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# Skokie Indians

by George Fennell

The Skokie, IL, American Legion Post No. 320 Indians Drum and Bugle Corps was organized in 1947 and was manned almost entirely by World War I veterans. Some of the original members were formerly with the old Evanston, IL, American Legion Post No. 42 drum and bugle corps. World War II veterans began appearing at rehearsals in 1949.

Their original uniforms consisted of blue coats, white breeches, black puttees and white Sam Browne belts.

In 1948, the Skokie Indians competed at their first American Legion National Championship in Miami, FL, and came in 29th place. They did not compete at any of the next three American Legion Nationals held in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Miami.

Actually, the Skokie Indians left the competitive ranks after the 1948 season and carried on as a concert and parade corps until the 1952 season.

In 1952, the corps was outfitted in new uniforms which consisted of black trousers

*(Top) The Skokie Indians in the early 1960s; (below) drum majors accept the first-place trophy from American Legion officials at the 1957 national championships in Atlantic City, NJ (photos courtesy of Bob BellaRosa, Eastern Review).*



with white side stripes, white jackets trimmed with red and black, wide red shoulder and waist sashes, along with long red side sashes. Their shakos were black with white trim and topped with brilliant red plumes.

The Skokie Indians also had white satin blouses that they wore in parades.

After a winter of hard work, they re-entered competition in 1952 with a corps consisting of 24 buglers, four field drums, two cymbals, two bass drums and a color guard of nine men.

Arthur Rippel was the musical director, which is probably why the Skokie Indians were also called "Rip's Raiders." Also, Leonard Piekarski was in charge of the drill, Arvin Bartlett Jr. was the drum major and Bill Tornov was color guard sergeant.

In 1952, at the American Legion National Championships in New York City, the Skokie Indians finished in seventh place after placing eighth in prelims. Earlier that summer, they unseated Chicago's Commonwealth Edison American Legion Post No. 118 Knights of Light as Illinois Legion state champions after an 18-year reign.

The Skokie corps then went on an eight-year run of their own by winning every Illinois American Legion State Championship from 1952 through 1960.

On August 1, 1953, the Skokie Indians sponsored their first "Music In Motion" drum and bugle corps competition and what a competition it was! This outstanding local contest was won by the Archer-Epler Musketeers from Upper Darby, PA, followed by the St. Vincent's Cadets from Bayonne, NJ.

Third went to the Chicago Grenadiers, fourth to the Chicago Cavaliers, Mel Tierney took fifth, followed by the Boys of 76 in sixth and the Evanston, IL, Lancers in seventh.

Archer-Epler and St. Vincent's Cadets were in the Midwest on their way to the VFW Nationals in Milwaukee, WI.

In St. Louis at the 1953 American Legion National Championship, the Skokie Indians continued their rise to prominence by placing ninth in prelims and sixth in finals. They again fielded 24 bugles, four snare drums,

two bass drums and two cymbals.

Two days after the 1953 Legion show in St. Louis, there was a big contest in Cape Girardeau, MO, sponsored by the Golden Troopers. This contest featured a line-up that included many top Eastern corps, which was a very rare treat for Midwestern drum corps fans.

Three junior corps competed, with St. Joseph's Cadets from Newark, NJ, taking first, St. Vincent's Cadets in second and the Chicago Cavaliers in third. The senior corps competition finished with the Hawthorne Caballeros in first, New York Skyliners in second, Connecticut Yankees from Stratford, CT, in third and the Skokie Indians in fourth.

Skokie Indians marched with 10 holes due to members having to return to Chicago for work right after the American Legion Nationals, which hurt their performance.

Following the 1953 Legion show, there was talk all over Chicago that the Indians' 24-man horn line was never going to take the corps any farther than it did in St. Louis.

Fortunately, right before Christmas of 1953, about a dozen Mel Tierney Vanguard alumni joined the Skokie Indians, which increased their horn line to 33 men.

At the 1954 American Legion Nationals in Washington, D.C., the Skokie Indians jumped from an eighth place finish in prelims to second place in finals.

For 1955, the corps added three tenor drums, which made all the difference in the world. Then, after placing fifth in prelims at the 1955 American Legion Nationals in Miami, FL, the Skokie Indians came back in finals to win the American Legion National Championship.

At the Illinois American Legion State Championship, snare drummer Larry LaVita passed out just as he was crossing the finish line. When he fell, he landed on the leg guard of his snare drum and fractured two ribs. He didn't return to competition until prelims at the 1956 American Legion Nationals in Los Angeles, where the corps took first place in prelims and in finals, winning their second American Legion National Championship in a row.

During 1956, the Skokie Indians were undefeated in 12 contests, including both the prelims and finals of the American Legion Nationals in Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, their only defeat in the previous two years was at the prelims of the 1955 American Legion Nationals in Miami, FL.

During the 1950s, two of the bigger annual Midwest senior corps contests were in LaPorte, IN, sponsored by the LaPorte Lancers, and in Bellefontaine, OH, sponsored by the Bellefontaine Satan's Angels.

While the LaPorte contest brought together top Midwest senior and junior corps to compete against each other, the Bellefontaine contest was somewhat unique in that it managed to annually bring together top senior corps from both the Midwest and the East for competition.

For example, in 1956 at Bellefontaine, the



The Skokie Indians at a 1953 parade in Chicago (photo from the collection of Bob BellaRosa/Heritage).

Skokie Indians topped a slate of corps that included the second-place Reilly Raiders from Philadelphia, followed in order of finish by the Chicago Cavaliers; Pittsburgh, PA, Rockets; Geneva, NY, Appleknockers; Portland, IN, Comets; Detroit's Edison Lamplighters; and the Marion, OH, Cavaliers. Skokie also won this contest in 1958 after not attending in 1957.

The Skokie Indians also won the LaPorte contest for six consecutive years, from 1953 through 1958.

At the 1957 Illinois American Legion State Championships, eight junior corps managed to perform before the rains came and forced the remaining juniors, along with all the seniors to finish inside the Northwest Armory in Chicago. The armory, at 171 feet by 103 feet, was the only place to finish. All the remaining corps, including the Skokie Indians, had to perform their field show in the confines of this very small armory.

In 1957, the corps went into a recording studio to make a record. Epic Records pressed the stereo album called "Skokie Indians Drum and Bugle Corps" and it was released in September 1957. Both record shops and the Skokie Indians sold the albums. It was reported sales were "going well" in the September 1957 issue of the Chicago-based *Drum Corps World* magazine.

At the 1957 American Legion Nationals in Atlantic City, NJ, the Skokie Indians won the title for the third year in a row after placing fifth in prelims.

During the 1958 season, the Skokie corps took the field with a 10-man color guard, nine drums and 39 horns. Their repertoire included *Stars and Stripes*, *Stranger in Paradise*, *Because*, *Jealousy* and a concert of *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*. At the American Legion Nationals in Chicago, the corps won the preliminaries; however, they slipped to third in finals.

On July 18, 1959, the Skokie Indians finally lost a local contest in LaPorte, where they took fourth place. But in all fairness, the corps lost to three of the Midwest's best junior corps, the first-place Chicago

Cavaliers, second-place Norwood Park Imperials and the third-place Skokie Vanguard.

It's quite possible that this

could be the Skokie Indians' first loss in a local Midwestern contest since sometime prior to the 1955 season. That's how dominant they were in the Midwest during this era.

At the 1959 American Legion Nationals in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN, the Skokie Indians took third place in both the prelims and finals.

On July 3, 1960, the Racine Boys of 76 held their annual contest, which for the first time featured senior corps. First place went to the Skokie Indians, followed in order by the Bellefontaine Satan's Angels, Detroit Lamplighters, Spirit of St. Louis and the Kewanee, IL, Black Knights.

Later that summer, on July 31, the annual V-J Day contest in Woodstock, IL, featured both a senior and junior corps contest of four each. In the interesting senior contest, first place went to the Racine Boys of 76, followed in order by the Toronto, ONT, Jolly Jesters, Skokie Indians and Beau Geste Brigade from Maywood, IL.

On August 27, 1960, the Skokie Indians went to the great East-Midwest meeting ground, the "Summer Serenade" in Bellefontaine, which was Ohio's biggest contest of the year. Winners of this contest twice before, the Skokie Indians placed second to the Pittsburgh Rockets, followed by the third-place Racine Boys of 76 and the fourth-place Kewanee Back Knights.

In 1960, at the American Legion Nationals in Miami Beach, FL, the Skokie Indians finished in third place at finals for the third year in a row. This would be the last time that the Skokie Indians competed at an American Legion Nationals.

The Skokie Indians were only a parade corps in 1961 and intended to field a competitive senior corps again in 1962.

The corps did, in fact, return to the competition field in 1962, but they were not as dominating a senior corps as they had been in the 1950s. For example, at one of the biggest senior corps contests in the Midwest in 1962, the "Senior Invitational" on September 1 in Racine, WI, the results were Spirit of St. Louis in first place, followed in order by the Hamm's Indians, St. Paul, MN; Skokie Indians; Winfield-Scott Rebels, Maywood, IL; Kewanee Black Knights; and the Kenosha, WI, Kingsmen.

Just a week earlier, on August 25 at the "Concourse of Champions" in Kenosha, WI, the Racine Boys of 76 won over the second-place Skokie Indians and the Winfield-Scott Rebels finished in third.

At the 1963 Illinois VFW State Championship on June 23 in Peoria, the Skokie Indians came in third place behind

the first-place Winfield-Scott Rebels and the second-place Kewanee Black Knights.

At the 1963 Illinois American Legion State Championship August 3 in Chicago, the Skokie corps came in second behind the winning Winfield-Scott Rebels. The Kewanee Black Knights came in third.

However, later that summer, on August 24, the Skokie Indians won over the Boys of 76 and Kewanee Black Knights in the senior corps contest at the Kenosha "Concourse of Champions" sponsored by the Kingsmen.

In September 1963, the Skokie Indians and the McHenry Red Devils merged and became the Men of Brass.

In 1964, the Men of Brass won both the Illinois VFW and American Legion State Championships in addition to winning numerous local senior corps competitions.

The 1965 season was not as successful a year as 1964 for the Men of Brass. The corps was small, sporting a 26-man horn line with only a few drummers and color guard. Their repertoire included *Basin Street Blues*, *Floatin' Down to Cotton Town*, *St. James Infirmary Blues* and their exit of *Soon*.

In 1965, the Men of Brass had a very entertaining show which featured two excellent soprano soloists. In fact, my dad, Don Fennell, after seeing the Men of Brass at the "Midwest Dream" in Milwaukee, liked them so much that he ordered the record from that contest. The "Midwest Dream -- Vol. 2" was the only drum corps record that he ever bought.

In 1965, the biggest Midwest senior corps contest was the first annual Midwest Senior Drum and Bugle Corps Association Championship. It was held in Racine, WI, on September 5. The Maumee, OH, Demons took first place, followed in order by the Kenosha Kingsmen, Racine Boys of 76, Hamm's Indians, Men of Brass, Spirit of St. Louis and the St. Clair Shores, MI, Vanguard.

The Men of Brass did not compete at the American Legion Nationals in either 1964 or 1965 and, sadly, folded after the 1965 season.

The August 1967 issue of the Chicago-based *Drum Corps Digest* magazine reported that the board of directors of the International Drum Corps Hall of Fame chose to induct the Skokie Indians into their organization.

In the senior category, both the Racine Boys of 76 and the Skokie Indians tied point-wise and it was decided to enter both into the Hall of Fame. This brought the International Drum Corps Hall of Fame up to 11 corps -- six seniors and five juniors -- and six individuals.

The only four seniors inducted ahead of the Skokie Indians were the Hawthorne Caballeros, Reilly Raiders, Archer-Epler Musketeers and Lt. Norman Prince.

Larry Grabowski, president of the International Drum Corps Hall of Fame, presented Skokie's American Legion Post No. 320 with the plaque that fall.

Turn to page 197 for a photo and biography on George Fennell.



A booster decal from the Skokie Indians (from the collection of Ron Da Silva).