
by Bob Diethrich

One of the great themes in history or literature is of the outsider who comes out of nowhere, reaches the top and then fades away. In Drum Corps Associates history, there is no better example of the obscure unit that rises, burns brightly and then collapses, than the Steel City Ambassadors of Pittsburgh.

The story begins in 1980 in Western Pennsylvania, home of dozens of fine units from the 1930s through the mid-1970s. As the steel industry that fueled the Pittsburgh region slowed down, so did the drum corps movement. However, in 1976 a group of old Sharpsburg Cadets dusted off their chops for their hometown's sesquicentennial parade and some of the guys kept that unit intact as a parade corps -- the Sharpsburg Ambassadors.



Steel City Ambassadors, 1984 (photo by Ed Ferguson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Four years later, Dave Fite, a former Archer-Epler Musketeers soloist, took a job in Pittsburgh. Fite knew there was more to drum corps than five or six parades and the odd standstill. One night after practice, Fite laid out a plan to build a competitive senior corps with all the untapped local talent. He organized a giant reunion party and more than 100 former corps members turned out to answer the call to form a new corps in August 1980.

The fledgling unit took small steps, joining the International Corps Associates and DCA and performing at Larry Hershman's Westshore standstill in Harrisburg. Steel City had a pretty strong horn line featuring some top-notch solo talent. Good percussion instruction, however, was hard to come by at first and the drum line took longer to gel. Percussion problems would haunt the corps for its entire existence.

Getting the corps onto the field became a

comedy of errors, as no less than four drill instructors were hired and fired. Larry Tinnerman, a part-time horn instructor during the winter, was brought in to perform emergency drill surgery a mere two weeks before the first show in Midland, PA, July 4. Tinnerman worked miracles, getting 11 minutes of drill written and taught in less than a fortnight, teaching the exit in the last two hours of rehearsal on the Fourth.

The crowd that evening roared with approval at this new unit from the Steel City. It seemed as if they were going to tear the stands down when the corps was announced second to the Erie Thunderbirds. They performed at a few more ICA shows and one DCA competition. Based on scores, Steel City looked to be a safe bet to earn 10th place at DCA Prelims. The only competition they were really concerned about was the resurrected Archer-Epler Musketeers.

DCA weekend produced total shock as both Archie and Steel City found themselves on the outside as the Niagara Regionaires, a Canadian unit that had never beaten either corps, leapfrogged to 10th. Rumors flew about a "reserved spot" for a Canadian corps to make DCA an "international" organization.

The 1982 season began with optimism. The corps grew in size and talent, with an improved guard. Frank Miller, who had taken over percussion instruction the previous summer, literally performed miracles with the drummers.

Steel City dominated ICA, winning the first show in Ohio at the end of June and going undefeated, winning the title easily. In DCA, they continued their climb, finally beating Erie and trading wins with Archie.

Prelims were another disappointment as the corps landed in 11th place. One of the saddest moments in this unit's history was when they received the news that they had lost to Archer-Epler and a corps that came out of nowhere, the appropriately named Bushwackers.

The second near-miss at DCA Prelims nearly tore the corps apart; however, they proved to be as tough and resilient as the "steel" namesake and vowed to become even better. The 1983 drum line was enormous, featuring six bass drums and 11 snares. The horn line checked in at 48 and the guard featured its first-ever rifle line.

That 1983 season was more of the same. While remaining undefeated in ICA, the corps still had trouble impressing the DCA judges. They did prevail and made it into 10th spot and the huge drum line had the honor of playing all corps on at retreat in Allentown.

The goal of DCA membership was achieved, but Steel City still suffered growing pains. The brass talent was there and Miller's drum line was solid, but the corps seemed to have constant problems in drill design and marching instruction.

The corps needed a change. Soprano Ken Behrend knew an instructor from New York and brought him in to take over drill design, teaching and staff coordination. This man turned out to be the most important person

ever to have anything to do with the Steel City Ambassadors, Rick Morey.

Personnel and management shakeups resulted in a smaller corps. The drill was written for 40 horns, the guard was tiny at 13 and the drum line shrunk to less than 20. Morey did not care. In fact, the smaller numbers worked to the corps' advantage.

Morey was truly an innovative designer. His drills featured great asymmetrical forms, smooth transitions and quick-hitting sets. As a teacher/motivator, there was no one better. He commanded the respect of the entire corps and he could get anyone to feel better, try harder or put bitter feelings behind them.

The corps also hired Steve Cooley to write the horn book. His charts challenged the talent and the quality was soon apparent. The corps may have been smaller than previous years, but the line was never tighter.

The 1984 ICA season found the corps facing a new corps from upstate New York, the entertaining but raw Empire Statesmen, who ended Steel City's two-year win streak in ICA with a victory in Canada early in the season. The two corps traded wins and then tied with Empire at ICA Championships.

Members had expected to rise in the DCA ranks that year and the corps did. They ended up seventh place in a tie with Les Cascadeurs, another of the "flash in the pan" French Canadian units that appear in DCA and soon disappear. However, the corps had achieved a first. No corps had ever tied at TWO championship finals the same year!

Most Steel City veterans would tell you the corps's fifth year was its best in terms of spirit and morale. Morey and Cooley returned and a fresh recruiting effort yielded a huge corps, featuring 58 horns, a full drum line and a 25-person guard. Former 27th Lancer drum major Billy Marshall took over as marching instructor, new horn techs were brought in and new uniforms were adopted.

The corps opened the season in Hershey by handing the New York Skyliners, suffering severe personnel problems, their first defeat ever at the hands of a Pittsburgh corps.

During the course of that season, the corps beat Sky regularly and achieved their stated goal, taking fifth place, beating every corps except Hawthorne, Reading, Sun and Bush.

The 1986 season dawned as something special. Indications were clear that Steel City Ambassadors were now a championship contender. The show retained only *Stormy Weather*, featuring champion soloist Curt Hawkins. Added were *Somewhere*, *One More Time* *Chuck Corea*, *Nutville* and *After You've Gone*. New staff were hired and Billy Marshall became podium drum major. Winter practices were huge and the corps reached a goal of 60 horns. The drum line was full and the corps fielded 28 guard.

At the Westshore standstill, the corps went on stage after Hawthorne, the undefeated back-to-back champions. It was a gamble. Steel City took the challenge and performed the standstill of their lives, leading to a roaring standing ovation.

The corps entered the competition season

Steel City Ambassadors

under a head of steam. The first show was Hershey and they were up against Hawthorne and three others. The performance was inspired and the crowd was enthused. The show received no less than four standing ovations. Standing on the field for the retreat ceremony, members almost could not believe their ears when they heard Caballeros announced in second place as 5,000 Pennsylvania partisans roared approval. Barely five years old, Steel City had handed the perennial champs their first setback in more than two years.

The next week at Rutgers in New Jersey, the corps floored all comers, with a caption sweep. They won in Carlisle before a minor setback in Scranton. A week before DCA, they performed an inspired show in a monsoon-like downpour at Lewistown, PA, but they definitely had momentum going into the DCA Championships.

Three years before, they had been hoping to make top 10 and now they were actually looking at winning the title. When the dust settled from prelims, Steel City was tied for first with Hawthorne. Steel City performed last at finals, having won the coin flip. They marched off feeling like champions.

Retreat was full of the usual nonsense and it had gotten chilly. The caption awards were read: high drums -- Bushwhackers, no big surprise; high horns -- Bushwhackers. It suddenly got *very* cold. The high GE trophy came Steel City's way, not unexpectedly, but then the top M&M award went to Hawthorne.

At that point the members knew they had lost. When the final tally was read, Bush beat Steel City 92.4 to 91.9. The corps had beaten Hawthorne, but the Bushwhackers had been enough to win it with a good performance, increasing their lead in percussion by almost one and a half points.

Choking back tears, Marshall called the corps to attention. The other corps had left the field, leaving just Bush and Steel City. Marshall marched the corps toward the confused Bushwhackers, halted and played

Somewhere to salute the winners.

When they concluded, several Bushwhackers were crying. Their drum major brought them to attention and a tenor drummer was heard to say, "We've come a long way from ICA!" True! The No. 1 and 2 corps in DCA had not existed six years earlier.

The 1987



Steel City Ambassadors, 1990 (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).

goal was to take the title they felt had been theirs. The horn line got bigger at 64 and Morey wrote his best drill yet, making much greater use of size over more of the field.

They retained *One More Time* and *Nutville* and added *Somewhere Out There* and *Come Rain or Come Shine*, prompting remarks that it kept up the Steel City tradition of rain and location adverbs.

The corps was better that season, but so were the other senior corps. The Ambassadors headed into Allentown on a rainy weekend. It was a deluge on Saturday night and prelims were held in a steady shower as the field became a quagmire.

At the end of the day, Steel City was fourth, behind Hawthorne, Bush and the resurgent Sunrisers in first. Less than two points separated the four corps and, as they had seen the previous year, anything could happen.

Finals could not be held that evening, so everyone retired to their hotels to await the decision. If foul weather continued, finals would be canceled and prelim scores would stand.

The corps had one of its best rehearsals that Monday morning. They were really pulling together. The horn line was in its semicircle tuning when the business manager, Tom Mahan, drove up with the news that finals had been canceled.

Members began to drift away in sadness, shock, confusion and disgust when Cooley yelled out, "Wait! We're not finished yet! Get back here!" When the whole line was ready, he conducted the brass in the last performance of the 1987 show.

Visibly shaken, he said, haltingly, "This isn't for DCA or the judges or anyone else. This is for us!" And the corps played like they never had before, as the second consecutive season ended in pieces.

The rest is anti-climactic. The corps attempted to go in another direction in 1988 with a "sweet swing" show, which was pretty much a disaster. The horn line was used to playing with dynamics and emotion.

This controlled show sapped members' energy. They finished eighth, falling four spots.

The horn line finished fifth, only sevenths behind Bush, but the drums finished ninth. No section of the corps worked harder than the percussionists, but they just could not get over the top at the end.

In 1989, the corps returned to its roots with an exciting Latin-based show and a smaller, tighter unit. An interesting thing happened at finals as Skyliners leapfrogged

both Steel City and Rochester Crusaders, who had tied, to finish sixth.

The corps was lined up next to Rochester at retreat. When the tie was announced, a Rochester soprano and a Steel City mellophone (the author) broke ranks and rushed toward each other. Following their lead, both formations intermingled, shaking

hands, hugging, laughing and having a ball mocking DCA and the absurdity of the situation. They waved goodbye to the crowd and partied together into the night.

This was the last hurrah, so to speak. The decline came quickly. In 1990, Steel City attempted to copy the Madison Scouts' 1988 formula for winning with *Suite for Jazz Orchestra* and *Malagueña*. The corps harbored unrealistic dreams of the title and ended up seventh.

Smaller units took the field in 1991 and 1992. Personnel problems, budget crunches and staff disputes all took their toll. The entire board of directors resigned in January 1991 and the corps barely made it to the field.

When groups begin to die, they tend to eat their young as everyone looks around for someone to blame and everyone has the solution. The corps was on its last legs in the spring of 1993. A week before camp, a merger with a Johnsonburg corps failed and the unit officially folded its tent.

The Steel City Ambassadors had come out of Western Pennsylvania, a senior corps backwater, and rose through the ranks, gaining a reputation for entertaining performances and showmanship.

In 1986 and 1987, they stood at the top of the DCA world, but just could not take that last step. For whatever reasons, it was not meant to be. But in the end, the Steel City Ambassadors made their mark, improved the standards of senior corps and entertained a lot of people. And in some ways, that's all that matters.



Bob Diethrich was a founding member of the Steel City Ambassadors. He played soprano with the corps for nine seasons and mellophone his final year. He also served as the corps publicist, historian and

personnel officer during his time with the organization.

He currently lives southwest of Houston, TX, where he teaches 10th grade Pre-AP world history at Cinco Ranch High School. He has a masters degree in education from Duquesne University and is pursuing a masters in history at the University of Houston.

In his spare time, he enjoys writing, bicycling, baseball, chess, travel and playing golf.

He is engaged to Alyssa Shulman, a fellow educator originally from Long Island, and they will be married in March 2004.



Steel City Ambassadors, 1987 (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).