

Geneseo Knights

by **Bill Neuleib**

The origin of The Knights actually goes back to a Boy Scout corps formed in the 1930s in Kewanee, IL. The American Legion Post took over sponsorship and the corps became a Sons of the American Legion junior corps, competing through 1942 when World War II took most of its members.

A few years after the war, interest in drum corps began again. The boys of the SAL corps were now men and a senior corps was formed in 1949. With the help of the Kewanee American Legion, the corps raised money for instruments and new uniforms and the name Kewanee Black Knights was chosen.

The Black Knights became a familiar corps on the state and national scene from 1951 to 1964. In addition to many local championships, the Black Knights finished in the American Legion national finals (top 10) every year from 1954 to 1961. The senior corps was disbanded in 1964.

About a year later, one of the former senior members, Marshall Heene, felt the area still needed a drum corps and he promoted the idea of forming a junior corps. In the winter of 1965-1966, the idea became a reality. Heene contacted several former senior members who had been active and helped teach as well as play to be the

instruction staff and the Black Knights junior corps was born.

The junior corps became successful early on. In fact, they made the finals at the 1966 Illinois State Fair competition and didn't have a finals show. At that time, a corps learned a preliminary show of seven minutes and a final show of 11 to 13 minutes.

That first summer the staff conceived and taught a seven-minute show mainly to acquaint the new members with the drum corps activity.

They entered the State Fair competition for the experience of being judged and seeing other corps from around the state. When they unexpectedly made the finals, they had no choice but to do the short show again and take the under-time penalty, but the fact that the Black Knights were a viable drum corps was established that summer of 1966.

In the 30 years that followed, at one time or another, they defeated every corps (except the Royal Airs) in Illinois and most everyone in the Midwest.

The Black Knights of Kewanee dropped the "Black" from their name in 1972. There was always confusion with another junior corps from Belleville that was also named the Black Knights and, in addition, the corps was interested in broadening the program possibilities. This was much easier with just the name The Knights.

The Knights were not one of the premier corps, so some of the innovations they brought to the activity were not given as much attention, but one of those firsts was to abandon the traditional cadet uniform in favor of a "uniform costume" that depicted the name of the corps as well as the literature they were playing in their program.

They adopted a uniform consisting of a knight's tunic with a cross and a Robin Hood hat and played selections from the musical "Camelot." Several years later, the Cavaliers and Phantom Regiment both followed suit and adopted uniforms more in keeping with their name.

The corps moved from Kewanee to Geneseo after the 1973 season. Reasons for the move were both financial and membership. Membership had dwindled in the Kewanee area and had grown considerably in the Geneseo and Quad City areas and it was hoped that the move to Geneseo would give new life to the corps. This hope turned out to be true.

The next 15 years would see the Knights attain national status, especially in the 1980s. One of the principal music arrangers for the corps was Larry Kerchner, who did most of the music from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s. Ken Norman also did some arranging for the corps.

Another example of the corps' innovation was presented in their 1979 show. Prior to a number called *Slavic Dance*, four of their guard girls disappeared into the percussion section and reappeared in full Hungarian costumes and danced to the music. They went back into the percussion section to change back into their guard uniforms while the show continued and many times the audience was not aware where they went.

Costume changes like this are done frequently now, but as far as we know, this kind of presentation had not been performed before The Knights did it in 1979.

In 1980, the membership and talent had

(Top to bottom) Kewanee Black Knights senior corps at the 1959 American Legion Nationals parade in Minneapolis, MN; the Black Knights at the 1960 American Legion Nationals in Miami, FL; the Geneseo Knights at the 1983 DCI Midwest in Whitewater, WI (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World); Quad City Knights at 1995 DCI Division III Prelims in Buffalo, NY (photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of DCW).

grown to a point where it was decided their next objective was to become a DCI touring corps. Although the group had made week-long trips to Boston, Miami and Texas, taking on the responsibility of touring most of the summer was a new and exciting challenge.

One of the first tours involved a trip to the West Coast for a series of shows starting in Utah, over to the San Francisco area, down to Los Angeles and Las Vegas on the way back. A lot of things were learned on that first tour, like we learned how to handle real hardship when the motor on one of the buses locked up in Wyoming on the way out and other travel arrangements had to be made for a third of the corps for the rest of the tour. The inconvenience was offset somewhat by performing in these new cities, plus a special performance at Disneyland.

For the next decade, the corps became a regular in DCI and Drum Corps Midwest contests all over North America.

The most successful season was probably 1983. The corps marched 122 members and was recognized as a viable competitor. They placed third in DCM Finals just behind Madison and Phantom Regiment, were ninth at the DCI regional prelims in Whitewater -- significant because all the corps in DCI were there -- and also came in among the leaders at DCI East in Allentown, PA.

It was a real disappointment when the corps failed to make finals at the DCI Championships a month later in Miami, FL, after being in such a good position in those DCI regionals.

Because of the success of the corps that year, DCM named me "Director of the Year." This was a tremendous honor and the reality was that I really represented an outstanding group of people consisting of a dedicated and talented staff, the greatest group of young adults you could hope to work with and an untiring support staff.

DCI decided to recognize support people at the championships and over the next several years the Knights had Gene Herring, Dorothy Johnson and Wayne Huntley recognized for their work and dedication.

In 1984, the Knights marched a smaller but equally talented corps and introduced another innovation in their program. In one of the last productions of the show, they featured a boy and girl from the guard in a solo dance number. This is commonplace now, but it was unique in 1984.



The Kewanee Black Knights, 1970 (photo from the collection of Bill Neuleib).

performing many places.

In 1992, they played music from the movie "Robin Hood," which was well-received, and the following year they brought back "Jesus Christ,

Superstar," which earned them fourth place at the 1993 DCI Championships in division III. This was significant since earlier in the season they had the kind of bus accident corps don't like to think about. They were on their way to a show in Ohio when a car traveling at excessive speed ran a stop sign and hit one of the corps' buses broadside, sending it rolling down a large embankment. The driver of the car was killed instantly, but miraculously there were no corps fatalities, only bruises and a few broken bones.

The Knights went inactive in 1995 and their last competition was the Illinois State Fair, ironic since their very first competition 29 years earlier was in that same show.

The uniform became so popular that the corps continued to wear it, or a variation of it, the remainder of their existence. That year was significant also because of a last-minute situation that prevented Larry Kerchner from doing the arrangements.

Gregg Neuleib, who was the Knights' director at the time and had done some arranging, but nothing as ambitious as a complete book of a show like "Superstar," stepped in and wrote the show. The result was a complete success and Neuleib continued to do arrangements for the corps. The Knights were very active in sponsoring shows, which gave local audiences an opportunity to see corps from all over the country and gave work to fellow corps. The "Spectacle of Brass" show in Geneseo ran for 20 years starting in 1969 and a second show, "Pageant of Drums" in Davenport/Bettendorf, IA, was started in 1985 and continued until the Knights went inactive in the mid-1990s. Both shows were well-received and are still mentioned as one of the most entertaining events to come to the Quad Cities area.

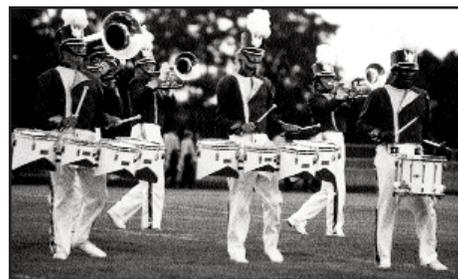
It was decided to move the corps to the Quad Cities in 1989. Geneseo was just not a large enough community to continue to finance a competitive drum corps, while the Quad Cities (combined population more than 300,000 and only 25 miles away) could provide a much larger base for fund-raising and local membership. It was hoped that this could bring the corps back to the success it had enjoyed in the early- and mid-1980s.

Unfortunately, this did not prove to be a reality. In 1991, because of dwindling membership and struggling finances, the Knights decided to merge with the Emerald Knights from nearby Cedar Rapids, IA, that was having similar problems. The merger was, by agreement of both corps, for one season only and then a decision would be made if it should continue.

After the season, both corps agreed the merger did not work and decided to go on as they had before. Although small in numbers, the next several years would show that the Knights would continue to put a solid program on the field and they continued to be a DCI/DCM touring corps,

performing many places.

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For a short time in the early 1990s, the Knights merged with the Cedar Rapids, IA, corps and were known as Knight Command (photo by Beth Eckert from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Bill Neuleib is a native of Geneseo, IL. He graduated from Bradley University in business administration. He ran his own independent insurance and real estate agency for 40 years before retiring in 1991. He and wife

Phyllis have four children (who marched a total of 35 years) and 10 grandchildren.

His corps experience covers almost 70 years, seeing his first competition in 1934 when his dad marched in the Galva American Legion corps and he marched in 1941 with the Kewanee Sons of the American Legion. He marched 13 years (1949-1961) with the Kewanee Black Knights senior corps, was brass instructor and arranger for Ottawa Crusaders, Q.C. Buccaneers and the Knights.

Neuleib's tenure with The Knights ran from 1966 to 1991 when he served as instructor, business manager, director and board member.

He helped form of Drum Corps Midwest and served in various positions on the board, being named "Director of the Year" in 1984.

In 2001, he was inducted into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame as an associate member, acknowledging his many years of contribution to the drum corps activity.



The Knights at American Legion Prelims, Soldier Field in Chicago, 1972 (photo by Jane Boulton from the collection of Drum Corps World).