Chapter 7: Winter 1959/60 – What's New, Pussycat?

The Corps was now a well-established and increasingly well-known unit. Exposure in new areas and almost one hundred percent favourable coverage in Drum Corps publications served to spread our reputation. Certain standards were now expected on the field as well as off. When the Corps was performing, it was expected to be good, and, when wearing a Corps jacket in public, it was hoped that your behaviour would create a good impression.

In order that this growing reputation be maintained and enhanced, it was necessary to make changes. We would, of course, make a run at a third consecutive Canadian title, aware that this would not be easy.

With the expanding movement here, more hungry contenders would appear, to join those already in existence. Our thoughts turned south, toward the United States. We had experienced moderate success there and hoped to return to try again. Both of these goals required that changes be made, to stay abreast of the times.

1960: Jim, Bill & Ron cleaning their horns

In order to achieve success in the U.S., it was apparent that we would have to become more American in style.

Since the United States was where the whole business began and developed, they were the best at it. The name of the game became to do what they do, only do it better. Beat them at their own game, so to speak, in their own backyard.

This, of course, was easier said than done, but the attempt had to be made or we would, ourselves, be overtaken by others in Canada with similar ideas.

This was what we all wanted, and, in the future, we would often measure ourselves against, and aim for, U.S. Corps; soon, one in particular. By this method, we hoped to be able to remain ahead of our Canadian rivals. One of them, in retrospect, was of the opinion that their quest after us was what kept us moving up. There is more than a grain of truth in this, but our aspirations toward American Corps was also a major factor influencing the extent and range of our activities.

Changes were needed

The first casualty of this expanded ambition was the "happy type" music theme adopted at the inception of the Corps. It had originally been introduced because it suited the name of the Corps and was in keeping with the concept of the Optimist Club. Now, for competition purposes, it became a limiting factor. Enough of this type of music existed that could have

fuelled such a theme for years. It also could have produced stagnant, predictable performances, or even repetitious, that could have had an effect on scores, mostly through the general effect captions. There are Corps that do adopt this policy successfully; the most obvious, the Hawthorne Caballeros, but we were through with it. Retaining only the official Optimist Club song, “Hail to Optimism”, we moved on.

The result was to be a much harder driving show. It featured a mix of semi-classical, march, and old-time popular music for the bulk of the field presentation. The cadence was stepped up from our hitherto leisurely 124 paces a minute to a peppier 134. This pace would often be exceeded later on, due to enthusiasm and exuberance.

That was change number two. It was also an innovation that was not revealed until the first public airing and was immediately picked up and used by others in Canada. That gave us an edge at the opening of the season, as we had spent all winter rehearsing at the new cadence and our execution was attuned to it.

The horn line was now to begin experimentation with slides and rotary valves. Arrangements of greater complexity required the full capability of the instruments. It was a matter of improving technical proficiency, a definite must for further inroads south of the border.

To refer to the previous chapter, the observers, mentioned at the New York/Canadian contest at Auburn, N.Y., who commented on Scout House, also noticed the relative simplicity of our show. Much block chording in the music and straightforward drill patterns. Scout House, at the time, had a more complex music and drill routine than us. Simple but effective could summarize our show. This was alright, unless you had ambitions to move up. Then it was not good enough. Accordingly, we were the ones to modify our style in the direction of greater difficulty. In the future, such observations would not be repeated. It was a step in the right direction.

The people who made these remarks about Scout House and us were off-duty American judges. Their opinions could be considered valid and had appeared at a later date in a Galt newspaper.

To some more advanced units these things were already elementary, but to us it was all new. The greater technical ability involved allowed greater range and variety in the repertoire. When mastered, it would make its presence felt on the field.

The colour guard, still under the control of Eric Burton,

1959: Seaway Flag (Don Chisolm, Bob Cook, Phil Hennings)

and increasingly feeling the influence of the ambitious and enthusiastic Ivor Bramley, moved into more intricate routines. The rifle squad, especially, had become more specialized in their drills, involving spinning and tossing. It had come as a surprise to some that they used nine-pound Lee-Enfield rifles, the real thing, not lightweight imitations.

The flag line was growing in size as new flags were added, always by virtue of having been won, or presented to represent an occasion or institution. At the 1959 Civic Reception, we had been awarded the City of Toronto flag and, later, the St. Lawrence Seaway flag.

Major changes, but the least evident, took place in the drum line. To the unschooled observer, one drum line looks and sounds much the same as another. To those who are aware, there can be, and are, great differences.

It began when Lorne Ferrazzutti, still drum instructor, required that all current members of the line work on snare drum rudiments. This was before the days of the matched-grip and thirty-piece percussion squads. The only members of the line who played the full range of rudiments were snare drummers. Now everybody would become familiar with them.

1958: Don Mills Sky Raiders (Nationals, Galt)

During the previous season, we had acquired two new snare drummers due to the breakup of the Sky Raiders Drum and Bugle Corps, who were also 180 Squadron Air Cadets. In 1958, we had used only two snare drummers but had acquired a third for 1959. With the two more now added, we had, at the moment, a total of five. A couple of weeks later, in walked another one, Ronn Prokop. He had drummed with Sea Cadets and then spent one year in Scout House. People seldom left Scout House for other Junior Corps, and this could be seen as a sign of the times.

Although Mr. Prokop would eventually achieve international fame, he was, right now, just another new guy.

The “Big” Drum Line

1960: “Big” Drum Line (Maple Leaf Gardens)

We now had six snares, which, along with the three tenors, two bass, and one cymbals, gave us a total of twelve people working on rudiments. Anybody else who was interested was invited to try out on tenor, bass, etc. The offer was taken up by more than a few. All winter the regular drummers worked on rudiments, all of them, even some Swiss. The old standard drum solos; “Connecticut Halftime”, “Old Dan Tucker”, “Army 2/4", and “Three Camps”, became familiar to all. A few actually managed to play them.

At this point, it was realized that we had a very good chance of fielding a six-man snare drum line. Modern Drum Corps types will say, “so what”. Well, in those days, this size of line was unheard of. Three snare, three, tenor, two bass, and one cymbal was the standard line and was almost universally in use. A few Corps had tried other combinations. Four and four, even two and two, but usually stuck with three and three. This was mainly due to the requirements of execution and the size of one’s horn-line. Techniques for eight, or ten, well-executing snare drums, along with twenty or more other percussion pieces had not yet been developed. It would be some years yet before drum lines grew in size and complexity to become the large, well-executing percussion sections that are the norm today.

Thus, with our six snares, we were a bit ahead of our time; nevertheless, it was planned to use them – until circumstance and practicality intervened. Further along we shall see how, but, meanwhile, no less than Wild Bill Hooten, leader of The Reilly Raiders had visited us in January. Having watched the six in action, he had been most impressed.

Drill-wise, the major change, as mentioned earlier, was the increased cadence. This took some getting used to. The fact that we had the fall, winter, and spring rehearsals to master it was an asset. Also, style changes were introduced. The arm-swing was altered from stiff-armed to a more relaxed, bent-at-the-elbow position. Snapping horns and body into position became the norm, rather than a casual moving into position. More emphasis was placed on military bearing and, for the first time, a genuine effort was made to standardize leg heights when marking time. In addition to raising leg heights we began the first experiments in using a measured pace. Many hours were spent trying to find the best methods for doing all of these things.

To everyone in every section, all of this was innovation. Everybody was eager and strove to grasp everything for the beginning of the new season. Of course, the coming season would be the most challenging yet.

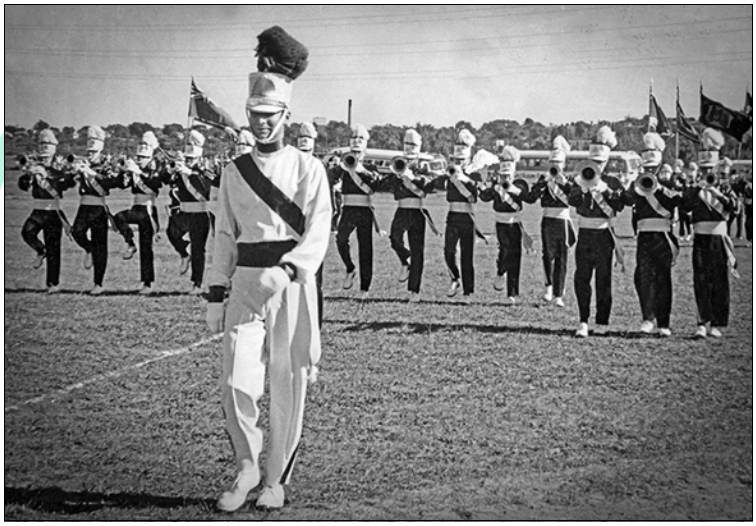
1960: Grantham at the Grape Festival Parade

A common practice among Corps was to visit the rehearsals of other rival Corps, thus gaining insight into how the enemy was shaping up. It was not uncommon for De La Salle people to drop in at our rehearsals, and vice versa. They were always welcome, and, usually, so were we. I use the word enemy with reservation. We never saw anybody from Grantham or Scout House; they were too far away. De La Salle were not much more than a mile away, in the same city. There was already a rivalry between the two Corps and their fans. Most of the time it was friendly and the two Corps often mingled and exchanged ideas. For years, the two Corps practised on the adjacent fields that we had found on that day in 1958 when looking for a new practice spot. That day, De La Salle was already there.

This rivalry, though healthy and friendly, revealed its depth when we acquired a former De La Salle member, Frank Gabriel, the only one we ever got. At the time, in local circles, this was akin to one of the Hatfields joining the McCoys.

Change of Drum Major

To round off our slate of changes, we lost the services of our flamboyant second Drum Major, Don Chisholm. He had distinguished himself at the 1959 Nationals. When we were on the line, ready, as winners, to perform the exhibition after the senior contest, he marched out to his starting position in a parody of the Scout House style. This entailed almost the full width of the field, and it was unmistakable. It caused both humour and unrest, but not enough of either to cause any serious disruptions. Needless to say, Mr. Baggs was not amused. Don was a genuine loss, his wit and irreverence served to create many an uproarious bus trip. We would not see his like again.



1960: Barry Bell as Drum Major

Phil Hennings was still with us, as Drum Major, and as military as ever. It was felt, though, that with the added variety of music, someone more musically inclined should be doing the actual conducting.

The responsibility fell on none other than a slim, slightly stoop-shouldered, and overworked fellow by the name of Barry Bell. He had done this before with the Danforth Crusaders. As musical director of The Optimists, his plate was full. He did not really need or want it now, but nobody else suitable was available. Ever compliant with necessity, he took it over.

Corps Spirit

The overall spirit that existed in the Corps had yet to subside. It was as pervasive now as it had been at the beginning. In an army, this would be called morale, and it was an important factor. It had its ups and down, of course, but it was mostly up, likely due to the almost constant run of success that the Corps had enjoyed.

Its manifestations were varied. There was seldom a lack of volunteers for anything that had to be done. Section rehearsals, on ones own time, had become almost second nature to many, as well as individual practice to increase ones ability.

One fellow, a baritone horn player had, I saw it, worn a smooth groove in the concrete floor of his basement. This had resulted from many hours of marking time playing his horn, on one spot. Needless to say, he was one of our more concrete members. His playing and marching ability was admired and imitated by others. His name was Al Punkari, and he was one among many similar stories.

Also, as at the restaurant near the school, when at the waterfront practising, people would stay after practice. They would often stay until one or two in the morning, or later, talking about Corps. The presence of more than a few of the aforementioned people, not only then but also later, helped the Optimists on their gradual climb to success.

1960: Corps members with restaurant owners near the waterfront rehearsal site

As a unit, the members, instructors, and executive got along remarkably well. If there were any disputes between instructors and executive, they never reached our ears. There was friction of course, and this is almost unavoidable, even healthy, in a large organization such as a Drum Corps. The staff ironed out cases of disagreement or dissension that surfaced in the Corps itself, and friction never lasted long.

Many had different ideas about things and were usually allowed to try them out. Often, they were adopted, to the advantage of all.

An every growing sense of unity, “Corps Spirit” as it was called, focussed on the desire for a better Corps. This “spirit”, “esprit de corps”, “elan”, or what have you, would in the future reveal its extent when disaster was imminent. As yet, we had encountered no major emergency.

If all this sounds like a regimented unit of willing slaves, it was not exactly that at all. Rehearsals were carried on in a mood of good-natured application to the task at hand and were interspersed with breaks. There was always fun. Many associated with people outside the Corps itself, doing things that all other normal people do. (It was thought that people in Corps were not quite normal.) Cliques and groups existed but not to a rigid degree, and it was just one, big, usually happy, family.

The “Tough Guys”

Our practice spot at the corner of Carlton and Jarvis streets served to be the source of rumours and theories that had no great basis in fact. This was part of the tenderloin district. Interested parties often thought that one reason for our success was the fact that we were from a “tough” area. Being “tough” kids, we had to fight harder for what we got. This attempt to explain our repeated dominance of the local scene was not only misplaced but also indicative of much deliberation in this direction. It was wrong because actually very few of us were from this area itself. Some were, and were “tough” kids; but, as described before, many came from all over the city and from out-of-town. This theory holds less water when it is realized that “toughness” does not a good Drum Corps make. Skill, dexterity, planning, and creativity are just a few of the requirements. Toughness may only play a part in the length of hours put in. This is also called dedication. As a sop to the theorists, I will say that those who did originate from that area really were tough. They had to be. Humourously, as ordinary young men who often like to think themselves tough, we did profess a certain, maybe misplaced, pride in this circumstance. Unofficially, we adopted the name, “The Jarvis Street Commandos”.

1960: Barry Bell, Dave Hanks, and corps by the waterfront

This area, however, did produce its pathos and humour. One very warm night, we had opened the doors of the auditorium to the outside to let some air in. The music floated out onto Jarvis Street. Unobtrusively, a young lady of the night had come right to the door and stood observing the proceedings. We were having ensemble practice, and she stood looking in on a world she had not been aware of before. One of our members approached and spoke with her, but it is not known what she thought. Although some of our members were familiar with her world, she was obviously, until now, unfamiliar with ours. Eventually, she slipped away, to who knew where, and we remained in our comfortable niche.

On another occasion, one of our members encountered a local resident performing an act usually confined to the washroom. He was prompted to make uncomplimentary remarks, whereupon she went to bring her mate. He was about 150 pounds heavier, but fortunately a streetcar came along at that moment and our man made his exit safely. Due to past, and present prominence, the name is being withheld, to protect the guilty.

All this had nothing to do with the Corps and its operation; it was where we practised. Just part of life in the big city.

Finalizing the show

Before the season came around, the show required finalizing and membership, again, finalized. We still had some music from the previous year, but most of the show was new, both music and drill. The concert had been slated for change, but this did not happen. The first number, “Serenade from the Student Prince”, was a beautiful vehicle for solo horn work by Joe Gianna and Al Morrison and it had proven itself popular for the one year that we had played it. It provided a fine contrast for the now trademark, “In The Mood”, that we had played since 1958. This was the number to be replaced, but later, the selection chosen, when aired, would prove to be a flop. So, “In The Mood” stayed for the third year. The fans loved it, we loved it, and the judges as well.

The horn line had been boosted into the thirties, from the original 27 to around 33. In those days, 36 was considered big. The colour guard had twelve men and, with our bigger drum line, we would have close to 60 members on the field. What a contrast to today, when 128 is considered the normal, and anything less can endanger ones chances for top contention.

The drum line by now had sorted itself out. Those who had left tenor, bass, or cymbals, to practice snare for the winter, returned to their original places. Those who had tried for their positions went back to where they had come from, leaving us with six more snare drums. If Lorne had been searching for some hidden, missed talents, he was unsuccessful, but the experience was good for all.

The six snares formed a competent line, but it would not last too long, which would lead to some difficulties. Of the new members on snare, Ronn Prokop, who was already a good drummer when he joined, showed real potential to become extraordinary. Coming into contact with Lorne Ferrazzutti had taken its effect and he really began to develop into a snare drummer par excellence. Others would too, but, if one was around Prokop, it was to usually be in the twilight, rather than the limelight. This was evident to all, even those with little or no knowledge of drumming. To Ronn’s credit, he never allowed himself to be affected by any admiration or flattery, always being a solid lineman and a first-class Corpsman.

The Social Side

The changes referred in the title of this chapter not only apply to style and material but also additions to the Corps in various departments. This was how it grew bit by bit, and, at this time, the ladies decided to get in on the act.

1960: At a dance

Mrs. Nonie McKolskey, who had a son, Terry, in the Corps, together with a number of other enthusiastic "mums" began what became the Ladies Auxiliary. This was the year that they started, and it took them a while to get themselves organized. Once they did, they began to assume responsibilities and, the following year, their influence began to make itself felt. Coincidentally, Mrs. McKolskey herself, after being with the Corps for two years, would become the wife of Bernie Beer.

There was another ladies organization that had been around for a while to help the Corps. Less obvious, but no less effective than the Ladies Auxiliary was to become, was the Opti-Mrs. They were the wives of the men of the Optimists Club. Seldom heard from and even less seen, they nevertheless played a big part in activities like dances and parties. Such people helped make the world go round.

On April 17, 1960, a dinner / dance was held and a tradition began. The first 5-year rings were issued; it being five years since the Optimist Club had assumed the sponsorship of the Corps. Seventeen were given out that night. All was well with the club. There had never been a word of regret, at least publicly, about the reversal of opinion that originally led to the sponsorship. The Corps had exceeded all expectations, while bringing the club much good publicity. It was a living advertisement for their good works.

1960: First Recipients of 5 year rings

During the previous year, the Corps had set up another band composed of much younger fellows, at Oak Park Public School in East York. They were

called the Bantam Optimists, and they were what was known as a Feeder Corps. Run by various people during their existence, they were initially organized by Bill Jay, an ex-Optimist bugler, and Fred Johnson. Fred later became a successful Scarborough politician. Members of the Junior Corps itself would go, one or two nights a week, to instruct. The idea was to create a reserve pool of talent from which the Corps could draw new players. It was rapidly becoming harder for someone new to join the Corps without some prior training. By this year, the Bantams a thriving enterprise. In the future, it would prove its value beyond all doubt.

All these things described were new, adding weight and complexity to the whole organization. Where would it all end? Who knew? Who cared? This was a rolling stone that gathered moss as more people jumped on the bandwagon (no pun intended).

Our Competition

Rumours were more rife this year than usual, and reports reached our ears that De La Salle and, particularly, Scout House were red hot and raring to go. We could check out De La Salle, if we cared, but Preston was harder to observe. Now, some units often held closed rehearsals, which was supposed to hide something. It was the beginning of the cold war, one strange report that reached us was that Scout House would only enter two contests this year, one of which was the Nationals. This proved to be true, with results that we shall cover later. De La Salle were never to be taken lightly, and seldom were by us. Many who had been around for a while generally found it best to ignore rumours and wait to see what was real. This was because they were usually the same every year, and it took the first show to confirm.

As for us, we were again scheduled to be busier than ever. We would again open at the Ice Follies. By this time, we should have been doing it on skates. The Corps was sounding the best we had ever heard it, and all were eager to see how the new style and show would be accepted by both fans and judges.

There stretched before us a full season of tough competition, against both American and Canadian opponents. We were not the only ones to make changes and progress, as this year would demonstrate.

As so, we anticipated much activity, but, at this early stage, uppermost in our minds was the fact that we were going back to New Jersey. What better place to test ones new ideas and innovations.

And the band played on.

1960: Toronto Optimists rehearsing (from the Toronto Star)