The history of the Decorah Kilties was initiated on March 28, 1876. Capt. G. Q. Gardner called a meeting of those interested in the organization of a drum corps. P. Peterson, Fifer Coleman and John Fuller were the first in the long existence of the Decorah Kilties.

On April 19, 1876, George Scott, E. Scott, L. Miller, I. Gilbertson, M. Brown and J. Hard joined this small group. In 1880, two Neshiens, Anderson and Smout, became members and, in 1881, Charles Thompson, George Norton and Rennie Marrietta enlarged the group.

The corps in 1881 gained a national reputation, raised the membership to 15 and attended an encampment at Des Moines, IA. It was there that they gained their first victory over the Dubuque corps, became known throughout the state and were named the Fourth Regiment Corps.

In June 1882, at Waterloo, IA, first prize was awarded to the Decorah Kilties. In September at the International Competitive Drill in Dubuque, IA, their saying was, “Show what the little backwoods drum corps can do.” The Decorah Kilties proved themselves by winning the first prize of $500. This was the start of a long history of performances and victories for the organization.

Jim Hepburn, a local beer distributor and chairman of the Iowa State VFW Convention and parade, was asked to head the VFW Junior Drum and Bugle Corps as senior commander and the Kilties were organized in 1932. His job in organizing this corps, along with Junior Whitney, was to raise funds for uniforms and equipment and to secure a musical director. Hepburn went door-to-door in town and raised $1,200.

The first donors were Ed Holmberg and Erickson Meat Market who each donated $20.

The musical director was Thurst Kjome, owner and operator of Kjome’s Music Store. At that time, Hepburn and Kjome started recruiting the boys who were sons of VFW members.

Hepburn then took charge of drill and training the corps in marching. As time went on, he lined up many trips for the corps.

Scottish kilt uniforms were ordered from Scotland. Because they would not arrive in time for the first year, the corps was dressed in white pants and white shirts, black ties and red sashes. Hepburn was with the corps until his death in the late 1940s, at which time Kjome took over the corps completely.

On December 21, 1932, Kjome’s first instruments consisted of 12 bugles, 12 drums, two bass drums of Scotch design, two cymbals and a drum major’s baton. These bugles were of a straight design with no valves, except the traditional spit valve. He was asked to have two songs ready for Memorial Day 1933: The Iowa Corn Song and We’re in the Army Now.

Kjome wrote several songs for the corps to play and later sold them to other corps.

The most outstanding trips for Hepburn and Kjome were to Los Angeles, representing the Elks, and to the first Presidential Inauguration of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953. Kjome was director for 22 years, retiring from the organization in 1954.

Corps staff
Early years: Thrust Kjome, Jim Hepburn, Sig Sparatti.
Mid-years: Thrust Kjome, Jim Hedden, Jim Casterton, Art Branae, Al Sensor, Mike Jensen, Bob...
Howard Hill started his drum and bugle corps career in 1978, marching with the Blue Stars. He went on to teach the La Crosse, WI, corps until 1990 and was interim director in 1984 when he hired Brian Whitty as a brass instructor who eventually became the director.

Hill graduated from the University of Idaho in 1983 with a degree in music composition.

Soon after director Mike Root converted the Decorah Kilties from doing only parades to participating in drum and bugle corps competitions in the Midwest and on an international level, Hill came on board to evaluate the program and in 1994 he became the corps’ percussion caption head.