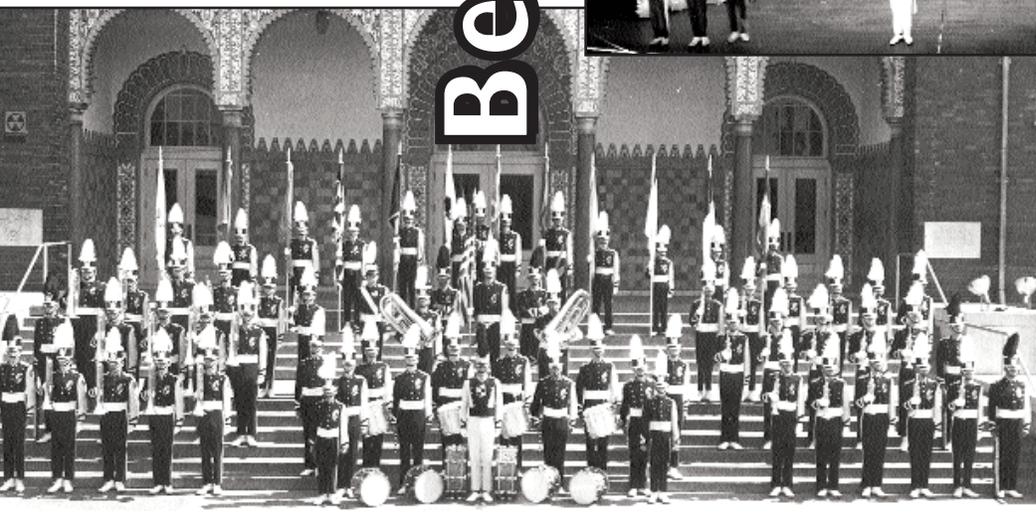
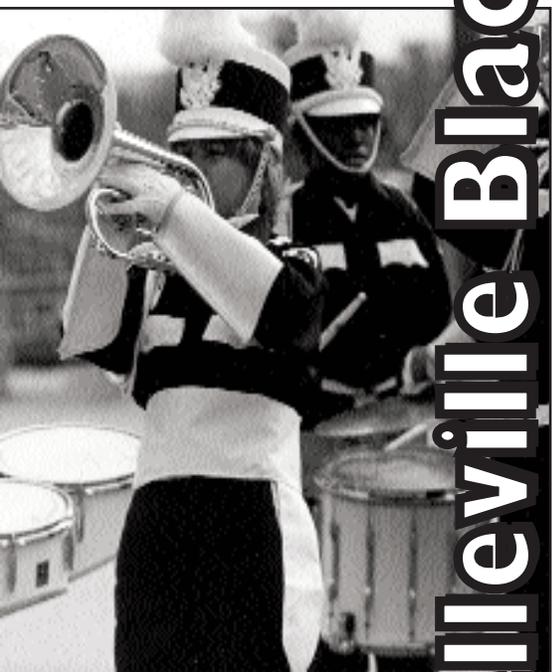

Belleville Black Knights



by Dave Scott

The Black Knights were organized in the spring of 1953 when Forrest "Dad" Creson and Vern Poole combined their talents and ideas to form an all-male junior drum and bugle corps in Belleville, IL. Both men came from a drum corps background and first became acquainted while marching in the East St. Louis Ainad Temple Shriners Drum and Bugle Corps.

Creson, who became the Black Knights' director and brass arranger, grew up with a love of music and pageantry. He was the drum major of his high school marching band and later went on to be the instructor and music arranger for several corps in Illinois such as the Kiwanis Drum and Bugle Corps, Ainad Temple "Big Red" Shriners, the Cape Girardeau American Legion Senior Corps and Red Bud Golden Hornets.

Through his years of involvement with all branches of Masonry and Shriners, Creson envisioned a constant supply of talented young men that could be recruited from the ranks of the Belleville Tancred Chapter of DeMolays. Other sponsors included the East St. Louis Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8677 and the Caseyville American Legion Post 53.

Wearing distinctive black and white

uniforms and possessing a highly precise military bearing, the Black Knights quickly gained state and national prominence early on as they won the AmVets National Championships in 1954 and continued to shock the drum corps world by taking the first place trophy again the following two years.

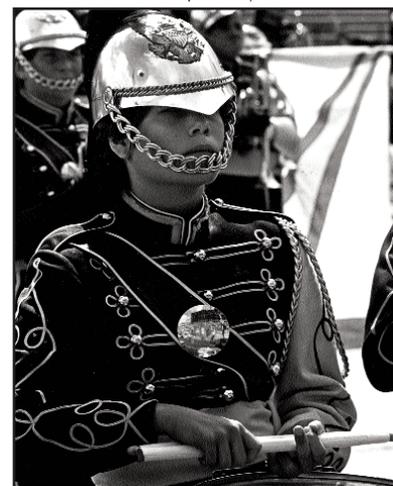
As the 1950s rolled on, the corps grew in size and confidence, adding a feeder corps known as the Sir Knights.

They next switched uniforms, going with a tailored cadet-style black uniform with trademark white sleeve and giving the old satins to the Sir Knights.

The corps also expanded their competition schedule by traveling to Dallas and placing fifth



Black Knights, 1972 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Black Knights, 1973 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Black Knights at one of their annual winter concerts in Belleville, late 1960s (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

in the 1956 VFW Nationals and third at the 1957 VFW Nationals in Miami.

By the 1959 season, the corps experienced one of their most successful summers and stormed into Los Angeles confident of bringing the VFW National

Championship trophy back to Belleville. Unfortunately, the Knights had to settle for second, as they were outscored by their upstate rivals, the Chicago Cavaliers.

Moving into the next decade, the Black Knights retained the image as a Midwest power, gaining a reputation for their

(Top to bottom) Belleville Black Knights in 1972 (photo by Rich Jackson); 1969 (Moe Knox); 1988 (John Hillebrandt); and 1964 (from the collection of Dave Scott).

spectacular rifle squads that performed some amazing equipment work on authentic Springfield rifles.

The music during this decade included such crowd favorites as *Victory At Sea*, *Johnny One Note*, *Sherwood Forrest*, *Major Dundee* and *I Wish You Love*. These selections were backed by highly proficient percussion lines that produced many talented players like Jim Middleton, who won the VFW National Champion snare trophy in 1960 and was also a member of the corps' 1961 VFW National Champion percussion quartet.

By the end of the 1960s, the corps underwent several rebuilding years. Entering the 1970 season, they were able to climb back into the national scene by placing 12th at VFW Nationals in Miami. They had high hopes for the future.

This momentum stalled briefly with the untimely death of Creson in early 1971. At that point, Ken Snyder took over as director and, with the help of a large, talented staff made up primarily of alumni, the Knights continued to improve and build the organization.

In the process, the decision was made to end the long association with the DeMolays



Black Knights, 1987 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Black Knights, 1973 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

so that the corps could become co-ed.

The 1973 season proved to be their most successful as former drum major Roger Kaiser took over as corps director. Kaiser designed new cadet-style uniforms, giving the corps a British look with white gauntlets and chrome helmets. A top name design team was also hired and included Ray Baumgardt, Marty Hurley and Gary "Chops" Chopinski.

For the first time in many years, the Black

field a corps and keep things going. This struggle continued into the 1980s as the Knights changed from open class competition to class A. Fielding a smaller corps, the philosophy was no longer "winning is everything," but rather, one in which the emphasis was on the members having fun while learning and performing an enjoyable



(Above) Black Knights, 1973 at Bluegrass Nationals in Lexington, KY (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Black Knights, 1988 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).



(Above) Black Knights, 1968 VFW Nationals (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Black Knights drum majors, 1973 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Knights won both the VFW and American Legion State Championships. They also placed second at the Bluegrass Nationals, third at the U.S. Open and wrapped up the season with a solid 10th-place finish at the DCI Championships in Whitewater, WI. The musical program consisted of *Crown Imperial*, *Get it On*, *Russian Sailors Dance* and a medley from "Man of La Mancha."

As in the past, the latter part of the decade saw the corps struggle with membership and financial strains. At times it appeared the corps would be forced to fold. However, a small nucleus of members and staff stuck it out and managed to

show. With mild success in class A, the Black Knights still had a difficult time recruiting new members and, with mounting financial debt, it was inevitable that the end of a proud history had arrived at the close of the 1989 season.

While the Belleville Black Knights have been gone for several years, the mark they left on the drum and bugle corps activity remains to this day. A 50th anniversary reunion is planned for September 2003.



Dave Scott is a native of Alton, IL, and marched in the Black Knights during the mid-1960s. He still lives in the St. Louis area with his wife and two sons.

During the 2002 and 2003 seasons, he participated in the Chicago Royal Airs Reunion Corps.

For the last 30 years he has been on the staff of Drum Corps World and attends Midwest shows and the DCI Championships yearly.