

Chapter 6: 1959 – To Jersey and Back

This trip was our biggest yet. Not only would we be up against some of the best Corps in the USA, it was also further than most of us had ever been from home, five hundred miles, no less, to the fabled heart of Drum Corpsdom. We were all very excited and nobody missed this one without a good reason¹. As a friendly gesture, we took along Brother Eugene, Director of De La Salle. He was likely interested in becoming acquainted with big time competition, its demands and necessity. No doubt, he had visions of his own Corps one day being in the same position. It would be, but in another time. Also, this would be our first all weekend tour, leaving early Saturday morning and not returning until the wee hours of Monday morning. Those of us who had jobs would have to get off the bus when it returned and go straight to work, equipment and all. So what! This was what it was all about.

We climbed aboard the bus at Jarvis Vocational School and away we went. Crossing the border at Fort Erie/Buffalo, we were soon rolling down the New York Thruway. Mile after mile of green, pleasant countryside rolled by, punctuated with restaurant/gas station combinations, farmhouses, and occasional stands of trees. It was hard to believe that this, at one time, was all part of the Great Eastern Forest that stretched from the Mississippi to the East Coast. After about ten hours, we began to suffer from aching bum syndrome and leg cramps, familiar to all Corps people who endured over long bus trips. Finally, into view loomed the unmistakable skyline of New York City. Passing through a part of this inimitable concrete labyrinth, we finally arrived at St. Patrick's parish church in Jersey City, our home for the night, under the friendly supervision of Father Gaffney, our host, and moderator of the St. the Patrick's Drum Corps. We were assigned to our sleeping quarters in the church hall, told when curfew was, and given some free time. Jersey City area was not Toronto and we were somewhat taken aback by local customs. For example, bars would be open until 3 a.m., or later. Not that we were into that, but there are always one or two in any crowd that feel they have to do their own thing.

In general, discipline and cooperation prevailed, so that most of us were in bed at the proper time, in order to be in good condition for tomorrow's contest. Somehow, the staff found time for us to make an excursion into New York City proper. Entering through the Port Authority bus terminal, we travelled up Broadway, marvelling at the number of movie theatres, saw the clutter of Times Square and ended up at the Empire State Building. That alone was worth the trip.



Roosevelt Stadium with SAC & Cavaliers

¹ Bob Owens wrote: *The trip to New Jersey may have resulted in holes in the line if Mr. Baggs had not stepped in and helped myself and two other members. I had just graduated from Danforth and had my first job. My boss would not grant me permission to take the Friday off so I could be in New Jersey. Mr. Baggs organized tickets to fly to New York La Guardia airport and then be transported by helicopter to Newark. He picked us up and took us to St. Patrick's. That was my first experience flying and was an unforgettable experience.*

It is debatable if, today, a Drum Corps in a top contest would take the time to do this sort of thing, such is the pressure of modern competition. However, in those earlier days, things were more relaxed and fun was had by all.

Of course, we did rehearse and at last boarded the bus to take us to the field of competition. This was Roosevelt Stadium, in Jersey City, and it appeared gigantic. We were not used to such large stadiums, and that along with the Corps we were up against made the whole thing a little intimidating.

In competition were:

- ▶ Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights
- ▶ Garfield Cadets
- ▶ Audubon Girls
- ▶ Paterson Cadets
- ▶ St. Vincent's Cadets

Not a weak one among them.

Three of these Corps we had met the year before; St. Vincent's, Audubon, and Garfield (Holy Name). Blessed Sacrament most of us had only seen on the back cover of Drum Corps World, advertising Getzen bugles or Leedy drums. Paterson we had only heard on records.

Although it no longer exists, Roosevelt Stadium in those days was a mecca for Drum Corps shows. They included the annual Dream Contest, always held later in the year. It featured top junior and senior Corps, as did the show that we were about to enter.



Audubon Bon Bons

Before we were due to go on, Barry spoke to the Corps. He said that we knew where we were and what the competition was. All we could do was go out there and give it our best shot. One cannot swim without first getting ones feet wet.

Finally, dressed, polished, and ready, off we trooped to do our thing. We were on during the early part of the show, and although there were some gaps in the line, the show started well. If anyone

was nervous, it was not apparent, and confidence grew as the performance progressed. Applause from the crowd and an absence of major blunders helped smooth the way for us greenhorns (no pun intended). Crossing the finish line and turning to play the closing fanfare, the feeling was that we had done the best of which we were capable. Marching off the field, the crowd reaction, a standing ovation, made us feel very good about the whole thing. The crowd seemed enormous and it was. We were used to a few hundred, or a few thousand at most. This one was many thousands and a sophisticated, knowledgeable crowd at that. Shows of this calibre were often a weekly event to many of these people, living as they did, in the heart of Drum Corps land.

So it was with great pleasure that we accepted the ovation. Being from a different region, our style was very different from that of the local Corps. This fact helped us gain approval from the crowd. It would not help us with the judges, whose job was not to be generous but to be fair and accurate.

We retired to the stands to watch the other Corps and to see how it was done. They were all good, of course, and we knew that to even place would be an accomplishment.

At the time and place of this writing, accurate records are unavailable and memory is a poor servant. Suffice to say that we were in nine and one-half points out of first place, occupied by St. Vincent's or Blessed Sacrament². This, for us, was hardly an improvement over our first, less sophisticated attempt the year before in Batavia. We had much to learn and do to climb this hurdle.



St Vincent's Cadets

Our pre-show conditioning had prepared us for such a result, so we were not too disappointed. The contest chief judge, Charlie Nabors, had commented on the score sheets how nice it was to see the old straight arm swing and slower cadence. Such things and others had long since disappeared from the routines of the local Corps and pointed up the differences between us.

Everything now over, we packed up and headed back to Toronto, full of stories about our first taste of big time competition for the folks back home. We would be back.

After our return to Canada, the score sheets from Jersey were scrutinized closely and the lessons thoroughly digested. We discovered many things about our performance that would lead to changes, not only in our show but also in our whole concept of this activity. The detailed scrutiny that we had endured served to reveal many flaws in execution. For example, I myself lost 8/10 of a point for a carelessly protruding little finger on a drumstick. This and

others were technical flaws that could be eliminated. A general change of style or material would have to wait for a while, as the show for this year was already set.



Holy Name Cadets (about 1957)

We now got back to rehearsals, as approximately one month from now we faced our first full field show in Canada. This would be against our local rivals; namely, Preston Scout House, De La Salle, and Grantham. All of these Corps were good in

². *Sac and Vinnies tied at 88.2, Opti was third with 79.05 follow by Paterson Cadets with 77.2 and Cambridge Caballeros with 75.65*

Canada, and we could not stay idle if we wished to maintain our position. As yet, we did not practice to a much greater extent than usual. We had for the Jersey show and did for our upcoming one, but the time spent would still not compare with the activities of today's Corps.

The season begins in Canada

The date for the first show was July 1st, and the location was the pleasant town of Woodstock, Ontario. The occasion was the Western Ontario Championships. As far as the other Canadian Corps involved, we had no idea of what to expect, not having been in contact with any of them.

As a further reference to the more relaxed ways of those days, the girlfriend of one of the instructors has prepared a picnic. Some of us, the time being available, enjoyed this interlude in the fine sunny weather of that day. Drum Corps was truly still a hobby in Canada in 1959.

Before a local crowd of a few hundred, the competing units performed their shows. When the smoke had cleared, we stood in first, a full six points ahead of Preston Scout House, with De La Salle a close third and Grantham fourth.

For the other Corps, this was their first competition, while we had already been at it a month. While this did not detract from our success, it did partially explain it. High score in all captions was ours, with the biggest spread on drums and general effect. To "out general effect" Scout House was no mean feat in those days. It possibly happened because they finally had new material that, as yet, was imperfectly executed. The six-point spread, between us and the

rest, would not be allowed to delude us into thinking that the remainder of the season would be a pushover. The Canadian Nationals were still over two months away and both of our closest rivals would improve a great deal between now and then.

This show was the first full field show of the Canadian junior season. Although we would be pretty busy for the rest of the season, it was a very late start for Drum Corps activity compared to the Jersey area. If we had not been a participant in the May 31st Preview of Champions, this would have been our first field show. It highlights one of the differences between Canada and the USA, at that time, at least the New Jersey area. They had already been at it hot and heavy for over a month. This contrast, although to diminish somewhat in later years, would never entirely disappear and is a partial explanation of the regional disparity of the different areas, Corps-wise. Much longer rehearsal hours would help alleviate this disadvantage in years to come. Other factors that would contribute to greater



1958: Toronto Optimists receive Seaway Flag (Don Mills)

competitiveness by Canadian Corps would be more sophisticated shows, with better arrangements, as technical ability improved. Also, exposure to different, mostly stricter, standards of judging would help to close the gap.

Surprisingly, we were, later this year, to score a major success, from our viewpoint, although with a qualifying factor involved. But that would be further on in the season. Right now, we plunged into a weekly round of competitions that kept us on our toes and helped prepare us for this upset to come.

Throughout the month of July, every weekend saw us in competition against Senior Corps, both Canadian and American, and once with one other Junior Corps. Because of this schedule, we were the only Canadian Junior Corps to be active competitively for the entire month. This gave us a definite advantage over our rivals in the junior division. No matter how much one rehearses, competition is what hones a performance to the fine edge necessary for success. Preferably, competitions against Corps better than one's own. Such was our position in this month, when we competed every weekend, mostly against good Senior Corps. Only once, on the 25th, in Welland, Ontario, was another Junior Corps involved, which was De La Salle. Why such a situation? Possibly other Corps had declined to compete, feeling themselves not ready. Not very likely! They probably had not been invited. As for us, being the current champions, we were a good crowd draw and, therefore, a worthy addition to flesh out small senior contests. Had the shows been distributed on a more equitable basis, results at the end of the season could have shown a marked difference in scores, or even placings. All the world loves a winner, and we were not about to refuse entering contests for philosophical reasons. Such inequities, if that is what they were, have to be overcome by one's rivals.

These contests consisted, almost one hundred per cent, of Senior Corps from Southern Ontario, Upper New York State, and Pennsylvania. They were, though not of National Championship calibre, all very good in their own right. We did not win one of them, though according to ourselves it could have occurred on July 18th at Niagara Falls. After three attempts at beginning our show, the affair was called off due to heavy intermittent, and then constant, rain.

These shows did a lot for our season to come, and the placings, one fourth and two seconds, were not disappointing. The Senior Corps that defeated us were good. Jolly Jesters of Toronto, Eric Burton's former Corps, were consistent contenders for Canadian Senior Champions. Also, the Niagara Militaires whom we did manage to defeat once. A most impressive unit, whom we never did best, although coming very close, was the Hilton Crusaders of Hilton, New York. This Corps was always neatly, cleanly consistent and clearly marked for better things. After reorganization, they became the Irondequoit Crusaders. Subsequently, joining with the Rochester Grey Knights, no mean Corps themselves, they emerged as the Fabulous Crusaders of Rochester, N.Y. Under this name they achieved national prominence, competing on a par with the top senior units in the United States.

Through all of this they had Mr. Vince Bruni, who is today active with the D.C.A. senior circuit, as part of their staff. He is now, as then, recognized as a leader in his field, marching and maneuvering. (Vince passed away on August 29, 2003)

The intense activity of July, continuing into August, had prepared us for our first victory in the United States.

Rome, NY

On August 15th, after a parade and exhibition the previous weekend in Sarnia, Ontario, we packed our bags and made the long bus trip to Rome. A small town in Upper New York State, Rome was later to acquire a special significance for us; today, however, it became noteworthy as the location of our initial victory in the United States and not against unworthy opponents. The St. Catherine's Queensmen of St. Albans, N.Y., were there, as were the Garfield Cadets. Less than four points separated the top three Corps, with us in number one position. In second place was the St. Catherine's Queensmen, and bringing up third was Garfield. Garfield! We had never even come close to them before, let alone defeat them, and there was a qualifying factor involved.

Having broken with their sponsor, Garfield (formerly the Holy Name Cadets) had not only lost uniforms and instruments, but, no doubt, some members as well. The remaining members had, with determination, managed to buy and borrow instruments and had outfitted themselves with an all-white version of a uniform. This uniform was very similar to that of Preston Scout House, with whom they had a close connection. Under this makeshift arrangement, they had fielded a Corps for this year, and though still good, were not of the calibre of previous years. Many Corps would not survive such a blow to their organization, but Garfield, as they now called themselves, were not an ordinary Corps. This year, a setback in their long history would prove a minor obstacle to future success. The ensuing year would bear out this observation, and modern types are all familiar with Garfield and their prominence in D.C.I. Now known as The Cadets of Bergen County, they continue to represent the best in Drum Corps achievement. Yes! That day in 1959, we did beat them. But?

On August 22nd, the Optimist Club sponsored the Ontario Championship at East York Stadium in Toronto. Being the host Corps, we performed only in exhibition. This show was two-dimensional in that it featured the Ontario Junior "A" and Junior "B" championships. Such a format was organized in order that more Corps would have a chance at competing, helping to provide some much needed contests.

In the Junior "A" division, Preston Scout House took top honours, with De La Salle placing a close second. Grantham was again third. De La Salle was already displaying the tenacity that was to serve them so well in years to come. They contained, as yet unrealized, the seeds of greatness.

The obvious current potential of Scout House, De La Salle, and Grantham was not lost on us. It was apparent that any relaxation of effort on our part could only have calamitous results. In this respect, being able to observe our rivals first hand helped us as much as they were helped by participation in competitive activity.

This was brought home to us on September 5th when, performing at less than peak, we just barely edged out De La Salle for first place at the annual Canadian National Exhibition contest. Only a week later we soared to a full eight points and fourteen points over second and third places, respectively, of which De La Salle was one. This late in the season such inconsistency is unusual, to say the least, and definitely not healthy. How to explain this? Possibly it was an indication of apprehension regarding the fast approaching Nationals. More likely, it was a sign of a not yet fully developed maturity as a competitive Corps. We were still not yet two years old as a Junior "A" unit, and some cracks were still showing. A combination of these factors and others not doubt had their effect.

1959 Canadian Nationals

Finally, as last loomed, unavoidably, the first defence of our hard won National Title. The Canadian National Drum and Bugle Corps Championships, would be held again in Galt, Ontario, on September 12, 1959. We had been watching our rivals closely, and, although we had defeated them all throughout the year, the scores had often been within easy to overcome range. The big question mark was Scout House, whom we had seen but not competed against since the first Canadian field contest of the year. They had been improving steadily before our eyes. Only one year out of championship status themselves, still very powerful and popular, they constituted the biggest threat to our position.

A sure indication of the mood surrounding the approaching drama was the short bus trip to Galt. The previous year the trip had been a riot of unrestrained chaos, until curbed by cooler heads. During the entire length of this trip, you could have heard a pin drop. WE were now the defending champs, with nothing to gain but another title, but with everything to lose. In subsequent years, such tensions would almost always be present, varying only in degree, to an extent that sometimes affected the performance.

Off we went, grim, determined, but of course full of optimism. As with the previous year, Championship day dawned bright and sunny, and things were conducted in the usual businesslike manner. Interest was high among observers to see if the Optimists could retain their title. Scout House had been receiving additional instruction from a local Senior Corps and were as primed for this as they could possibly be. As an aside, such partisan activity was not uncommon. The Optimists themselves would develop ties with a Senior Corps in later years, though in a different capacity.

Again, the contest was held in the afternoon, enabling the victorious Junior Corps to perform after the senior contest in the evening. By doing this, the evening crowd was entertained while scores for the senior show were tabulated.



1959: Toronto Optimists at Nationals (Galt)

There were many Corps in junior shows and memory does not recall them all. They all put on fine performances, contributing to a good afternoon's entertainment; however, the Scout House, Optimist, De La Salle, Grantham line-up was what was attracting the most interest.

Scout House appeared flawless, new music and routines having been perfected, and they bowled over the crowd. Everybody in the Optimists was aware that anything less than our best would lose the day.

With the opening fanfare echoing around the park, all tension disappeared and we stepped off the line, as we had done many times before. The show unfolded smoothly, and, after having trampled a hundred yards of field, we were owners of our second national title.

This time the margin was a full two points over Preston, who were second, with De La Salle third and Grantham fourth, a now familiar pattern. The score difference was a half point wider than the previous year and served to firmly establish our position.

Whereas, the previous year our win at this show had produced a spontaneous outburst of elation, a similar reaction this year was tempered with relief. We were still champions. From now on when this title was on the line, relief would always play a part when favourable results were announced. As the years passed and the list of titles lengthened, tension would grow, especially when a capable challenge was evident; most years there was. It was one price of success, not that anyone would have had it any other way. We had won the major contest of the year, again, but our season was not yet over. There were still more shows and contests, facing yet again our junior rivals.



1959: Toronto Optimists (Nationals, Galt)

Exactly one week after our victory, we appeared at Varsity Stadium in Toronto, as part of the junior portion of the 4th Annual International Drum and Trumpet Corps Championship.

Leaside Lions and the Canadian Bugle and Trumpet Band Association sponsored this contest. Notice the titles of the contest and the association. They were, considering the state of Canadian Drum Corps at this stage of the game, somewhat anachronistic. This situation would shortly change as Canada, bit by bit, pulled itself into more up-to-date terminology. It had to do with the origin of the species in Canada, which was a little different from that of the United States.

The contest was a junior and senior show. It featured top U.S. and Canadian Corps competing against each other in their respective categories. Last year, Scout House had represented Canada in the junior division.

Our competition was the Audubon Girls, from Audubon, N. J., who had thoroughly trounced us during the last two years. They had beat us again, now, but the total spread was only 1.17, and we actually swept the three execution captions; drums, bugles, and M & M, by small margins.

The season was, even now, not yet ended, as we had to meet Scout House and De La Salle again, for the last time this year, as it turned out. This was on September 26th in Auburn, N.Y., for the New York/Canadian Association title. This association is now non-existent, but, then, it was a prestigious title to possess. Preston, now way down because they had failed to regain their Canadian title, put on a sparkling performance. They tied us on two captions and won another handily. We only took first place by the slim margin of 0.55. It was an unpopular

decision, and Scout House had the crowd with them all the way. This, however, was a phenomenon that one had to learn to accept when appearing on the same field as Scout House. In their prime, as they still were, they nearly always had the crowd. It was their unique style and quality of performance that contrasted with all others who were basically the same, differing only in degree.

It was also at this show that a group of knowledgeable, non-partisan observers noted that unless they modified their style, there was not a future for them in competitive Drum Corps.

The final contest of the year was held at the Annual St. Catharines Grape Festival, one week later. Thus appeared a first blemish on a hitherto clean record. We pulled out of it. Because both Preston and De La Salle were involved in this show, immediate reaction among some was that we had pulled out to avoid a late season defeat by Preston.



1959: Toronto Optimists (Toronto City Hall)

The official explanation from our side was that it was now October, the official release month, and reorganization was already underway; plus, everybody was very tired after a strenuous season, and there would be many holes in the line. There was some truth in this because not everyone was a total Drum Corps fanatic. After winning two major titles, some were indifferent to another show. Most would have come, but whatever the truth, Grape Festival organizers and local fans were not very happy. We were the number one Corps and the

one that everyone wanted to see. The fact that our three major rivals would also be there added further drama to the situation. It would have been a repeat of the championships, but, by pulling out, we converted it into just another contest. Forfeiting a posted bond, the decision stuck and the situation remained unchanged. Strange are the ways of men, but most of us were glad the season was over. We were tired and had had enough, almost. Toronto's stalwart mayor had again arranged a civic reception to honour the Corps. Again, we marched up Bay Street to the steps of Old City Hall, waking up those asleep at their desks. The appropriate pleasantries were exchanged, and then it was over. Well, if nothing else, people in New Jersey had at least now heard of Toronto, Ontario.

Next year? Nobody was thinking that far ahead yet, at least not the rank and file; but others were, and their plans and ambitions were to bring about many changes.

On with the show!