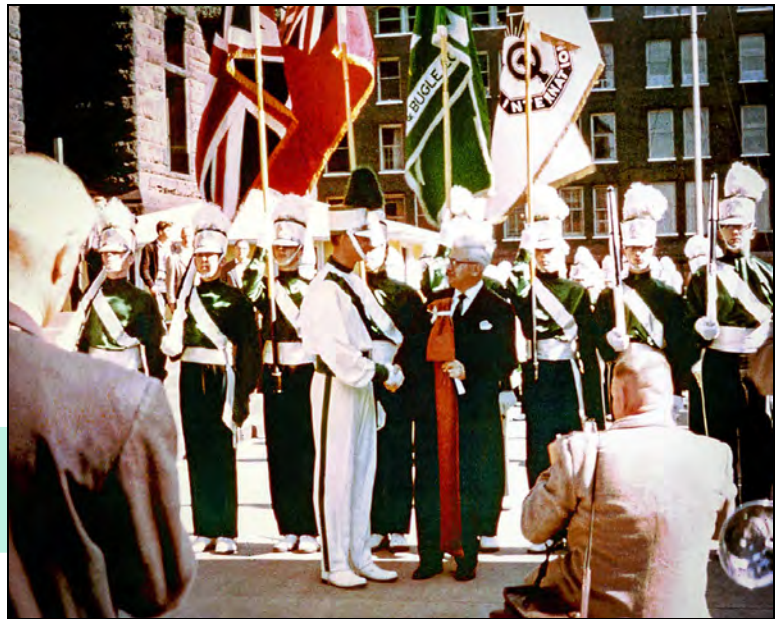


Chapter 5: 1959 – Composition, Characters, Continuation

After the excitement of our victory at Galt had subsided, it took quite some time before it truly sunk in that we were the Canadian Junior Champions. A championship crest, to be worn on the Corps jacket was issued to all. It embodied the symbol of the Optimists Drum Corps and had been suggested by one Don Chisholm. As the years passed, the design and size of succeeding crests would be altered to accommodate the growing number of years to be displayed.

After the 1958 season ended, the Corps was accorded a civic reception by the City of Toronto. We paraded up the concrete canyon of Bay Street to Old City Hall. There, the incumbent mayor, Nathan Phillips, presented us with



1959: Mayor Phillips presents City of Toronto Flag to Phil Hennings, Optimists DM

a City of Toronto flag in recognition of the honour that had been brought to Toronto. This flag was the first of a collection that would grow, each one having its own significance.

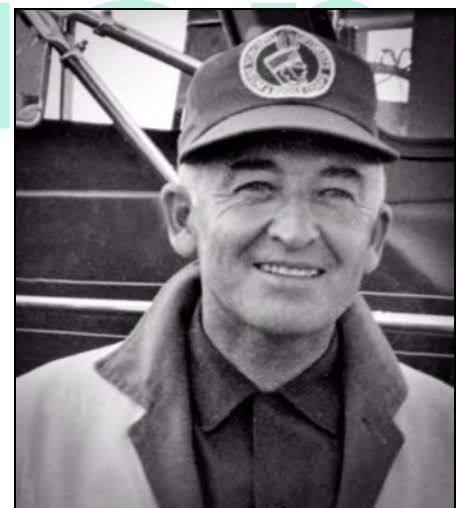
Rehearsals continued more or less as before, in order to ensure continuity. If things had been allowed to go on too long without activity, momentum, and even interest could have waned. This can happen and the unit becomes a one shot wonder.

Bernie Beer

Now that the Corps was more or less established, the dividends of success began to make an appearance. New people came down to join. Not only playing members, but also those willing to help out in subsidiary but essential ways; drivers, supervisors, equipment, etc. Some of these people had youngsters in the Corps, and some did not but were just interested.

One of these was to remain with the Corps for a long time. In conjunction with others, he made a definite impact. After his association with the Optimists, he would take his knowledge and experience elsewhere; namely, the Canadian Commanders and De La Salle. This was Mr. Bernie Beer.

Mr. Beer, or Bernie, had joined the Optimist Club in 1958, purely through a desire to assist in boys' work. He



Bernie Beer

immediately became active on the “boys’ work committee”, but first saw the Corps at the 1958 Championships in Galt. This show confirmed that if he was going to be involved in boys’ work, this was the side of it that he wanted to be in. Bernie, who was born in England and came to Canada as a young boy, had played for sixteen years as a cornet soloist with “Dovercourt Senior Band”. Most likely, a school, or service club organization.

His interest in the Corps was such that he travelled with us throughout 1959, becoming familiar with that world. He was also, at this time, Vice-President and Chairman of the “boys’ work committee” for the club. At the beginning of the following year, 1960, he was appointed Assistant Director of the Corps and relinquished his position with the boys’ work committee. Almost at once his influence was felt when he obtained a Sunday, indoor rehearsal spot for us at A.E. Long Co., in East York, his place of business.

There was also a Dr. Schilling. He was a member of the Optimist Club, and his assignment was to report to the sponsor on the activities and progress of the Corps. He had been around since the beginning but so quiet that most of us were unaware of his presence. Around this time a Mr. Keith Morgan and Mr. Bruce Brodie made their appearance. Where they came from, we did not know, but they came, providing assistance in controlling and directing the group. We were sometimes less than gentlemen.

The full size of a Junior Drum Corps during this era seldom exceeded fifty marching members. Usually one bus was all that was needed to transport the Corps and most of its equipment. This is in stark contrast to the four large busses I saw in use by a modern Junior Corps at a recent D.C.I. contest.



1959: some corps members

It was during the 1959 season that we acquired neat, green uniform bags, to replace the motley collection of individual bags that has previously been used. These bags fitted neatly onto numbered chrome racks that were stowed securely in the bus’s luggage compartments. Also, just about every other piece of equipment fitted into these compartments, leaving only personal items to be taken onto the bus itself. As most of our trips were of less than a full day’s duration, not much in the way of personal luggage was necessary.

A bit of background on our staff

Often, for a variety of reasons, not all of the executive or instructors would attend the weekend trips. In explaining this, it is also a good opportunity to delve a little further into the background of these individuals. We had gotten to know each other quite a bit better since the beginning of the Corps, and things had settled into a more or less acceptable pattern.

Mr. Baggs was an employee of the Toronto newspaper, The Globe and Mail. His position as a trouble-shooter for them often meant his absence from Corps trips. He would, however, always make himself available for very long, extended ones, or for very important ones (i.e. The Championships). Whether this was to the detriment of his profession, we never knew, but he would always be there when it mattered. His presence always mattered.



1958: Lorne Ferrazzutti, Eric Burton & Mr. Baggs

The man in charge of the Corps for most of the trips was Barry Bell. This displayed another facet of his character, as things seldom got out of hand, or went wrong. If they did, it was only due to unforeseen circumstances. Barry was a draftsman by trade, who liked Drum Corps, fast cars, and Drum Corps. He also liked Drum Corps. He was able to attend almost all of the trips and would take the responsibility for discipline and organization before, during, and immediately after bus trips. There were seldom any reasons for severe measures, as the Corps was composed of a generally cooperative, amenable if diverse bunch of kids. Any situations that got out of hand would usually be the result of over excitement and could be suppressed by a sharp, well-placed rebuke from Barry. This was rarely necessary, but one occasion deserves mention.

It was a habit among a certain element in the Corps to make insulting remarks, from the safety of the bus, to people on the sidewalks of towns through which we passed. Barry said that he would stop the bus and have us get out to face these people if this practice persisted. It soon ceased. As a consequence of measures like this, The Optimists were seldom, if ever, barred from or unwelcome at any location or event. To have been would have put the name and reputation of our sponsor in a bad light. Almost any behaviour was tolerated on the bus, as long as it was confined to the bus. Thus did Barry exert another form of influence.

The most noticeably absent, of any of the instructors, from trips was Lorne Ferrazzutti. His job required that he work every Saturday. He worked in the produce department of a Loblaws Store and could only attend shows that were local in nature. Nearly all of his drum line work was done from score sheets.

Mr. Eric Burton, the Guard Instructor, was able to come on some of the trips and always fielded a capable section. In fact, the guard won more honours and was remarked upon more often than most of us were aware. Eric, a locksmith by trade, was often the host of Corps parties at his home on Ontario Street, from which would emanate gossip, rumours, facts, and speculation, all part of the Corps scene.

This short summary of the backgrounds of the primary staff members reveals the fact that not one of them was remotely connected to music. Other than their interest and activity in Drum Corps, they were not involved in the field of entertainment in any form. Hence, were they true

amateurs. The fact that, when hired as instructors, these people were promised remuneration does not really detract from the meaning of amateur. The money was not always forthcoming. Even when it was, it would never be a substitute for a regular job as a livelihood. This situation never deterred them from performing their tasks, which indicates that interest, not money, was the prime motivation.

Of course, the dedication of the staff would not have been evident without someone to instruct, which brings us to the members of the Corps itself.

Our Corps members

The Corps as a whole was a genuine cross-section of society, in miniature. People came from all over the City of Toronto and even from out of town to belong to it. Other Corps, especially if affiliated with a school or church, might have been restricted to people who attended certain institutions. We had no such limitations. If this was an advantage, its reverse side was that we never had a permanent base of operation. Everybody always took their entire equipment home and even the practice school, Jarvis Vocational, was subject to change. This occurred in later years. Thanks to the influence of people connected with the Corps, we never, for long, lacked an indoor rehearsal spot.

Some of the outdoor ones, though, were unusual, almost bizarre. Any place of proper size, location, and accessibility would do, if it was in a non-residential area. When it rained, we would move under the Gardiner Expressway, or to the porch of a building, usually in the Canadian National Exhibition grounds. The best was four floors down, under the ground in the main City Hall parking lot. The empty, cavernous space provided shelter from the elements and caused the music to float eerily through all levels. It was akin to a huge echo chamber, and the Corps never sounded better



1958: Some members of Scout House and Toronto Optimists

These minor inconveniences never dampened enthusiasm. If anything, they enhanced it by fostering a spirit of cohesiveness and persistence. This spirit strengthened as the years passed and had a great deal to do with the continuity of a group composed of such diverse elements.

From George's Spaghetti House and the Zanzibar Tavern to Mama's Pizzeria on Eglinton Avenue and beyond, from the sprawling suburbs of Scarborough and West Hill to the polyglot regions of the West End, the guys gathered, of one mind, to form the Optimists. It was fun and for many of us the focus of our lives. Also, the diversity was evident in the fact that there were high school and university students, motorcycle gang members, ex-reservists, working people, and others who combined to form the Corps.

Some, as previously mentioned, left their hometowns to take up residence in Toronto for the sole purpose of belonging to the Corps. These would mostly be people with full-time jobs, of which we had a fairly high proportion. Often they were objects of curiosity to those of us who were local, the majority. Why come all this way just to play in a band. It was a measure of the appeal that this Corps exerted on some people. Today, this sort of thing would not be considered at all unusual.

Considering this was a Junior Corps, the number of those who held full-time jobs was quite high. The age limit was twenty-one. This, whether good or bad, was good for the Corps. Those in school would understandably miss rehearsals, especially during exam time. Sometimes winter practices would consist of anywhere from eight to fifteen people, or less. Those who were at work would almost always be in attendance, plus some that were still in school. Also during winter, interest would wane, and it was the small nucleus that helped keep it going. Those who turned out consistently provided something to be built on when interest again picked up.

During the coming season, it was apparent, when we learned the schedule, that we would be busier than previously. There were two main reasons for this. One was that, being the Champions, we were now a bigger draw at shows and, thus, were invited to more contests and exhibitions. The other reason was that the Drum Corps movement in Canada was growing and activity was increasing along with it.

The Niagara Peninsula in particular was becoming a very popular area for shows. Many of these were combined senior and junior contests, where divisions would compete against each other. This type of activity also extended into New York State and Pennsylvania. It was a format that did not find favour with all and was to mostly cease not too far in the future. The primary reason for it was a lack of contests, especially in the junior division.

As far as new playing members joining the Corps, we did not recruit all of those who had an inclination to come. Some came because they liked the Corps and some came because they wanted to be in a Championship Corps. This, of course, is never guaranteed from one year to the next.

Then there were those who would have liked to come but were deterred by the fact that we were the current champions. They thought that they would not make it. In this fashion, some people, who would have been valuable assets, were lost. This attitude was negative. Most of us were very ordinary individuals with ordinary capabilities. Those who stood out, in one for or another, were few and far between and were just a part of the whole.



1959: Toronto Optimists (Guelph)

To return to the actual operations of the Corps itself, 1959 was to be almost a repeat of the previous year. We acquired some new horn players and, more noticeably, drummers. Also, new members for the Colour Guard, all of who were male. Drum Corps in those long ago days were usually all male, or all female. Those that were mixed were few, and then usually only a male Corps with a girl Colour Guard or Drum Major. Today, however, there are few that maintain this status quo, it is no longer prevalent. The modern mixed gender of Corps is a sign of how Drum Corps have changed parallel to the society in which it exists.



Merritton Grenadiers (Waterloo)

The horn line was full in all sections, with spares ready to jump in if necessary. With one year of experience under their belt and not too many new faces, they could be expected to perform at least as well as before, if not better. This expectation was bolstered by the fact that very little new music, or drill, was to be incorporated into the original show.

A drawback to this was that, if repeated too often, the show could become boring to those who watched it. Repetition induced boredom, leading to lack of positive crowd reactions, and could be reflected in general effect scores. There have been units that died due to failure to change their style or material as trends dictated. The Optimists would encounter this hurdle year later. This year, as most other Corps in Canada were in the habit of doing the same thing, any negative effects were evenly spread.

Of the new faces in the line, most were already experienced players from various sources. Not all came from other Drum Corps. Some were from High School Bands, Salvation Army Bands, and who knows where else. Most of these people would immediately become playing members, while others, not being able to play, would be accepted and taught. The basic purpose of the Corps was to give young people something to occupy their time in a worthwhile manner, not to create an elite of only those with certain abilities. Those who had to wait for a spot either did so or drifted on to other things. One fellow, Frank McKittrick, who could not seem to master anything, even with extra help, was willing to stay and become a water boy. So much did he want to be a member, and he is fondly remembered to this day.

As the winter rolled into spring, with the slightly attended drill and music being put together as weather permitted, we began to look forward to the competition season again.

Actually, we held our first outdoor drill rehearsal on January 11. In Canada, this is synonymous with biting cold and fierce winds. Such was the spirit that a full turn out was evident, replete with hats, gloves, scarves, and overcoats. One thing never in short supply was “esprit de corps”.

The Colour Guard had acquired some new members, some of whom would achieve distinction within, and without, the Optimists. Two of these were Len Perrin and Ivor Bramley.

Also, a second Drum Major was added. This was Don Chisholm, previously mentioned in connection with the crest. In contrast to the very military Phil Hennings, Don's style was more flamboyant, different in manner and dress, when most of us were dully conformist. Don had been a soprano horn player during his first year in the corps. His natural flair for the unconventional, added to a real talent, made him an effective, if controversial, addition to the straight-laced Optimists. Possessed of a rapier wit, that occasionally caused hostility, this, combined with his style, caused him to always be more than just a presence. As an aside, he was the only person I ever saw who could cause Mr. Baggs to lose his temper in public. No mean feat!



Ivor Bramley and Len Perrin

Apart from Don's talents, or otherwise, depending on one outlook, one of his major contributions was the introduction to the Corps of a young man named Ivor Bramley. They both worked in the office of the weekend Telegram Magazine, the predecessor of today's Toronto Sun. Don brought Ivor to a rehearsal, but he was not too excited until he saw his first show. That was the armouries show of the previous year. Possibly seeing Scout House had something to do with it. Few who first saw them in their prime could fail to get excited. Ivor joined us and took to the Corps like a duck to water. Things would never be quite the same again.



Don Chisolm

Possessed of a volatile personality that matched his red hair, he soon became a well-known figure. Having no experience of horn or drum, he joined the guard and before long was assisting with instruction as well as marching as a rifleman. This was to lead, in years later, to instructing on a larger scale, beginning with other guards and graduating to Drum Corps proper. Before his Corps career was finished, he was a well-known figure throughout Canadian Drum Corps, as well as certain parts of the United States.

The Corps continued preparations for the coming season, hoping to repeat the successes of the firsts year.

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The 1959 Season

Our first show was, again, the Ice Follies at Maple Leaf Gardens. This became an annual affair and usually the first public appearance of the Corps. This was followed by standstill contests,

exhibitions, and parades and, on May 22, an appearance at the Scout House Spring Show. This was an annual event that was very popular, and people came from miles around to see it. It featured Preston Scout House, performing variations on their show, and always one guest Corps. This year, in a magnanimous gesture, Scout House had invited us. The affair, always held in Kitchener Memorial Auditorium, was well attended, well received, and conducted in total harmony. It was a tribute to the name of Scout House.

The next show was one that we had known about for some time, and, to-date, was the biggest show in which we were to appear. This was the Preview of Champions Contest, to be held on May 31, in Roosevelt Stadium, Jersey City, New Jersey. It was against some of the top name Corps in the United States, and us in only our second year of full-fledged operation. We had been invited, no doubt, because we were now Canadian Champions. We would bring a different style to the occasion. To us, it was like an aspiring artist being asked to perform at the Hummingbird Centre for the first time.

All the Corps in this show were from New Jersey, which at that time was the centre of top Drum Corps activity. Most of today's top Corps (the 1990's) did not exist then. Notable exceptions were Madison Scouts, Cadets of Bergen County, and Rosemont Cavaliers.



1959: Audubon Bon Bons (Varsity Stadium, Toronto)

During 1958, our drum line had only two snare drummers, instead of the customary three.

Now, having acquired a competent third snare drummer, Brian Williams, we could go to Jersey with a full drum line.

Our participation in this show would be the first time that a Canadian Junior Corps had ever competed at such a big show. It would serve to reveal our shortcomings; however, the knowledge acquired would be useful later on, not only in the USA but in Canada as well.

At this early stage in our existence, to achieve success in the United States had never been seriously considered, or presented to us as something to be aimed at. Being good in Canada had been tough enough, especially as we had fared better than had been expected. However, nothing ventured, nothing gained, and Mr. Baggs was never hesitant about taking his Corps into the lion's den. In later years, as we visited the USA more often, it became apparent as we began to score some success, if minor, that eventual major inroads were possible.

Exposure to different judges and standards would gradually point the way to limited success. This was years in the future. For now, we were just beginning on this great adventure.

Follow the Yellow Brick Road.