


(Top to bottom) The original Boy Scout corps in 1941; St. Vincent's Cadets in 1946; the Bayonne corps in the early 1950s; members learning drill from Mickey Petrone (photos from the collection of Rev. Gerald A. Marchand); (below) St. Vincent's Cadets in a Bayonne parade, 1952 (photo by Welch).



St. Vincent's Cadets

Rev. Gerald A. Marchand

"How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" Psalms 116: 12

With this prayer as his life-time guide, in June 1938, the newly-ordained Father Edward F. Wojtycha, of Polish heritage, knocked on the door of the Irish parish of St. Vincent de Paul in the oil city of Bayonne, NJ, to introduce himself to the pastor, Father Joseph F. Dolan, as his new assistant. Little did either of them realize how he would forever change the city and parish.

His assignment as the moderator of the Boy Scouts Troop 25 would be the launching pad for the Vinnies when committee man Henry J. Verenault suggested that they start a Boy Scout drum corps. In 1941, with the expenditure of \$35 for second-hand drums and bugles and a cymbal and a half, they proudly marched in the annual Memorial Day parade playing their one and only song, John Philip Sousa's *The Thunderer*.

The following year they separated themselves from the Scouts, obtained khaki uniforms and again marched in the Memorial Day parade in Bayonne. The rush to fame was on, embellished with new green and white uniforms in 1942, colors that would lead to notoriety as the "Big Green Band."

Though in 1944, 1945 and 1946 they won the New Jersey VFW State Championship, their first taste of national success was realized in Harvard Stadium at the 1946 VFW Convention in Boston. With Michael Petrone, today's DCA president, as director and marching and maneuvering instructor, and the famous Jim Donnelly writing and teaching their music, they marched to their first national championship. From that day on it was a whirlwind success story, engendered by long, hard days of rehearsals and appearances.

During World War II, it became common for communities to raise a large banner above their main street with stars representing the number of boys from the community who were serving in the armed forces. At each flag-raising, community leaders would give motivational speeches, in prayers and song.

Martial musical groups were the cream on the cake and St. Vincent's Cadets were always happy to oblige. The usual pay was \$50 and it was one of the few ways available for raising money to cover expenses of the corps.

The Cadets accepted every opportunity and in recognition of its record of appearances in 1942 at these flag raisings and other patriotic functions, the St. Vincent's Cadets received the first-place award for New York and New Jersey sanctioned by the VFW, American Legion and Chamber of Commerce for appearing at 52 events.

The success of the early days was accomplished by playing mostly marches, including *Conquest*, *El Capitan*, *Columbia*, *the Gem of the Ocean*, *Triumphal March* from "Aida," *Under the Double Eagle*, *Washington*

Post and Colonel Bogey.

At the time, Scotty Chapelle of the Princemen and Petrone and Donnelly of St. Vincent's Cadets were revolutionizing drum corps music and marching.

Chapelle adapted the horn's rotary valve to the bugle's tuning slide and thereby made it easier to play chromatic pitches, and Donnelly developed the French horn bugle.

Added to the soprano, baritone and eventually the bass baritone bugle, it made it possible for him to allow St. Vincent's Cadets to introduce both the French horn and show music to the drum corps world with *Tropical Heat Wave*, *This is My Beloved*, *Tonight We Love*, *Shuffle off to Buffalo*, *Rock-a-Bye My Baby*, *Robert E. Lee*, *Papa Loves Mambo*, *Moon Over Miami*, *Bloody Mary*, *Scherezade*, *Alabama Jubilee*, *Polovetsian Dances* and *Lady of Spain*, to name a few.

In the competitive world, from 1944 to 1959 they won 44 titles, including 11 VFW and American Legion national titles and 18 state titles, culminating in 1951 and 1952 when they won the round robin twice -- that is, the VFW and American Legion national and state championships. They were the only corps ever to do so.

Dan Feldstein expressed their accomplishments well in a *Drum Corps News* article from October 20, 1971, 10 years after the corps' demise, when he wrote, "The St. Vincent's Cadets . . . must be considered the corps that, more than any other, was responsible for the modernization, the revolution of drum corps that took place right after World War II . . . in style and perfection.

"They moved and stayed way out in front of their contemporaries, playing the lead role to set performance standards and establish principles of showmanship. Perhaps no other corps in history ever so completely dominated drum corps as did St. Vinnies. More than anyone else, they are legendary.

"From 1950 through 1954, St. Vinnies lost only two contests (of which one was questionable). They went three years in a row without a single loss. From 1946 through 1956, they won nine VFW national titles -- one year they didn't go. From 1944 on, St. Vincent's Cadets won 15 out of a possible 15 VFW state titles.

"Their marching, musical style and repertoire, using instruments of the 1940s and 1950s, was closer to today's look and sound than any other corps of that period and most of the corps of the 1960s as well.

"The St. Vincent's Cadets are remembered to this day for their championship girl color guards and succession of title-winning drum majors such as Marie Dugan, Betty Russell and Edina McGready, all of whom developed new field leadership techniques that today are widely emulated.

"St. Vinnies was the first corps to sponsor huge extravaganzas such as the Dream contest. In training methods and organizational structure, as well as techniques of financing, they achieved a degree of efficiency and sophistication not

only totally unknown at that time, but which other corps were unable to imitate.

"The famous Father Wojtycha and Mickey Petrone teamed up as architects and engineers of this all-time great. This observer regards the St. Vincent's Cadets of New Jersey as, without the shadow of a doubt, the very greatest junior drum corps in our entire history. In terms of competitive achievement, their record in other respects and in their contributions to present-day drum corps, they have to be the finest -- there is no other!"

At one time, St. Vincent's fielded three distinct corps at the same time -- an all-girl corps, a junior corps and the "Big Green Band." In fact, the junior corps had its own identity and following and was a good competitor. This went on for a few years until, in order to survive, a merger of the two boy corps into one big corps was necessary and, from then on, the junior corps was a feeder for the big corps.

Eventually, by demand of the young parents prodded by their offspring, a youngster corps known as the "diaper brigade" was also formed. The scene of babies just out of diapers with drums and bugles marching throughout the neighborhood in imitation of their older brothers and sisters was a sight to behold. They, too, were now part of the social scene.

For their older brothers and sisters, the military ball was the social event of the season, as it was for all drum and bugle corps members of the day.

The first annual military ball sponsored by St. Vincent's was on February 12, 1944 and 127 drum and bugle corps from New Jersey, New York and other neighboring states were invited. The boys, decked out in their dress uniforms, and the girls in their formal gowns, created an imposing picture as they graced the dance floor at the first of many such events. Every year thereafter they looked forward in eager anticipation as they spent whatever free time they could muster after rehearsals to decorate the hall. To be invited by a Cadet to the ball was every girl's dream.

This social extension of corps activity was one of the many indicators that fame and championships were only the by-products of Wojtycha's endeavors. While receiving an award from the New Jersey Junior Chamber of Commerce, he expressed it this way when he said he "found the corps an ideal leisure-time project for young men and women -- one which gave pleasure to the participant, while helping to build character and desire for mutual benefit. The discipline and training . . . builds sound members of our community."

Nor was Wojtycha only interested in his own young people. The famous Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights of Newark got their start with the loan of instruments to Father Robert F. Garner and, in 1947, the famous St. Joseph Cadets corps of Newark was the beneficiary of his generosity when Father Thomas J. Finnegan received the drums and bugles necessary to get started.



St. Vincent's Cadets, 1958 (photo by Walter Ermel from the collection of Ron Da Silva).

This same interest and concern for all young people was in his mind when he conceived the idea of the Dream contest. As Petrone explains it, "The VFW Convention, Harvard Stadium 1946, created a real opening for the drum corps world, in both the junior and senior class. With true American spirit, the American Legion innovated a similar program. As with sports, so with the drum corps, separate rules and regulations were set up, one set American Legion and one set VFW. In typical American style, this raised the question as to 'Who is the best?' This is where the 'Dream' came into a reality.

"Father Wojtycha approached me, as director of his St. Vincent's, with the question, 'How can we get the VFW and Legion drum corps, juniors and seniors, together and have a World Series of drum corps champions? How can we have a play-off for the best? It's a "Dream," but we can make a "Dream" come true.'

"This is the way we became the 'Dream' originators, a man of the cloth and a man of music and marching, and, in 1949, the famous Dream contest was instituted."

Attendance at the Dream contest, first in Roosevelt Stadium, Jersey City, and finally in Giant Stadium at the Meadowlands, during the 34 years of its existence rose from 12,000 fans in 1949 to more than 20,000. During those years, 17 senior corps and 34 junior corps thrilled the fans as the best of the best competed for the title of titles, Dream contest champions.

Wojtycha received commendation over the years from all corners of the community, culminating in his, Petrone's and Donnelly's induction into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame in 1977. In 1997, Wojtycha and Petrone were inducted as honorary members of the Massachusetts Hall of Fame and, in 1998, when the New Jersey Hall of Fame was instituted, they became its first members.

In 1982, St. Vincent's Cadets became the first junior corps inducted into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame as the "Junior Corps of the 1950s." Later, individual corps members were also honored. Danny Raymond was inducted into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame in 1990 and New Jersey Hall of Fame in 2000. The Rev. William Smalley (1999), Bob O'Conner (2001) and Ed Biedrzycki (2002) were also inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

Yet, as wonderful as these achievements are, the accomplishment that is most treasured by Wojtycha, which will continue to bring honor and glory forever, is the lives that have been so deeply affected by his use of drum corps as a tool to attain the aim of his priesthood -- to enrich the lives of young people by giving back, in thanksgiving, for all that God has given him.

More than 60 years after its inception, an active mail list of 300 still exists, with more than 100 receiving a quarterly newsletter since 1997, when "All for One, One for All," the corps' history book, was written. Reunions have been

held regularly since 1969 and the successful lives of the corps' alumni give ample testimony to the effectiveness of a drum corps in building happy and productive lives.

When Wojtycha wrote the finale of St. Vincent's Cadets for the drum corps magazine *Off the Line* in March 1962 -- in which he announced the demise of the corps -- he mentioned, with understandable pride, the "dozen priests, the number of doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, teachers and nurses -- all alumni of St. Vincent's Cadets."

One of the original members, George McCusker, in response to a request for a comment on what the corps meant to him for the history book, wrote, "We are proud of the diverse vocations of corps members -- priests, nuns, authors, lawyers, counselors are all held in high esteem -- but the one lifetime endeavor that I sense doesn't get the credit it deserves is marriage. The Chief (Wojtycha) has to be given credit for bringing so many boys and girls together . . . What better training for the acres of responsibility in raising children and sacrificing for them and each other, than the 95 percent hard work of the corps training and five percent applause.

"The vast majority of corps members' marriages have been reflective of not only family values, but the discipline and hard work required in the corps. Marriage is just like being a corps member -- 95 percent hard work and five percent applause. So here's to those who have joined together in marriage -- a moment of applause for the 95 percent hard work."

Father Leo Farley, also a charter member of the corps, in his dedication for the Cadets' history book, wrote, "What this alumni has achieved makes for impressive reading, but *who* they have become as human beings remains the crowning achievement of (Wojtycha's) priesthood."

The drum corps world can rightly be proud of what corps like the St. Vincent's Cadets have accomplished, and continue to accomplish, for the youth of America.



Rev. Gerald A. Marchand was a member of St. Vincent's Cadets in Bayonne, NJ, from 1941-1948.

He graduated from Seton Hall University with a BA degree in 1950 and Immaculate Conception Seminary, where he received a Masters of Divinity degree, in 1954. His ordination as a priest was in May 1954.

He subsequently served at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Irvington, NJ, 1954-1978, and Our Lady of Lourdes in West Orange, NJ, 1978-1998. Currently he is assisting at St. Martha Church in Point Pleasant, NJ.

In 1997, he wrote "All for One, One for All, a history of St. Vincent's Cadets.