the Optimist Trumpet Band, was to be the Corps “home” for the next few years.

Jarvis Street, around the turn of the century, was the site of grand homes and one of the haunts of the elite. Over the years it had deteriorated and was now known more as Toronto’s “red light” district. Our school was on the fringe of this, and on a few occasions this would lead to humorous, or pathetic, encounters. It would also generate rumours in later years that had no great basis in fact. These were to come later.



1958: Toronto Optimists first public appearance at the Ice Follies

The First Meeting

Everyone who wanted to be part of the unit that was being formed stood in the gym, where things were to be sorted out. It seemed like a hundred people were there. I do not think anyone took an accurate count, as horn players lined the walls, drummers stood in the centre, and extra bodies stood wherever they could find a place. Those who had instruments held them.

One fact was obvious, with the average size of a Junior “A” Drum Corps being forty to fifty boys, in those days, not everyone here would gain a position. Competition for places would be intense, but relieved somewhat when some fell away, for a multitude of reasons.

With this gathering were included, of course, the leaders. Mr. Baggs was there. He would be the Corps Director, which entailed being responsible for the entire operation plus acting as a liaison between the Optimist Club and the Corps.

Barry Bell would be the bugle instructor, Lorne Ferrazzutti the drum instructor, and Mr. Eric Burton in charge of the colour-guard. There were no designated drill instructors.

In the Crusaders and the Optimist Trumpet Band, the task of writing and instructing drill had been undertaken by people who were in the band itself, or had been instructors in other captions. Barry and Lorne had performed this chore for the Crusaders. Although they, and in particular Barry, no longer had to worry about the business end of things, they would still be responsible for drill. This scheme would continue for some time, assisted by others of ability, from within the Corps itself.

Along with all of these people, there were others who came to serve in an assistant capacity of some kind. Some of their names will arise later in this story, and other will remain unsung but not intentionally forgotten. In these early rudimentary stages, along with the excitement of a new beginning, complete and accurate records were not always kept. Also, these events took place over forty years ago, and memory, a poor servant at the best of times, has a tendency to fade. Everyone who was there contributed and any omission is not to detract from this.



1958: Toronto Optimists "On The Line"

The job of sorting people out was made easier by the fact that most people already held the instrument of their choice. Having been the cymbal player in Danforth while dabbling in drumming, I managed to procure a tenor drum. This did not mean that I would get to keep it.

Not all of the members of the Crusaders had come to this new Corps, and the total of them and the Optimist band certainly did not reach one hundred. What boosted the numbers was the fact that many came from other Corps. When word got out that a new

Corps was starting, people came from Western Tech, Leaside, Sky Raiders, St. Mary's, and other established units. In later years, this trend would continue, with people coming from out-of-town to play in the Corps. Such things are commonplace today with, often, a majority of Corps personnel coming from somewhere else. In the Canada of the 1950's, however, this phenomenon was not customary.

The advent of this situation meant that no one was automatically assured of a place in the line. It also says something about the beginnings of the Toronto Optimists.

Most of these people were experienced to some degree at what they did, having already marched and played in good quality organizations. This made it much easier to start a new band with a reasonable expectation of some success. In the case of the Optimists, although

success was by no means assured, the outlook for the future was promising. In later years, others would cite this favourable situation as responsible for the rapid progress that marked the first years of the Optimists. To a certain extent, this is true. On the other hand, we were still all strangers to each other, often still with partisan mindsets. None of us had played in a top Junior "A" Corps before and we were unaware of the effort necessary to achieve this. The executive and instructors would also be breaking new ground in their quest to attain improved status. Without their dedication and perseverance, guided by the steady leadership of Al Baggs, and mixed with the all round enthusiasm of the members, the whole thing could have collapsed. The Drum Corps scene in Canada and the United States was solidly established. Long-standing units with smooth running organizations were in control of things and to crack their charmed inner circle would be no easy feat.

By comparison, we were a diamond in the rough, still in the rudimentary stages of organization and development that would acquire sophistication as time passed.



1958: Toronto Optimists (London, ON)

After things were sorted out, buglers here, drummers there, guard people elsewhere, it did not take long to get started. The drums ended up in the auditorium which would become their regular practice place, as well as the main meeting room for the Corps. The horns split into their respective sections and retired to separate rooms of the school, while the colour guard commandeered the gymnasium.

In the auditorium, the drummers, and those who would be, gathered to display their skills. It was a disparate group that individually displayed their skills, or lack of, before the discerning eye of Lorne Ferrazzutti. His job was to take this group of individuals and attempt to create uniformity.

At first, there was a surplus of drummers but, as time went by, some drifted away. It appeared that some had decided they were, after all, fed up with Drum Corps. Others felt that the new Corps would not work. None of us, at this stage, knew this either. This decreased the competition for places in the drum line. The same phenomenon occurred among the horn line and colour guard. This attrition actually helped to bring the Corps down to a manageable size. Some of those who left were very proficient and were a genuine loss. The road ahead would not always be smooth. However, the various sections began to work on their specialties and everybody was soon enthusiastically engaged.

The Instructors

Lorne worked the drums, mostly on exercises, until the music was ready. Barry, with assistance from section leaders from different parts of the horn line, worked the horns. Mr. Eric Burton, from day one, ruthlessly drilled the colour guard. More familiarly known as “Burton”, Eric was the only one of the instructional staff who had not sprung from one of the founding bands.

Eric was a tenor drummer with the Jolly Jesters Senior Drum and Bugle Corps, who, in turn were the band of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. Above all, he was a friend of Lorne Ferrazzutti, which explains how a drummer became the Optimists first guard instructor. When Lorne told Eric that the new Corps was in need of a guard instructor, he expressed an interest in the position. Al Baggs thought he would be suitable for the job, and Burton was hired. His knowledge of colour guards was virtually non-existent, but it soon became apparent that the right man had been selected. Taking the trouble to contact the National Commander of the Ohio Chapter All-American and the guard commander of the Syracuse Brigadiers, he soon familiarized himself with all aspects of guard operations.

Under his instruction, the Optimist guard would win trophy upon trophy and always be a credit to the Corps. Later, Burton would become chairman of the first Canadian Colour Guard Committee and, along with others, would help draw up rules for Canadian Colour Guards. He was no slouch.

The term “brass”, as was applied to the horns collectively, really meant that. They were made of brass as opposed to the chromium-coated instruments in use today. The only Canadian

Corps that used chrome horns, as they were known in those days, were Preston Scott House. They had used chrome, B-flat bugles, which gave them their distinctive sound, for years.



1958: Toronto Optimists Colour Guard

The Uniform

The choice of uniform design and colour scheme was soon known, when one was displayed for all to see. This creation was the result of more than one mind. Lorne Ferrazzutti and Eric Burton had taken a trip to Chicago and had been in contact with the Chicago Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps, as they were then known. Eric was favourably impressed with the design of their uniform and proposed that something similar would be appropriate for the Optimists. This was accepted, and then the colour scheme was decided upon.

Barry had, from his days at Western Tech, always wished for a Corps uniform that embraced his old school colours. They were green, black, and white, which also were the colours of the Chicago Cavaliers. When the design, with the colour scheme, was shown, we were all “Corps-conscious” enough to recognize the obvious similarity to that of the Cavaliers. Chicago had worn their uniform for years and made it famous with their enviable record. The uniform that we were shown had enough differences to make it distinctive, and it was adopted with the general approval of all concerned. Whether we had a choice, or not, was never revealed.

The Corps Name

So, knowing the main colour of the uniform, it still remained for the Corps to be given a name. The rank and file passed around many flashy and obvious names. Emerald Knights and Emerald Cadets were two of them. Then, one night, it was announced that the Corps would be called “The Optimists”. This name was chosen in honour of our sponsor, the Downtown Optimist Club of Toronto. In our immaturity, some of us did not think too much of the name “The Optimists”! What kind of a name was that for a Drum Corps? However, when it was looked at as the “The Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps”, it did not sound too bad at all; in fact, it was not too long before anybody who would have dared to suggest changing it would have become decidedly unpopular.

Happy Music

Because the name of the Corps was associated with looking on the bright side of things, it was decided to base the theme of the show on “happy” music. Although this policy actually only lasted for about two years, during those years, this type of music would dominate the performance. For the coming season, some of the music played was:

- ▶ “When You’re Smiling,”
- ▶ “Hello, Everybody, Hello”
- ▶ “Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams”
- ▶ “The World is Waiting for the Sunrise”

These numbers comprised over half the show. We got down to work in the fall of 1957 and began learning the music. Early on, the ensemble sessions showed signs that something solid would emerge from the whole affair. Due to the experience in the horn line, the music started to sound recognizable almost immediately. Individuals and sections would learn their parts under the guidance of Barry and section leaders. The section leaders were responsible for their section being up to par.

At the end of the night, the entire Corps would assemble in the auditorium for ensemble

practice. All sections, drums, horns, and guard would march and play through the show as far as they had learned. This would be done in a semi-circle, either standing still or marking time, dependent on how advanced the number was. This evening routine became permanent and remained our way of doing things for years.

Although Barry Bell conducted the Corps, during these sessions, he was not the person who would lead the Corps on the field. He had performed this chore with the Crusaders, as well as all his other jobs, but here somebody else was to be selected. The position was given to one Phil Hennings, whose height, physique, and bearing made him suitable for the job.

He gradually took over the conducting of the Corps during ensemble and, by the time the season came, he had mastered the task well and was looking like he always belonged there.

Gradually, the Corps settled down and really started to become “The Optimists”, rather than “Danforth Crusaders” and “Optimist Trumpet Band”. There never was any friction between the two, as sometime happens during mergers. This was because everybody was very enthusiastic about Drum Corps, this one in particular. All anybody every wanted was for this Corps to be good. Anybody who joined quickly became imbued with the same spirit.



1958: Toronto Optimists Drumline

Eventually, the green, black, and white jackets of the Toronto Optimists replaced the red, black, and white jackets of the Crusaders, and the blue and yellow of the Optimist Trumpet Band.

Enthusiasm

The genuine undercurrent of enthusiasm that pervaded the Corps was evident to anyone who cared to notice. Across the road from the school was the Atlanta Restaurant. On any rehearsal evening, it would be occupied by green jackets, often well before practice time, and long after. What they were discussing is not hard to imagine, and often instructors and executive were in attendance. This phenomenon, though doubtless not unique to the Optimists, was genuine and rubbed off onto others. It also contributed more than might be imagined, to the future success of the Corps. Enthusiasm, however it manifests itself, is a must for success in any field, and we had it in abundance.

As the year 1957 rolled into 1958, the Corps steadily improved, with the music being learned and the show and membership being finalized. The drums had worked on exercises as well as learning their music, in order to bring everybody to the necessary degree of proficiency. The

horn line also followed this method.

Due to the good sense of the instructional staff, the musical arrangements when acquired were within the limitations imposed by the ability of the players. Nothing sounds worse than attempts to perform at a level beyond ones capabilities. In later years, as proficiency increased, arrangements would become more complex.

Drill

The first outdoor drill rehearsal took place at the Canadian National Exhibition grounds on the parking lot east of the Shell Tower. It was the month of March and cold enough that it was necessary to wear gloves, so drumming was not really possible at that time. Bugling was also difficult, with valves freezing and mouthpieces sticking to lips. However, these conditions were no impediment to learning drill and were common to all those who engaged in winter activities.

Nobody complained and the drill and music progressed. At the weather warmed, we all acquired that mark of Drum Corps membership, the first suntans of the year. Those in Corps would be outdoors all day, sooner than is generally normal. The little sun available would give one a tanned, wind-burned look long before the uninvolved.

First Appearance

So, of course, the time approached for the first appearance of this fledgling unit. There was to be a pre-show standstill exhibition at the famous Shipstads and Johnsons Ice Follies, held at Maple Leaf Gardens. What would prove to be the first of many unusual situations, encountered over the years, now made its appearance. We would have to march out on sheer ice and play. This problem was overcome by the wearing of oversize socks over the thick-soled white bucks that were part of the uniform. It worked well, and nobody slipped and fell, thus preserving our fragile dignity.



1958: Toronto Optimists at the Shipstads and Johnson Ice Follies

The First Competition

It was not long after this that serious business approached in the form of our first competition. This was what it was all about.

The date was May 3, 1958, the location was the University Avenue Armouries. This was the



University Street Armouries

home of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps whom we have seen before as the Jolly Jesters. Most important to us was that Preston Scout House, undisputed masters of the Canadian Junior Drum Corps scene, would be there. We, as well as others, were eager to see how we would fare against them.

The show was an indoor performance of approximately 7-8 minutes duration per Corps. This was because the armouries were not large enough to present a full field show. It also might have been because, in those days, Canadian Corps were not ready at that time of the year to present their complete marching and maneuvering routine. We certainly were not. The second half of the show, drill-wise, was yet to be learned. This situation would change as the years passed. When Canadian corps became more competitive, necessity dictated that a full show be ready to go earlier than was necessary in 1958.

Finally, the day arrived, and an excited collection of youth was assembled on the second floor of the armouries, clad in their bright, new uniforms, spotless white bucks and instruments gleaming. I do not recall there being an inspection that evening, but for modern day types I shall elaborate.

Inspections before going on the line were an accepted part of competition. Had this show been of full length, there probably would have been one. Before entering the field of competition, the Corps would line up and each individual member was inspected from head to toe. A judge provided for the purpose did this. Tenths of a point were deducted for lack of uniformity in dress or bearing, and for lack of cleanliness or polish in uniform or instrument. The Corps would stand at attention until the procedure was complete contests could be lost on the inspection line.

Now, back to the armouries. When Scout House, who were on before us, were performing, we were instructed to take a look at them in order to see how it was done. Sure enough, the lines were ruler-straight and they sounded as good as ever. Their unique style and quality of performance was a never failing source of delight to any crowd, always evoking great applause. We did not really expect to defeat them the first time out.

Finally, it was our turn and away we went. In the armoury proper, where the show was being held, acoustics were awful. I could not understand why conditions were not perfect for a Corps show, or how anybody could understand what was being played. People lined the walls and filled the second floor balcony. One group of people, twenty to thirty, sat in a bloc together. They were all wearing identical gray jackets with a large "D" on the front. I wondered who they were. It was not long before I found out.



1958: Toronto Optimists Colour Presentation (on field at De la Salle)

At last, our Drum Major signalled and the rough but powerful strains of “When You’re Smiling” filled the air of the armouries. We went through the marching part of the show, then the standstill concert, and it was done. We had shown the new Corps to the public. The show, though far from perfection, was performed as well as could be expected at that early date. The receptive crowd showed its appreciation with loud and prolonged applause.

It appeared as though we had arrived. The final results, though, reflected reality, as we placed second, a full four points behind Preston Scout House. This was not, to us, a failure. We had leapfrogged over other established units who were there and were only beaten by the reigning champions.

While still on the floor, after hearing the scores, it was announced over the loudspeaker that “The Optimists”, on the strength of their performance, were invited to a contest one month from that date, at Batavia, N.Y. When we heard who else was going to be there, reaction was mixed. It would be St. Vincent’s Cadets of Bayonne, N.J., Audubon All Girls (the Bon Bons) of Audubon, N.J., and the Holy Name Cadets (now Cadets of Bergen County) from Garfield, N. J. These Corps were three of the best in the junior circuit, in the United States, and were names I had only heard and read about. However, Mr. Baggs told us that we would be going. We were all very excited, though mature enough Drum Corps wise to know that we had about as much chance of getting anywhere as rain has of falling upward. These three U.S. Corps were all outstanding and had been for years. The experience would prove invaluable and sobering.

There was much work to be done.

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