

**The Exit
of the
Vern Acklin Cavaliers
Memorial Senior Drum and Bugle Corps**

**Paul R. Dachille, Jr.
September 2021**

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I. The 1971 Verona Centennial. It was a half-century ago. Or maybe it was just yesterday. Some in Verona, Pennsylvania may yet recall that great moment for the town and its beloved drum and bugle corps, a moment that took place during Verona’s wonderful centennial parade in August of 1971. By the spring of that year, after decades of competition that had begun in 1928, the Vern Acklin Cavaliers Memorial Senior Drum and Bugle Corps—known colloquially as Vern Acklin and as the Cavaliers—looked as though it had reached its end. Numerous Cavaliers—some of whom had been teenagers or little more when marching in prior years—were starting families, beginning careers, entering the military, pursuing higher education, and undertaking all the familiar responsibilities characteristic of early adulthood. In fact, those

emerging responsibilities had begun to tax the ranks of the Corps as early as 1969; and both '69 and '70 saw the Cavaliers engage in precious few appearances. Then, by '71, it seemed as if most of Vern Acklin's members were simply too busy to continue with the rigors attendant to competitive drum corps. The Cavaliers announced that they would disband.

Notwithstanding the Corps's announcement and relative inactivity from 1969 through the start of 1971, the question posed by many in Verona—including Georgie Reed, writer for the *Advance-Leader* and ardent Cavalier supporter—was whether Vern Acklin might perform one more time—specifically, at the town's climactic centennial parade. The official answer from the Corps remained "no", but a plan was in the works.

Early on the day of the parade—unbeknownst to most townspeople—the Cavaliers congregated outside of what was then the Dachille home on Second Street in Verona. They had not played regularly together since 1969, but the buglers managed to revive their "lips" in a quick practice session by warming up with a few well-remembered songs—among them Vern Acklin's longtime theme of *Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White* and the love theme from the movie *El Cid*. Still in street clothes—no uniforms for that day—the Cavaliers then marched off along Second Street and down Center Avenue, falling in unannounced behind the last of the parade units, appearing dramatically on Allegheny River Boulevard to play for a stunned and jubilant crowd.

Those of us on the street that day saw Veronians with tears in their eyes. Everyone thought the Corps was gone; but here it was again. Somehow, the surprise and informality of the event seemed to highlight how much the Corps loved its town and how much the town loved its Corps: Though largely dormant for two years, Vern Acklin had reactivated in honor of Verona's special day, unwilling and unable to miss the town's 100th celebration. The ever-popular drum major Timmy Blose, now deceased, led the Corps along the parade route on that splendid day.

II. 1971-1977. The music and thrill of the centennial day were too much to resist: The stirring reunion inspired Vern Acklin members to restart the Corps. In the autumn of '71, the Cavaliers marched in the Greensburg Pike centennial celebration, the downtown Pittsburgh WIIC parade, and the Halloween parade on Pittsburgh's North Side. The Corps then went on to appear in scores of competitions and exhibitions throughout Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, and West Virginia in the early and mid-1970s. In street-parade competition, Vern Acklin won the Pennsylvania State American Legion Championship in both '73 and '75, secured undefeated parade seasons in those years, and captured the Pennsylvania VFW Championship in 1976.

One of the lighthearted Corps traditions resurrected in the 1970s was the so-called shirt-tail performance. After nighttime parades, the Cavaliers would trade their satin blouses for shirtsleeves, march back to whatever carnival or street fair was being held by the host town, and then play their full

repertoire surrounded by cheering townsfolk on the fairgrounds. Pennsylvania spots like Saxonburg, Homer City, and Springdale were common shirt-tail sites. And while shirt-tailing, the Corps was even known to march right into local taverns or veterans' halls and deliver impromptu performances. The '70s were a more gregarious, welcoming time than the one in which we now find ourselves.

During the twin-borough, Verona-Oakmont Memorial Day parades in the '70s, as well as earlier decades, the Cavaliers occupied the coveted last spot among participating groups—the finale position. Outside E.N. Miller Furniture Company on East Railroad Avenue in Verona, the Corps would take formation early on what was often a brisk morning. Parading through the town, the Cavaliers would reach Verona's War Monument (The Cannon), and after moving seamlessly into the small, curved street facing the Doughboy Statue, Vern Acklin would play music honoring local veterans. With the Corps then stepping on to the Oakmont-Verona Cemetery, a Cavalier soloist—often Dave Braden, Dave Weimer, or Paul Dachille, Sr.—would play *Taps* while another bugled the haunting *Echo* from a remote location in the graveyard.

The 1970s also witnessed the Corps renew its participation in the Red Carpet Association, a circuit of competing D&B corps drawn from the United States and Canada. The Cavaliers had, in fact, been one of the founding members of the RCA in 1968.

As it had done for years, the Corps featured its Spanish theme—playing Latin-rhythmed songs like *Taboo* (with expert drum and cymbal work by the late Fred and Clyde Conklin), *Valencia*, *Zabumba*, *Entrance to the Bull Ring*, and *Besame Mucho*. The myriad Latin pieces in Vern Acklin’s musical chart during earlier seasons had included *The Girl from Ipanema*, *Whatever Lola Wants*, *Granada*, and *Calypso Girl* to name a few. The Cavaliers’ lineup for the ’70s also offered popular tunes heard on AM radio in those day such as *Joy to the World* (by Three Dog Night), *Everybody’s Talkin’ at Me*, *Yesterday*, *Killing Me Softly*, *Playground in My Mind (My Name is Michael)*, *Pretty Woman*, *Smoke on the Water*, *TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)*, and *When Will I See You Again?* Additionally, the playlist contained the standards *Georgia on My Mind* and *Sweet Georgia Brown*. Always part of Vern Acklin’s musical program were patriotic numbers, among them *America*, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, *My Buddy*, and *Shenandoah*. Paul Dachille, Sr. arranged the majority of the Corps’s repertoire throughout the ’70s, just as he had done in the 1960s.

Cavalier practices in the 1970s were held in the two Verona public school buildings—the one now known as Verner on First Street and the older building that once sat across South Avenue. Vern Acklin practiced its marching drill at Cribbs Field on summer weeknights when townspeople came out to listen and watch. The Edgewater Steel parking lot in Oakmont and the Oakmont American Legion Post 600 were alternate practice sites for Sundays. Both the

Legion Post and the Verona VFW Post 441 were longtime sponsors of Vern Acklin.

For social events, the Cavaliers' favorite haunts were the Legion, VFW, Verona Moose Lodge and, above all, the Verona Café—wryly nicknamed “The Office” by Corps members. The Café, which sat at 811 Allegheny River Boulevard, frequently hosted Vern Acklin's post-practice or post-parade “business” meetings—and often quite beyond midnight. (The Verona Café may well have served the greatest hot sausage sandwiches in human history!)

III. A Final Adios. Like prior decades, the 1970s were exciting and cherished times for the Vern Acklin Cavaliers. The Corps bought new silk flags, high-quality bugles, and fresh uniforms. The Cavaliers donned colors of orange, black, and silver in the early '70s and switched to blue and black for '75-'77. (Prior colors had been maroon and white from the 1940s through the early 1960s, while green and blue/silver came in the mid-'60s.) There was an annual deluge of parade and other invitations, and the Corps traveled extensively. When not busy marching, the Cavaliers held parties and picnics.

To be sure, Vern Acklin experienced both good and bad in those years. The story of the Cavaliers is by no means a rose-colored tale of folks trekking the easy route. Rather, Vern Acklin members understood the merit—yes, the *value*—of struggle, tough times, and losses that happen along with victories—a value sometimes underappreciated in contemporary society. The Cavaliers built lifelong bonds and profound camaraderie through hard work, long

rehearsals, road trips, and shoulder-to-shoulder performances; they sculpted memories made of triumphs and failures, of celebrations and heartaches. And at all times—all times and all places—the Cavaliers represented Verona proudly.

But by 1977, problems that had troubled the Corps in the late 1960s were reappearing, and with greater force. The roster once more dwindled as older members departed, having become even more occupied with their increased personal obligations. Life only becomes more complicated as we age.

And there were other issues: Emergent in the drum corps world at large were substantial changes—changes familiar to all drum corps folks whose experience bridges back to the “old” days. By the late ’70s, the D&B activity was witnessing the ascendance of better-funded, more formally managed outfits. The activity was trending away from smaller, community-based units like the Cavaliers. Additionally, of course, the D&B performance styles were evolving into what many still call “new” drum corps—drum corps with field drills and musical arrangements quite different from the more traditional, military-type shows of what is now a long-ago era.

By contrast to the burgeoning nouveau drum corps model in the 1970s, Vern Acklin was an old-style unit—a hometown asset drawing its membership from nearby locales. Vern Acklin was a drum corps of firemen’s carnivals, warm-weather festivals, neighborhood taverns, summer parades, and

centennial surprises. Its ways were those of simpler days—innocent days in small towns like Verona and elsewhere. Vern Acklin was old-fashioned fun.

Many individual Cavaliers would long remain zealous and active fans of the D&B art form. But Vern Acklin as a collective group was out of style—out of step with the young, out of tune with the new. It happens. In fact, it happens to everyone and everything eventually.

In the end, the Vern Acklin Cavaliers had become anachronistic. They knew it and did not care. They had no interest in changing; they understood their time had come and gone. The final appearance of the Corps was most likely a parade in Renton, Pennsylvania in August 1977. And then Vern Acklin disbanded for the last time.

IV. Then and Thereafter. Over the years since 1977, some Corps alumni have been in mutual contact, though never as frequently as they hoped. In 2003, attendees at the Cavaliers' 75th reunion included Dale and Ken Acklin—Corps alumni and brothers of Vern, the instructor in the '30s and '40s whose name the group adopted following his untimely death as a young man in 1946. Several members such as the stalwart Corps Commander Henry Houck, the always-dedicated Chuck Acklin (mellophone/soprano player and Vern's nephew), and the standout mellophone/soprano soloist Dave Braden continue to this day to call and send heartwarming cards and messages to Jean Dachille, first lady of the Corps and wife of Paul Dachille, Sr., the Cavaliers' longest-serving director.

In 2013, Paul Dachille, Sr. died. Paul joined the Corps in the 1950s as a tenor drummer, later became soprano bugle soloist, often marched as drum major, frequently arranged Vern Acklin's musical numbers and field drills, facilitated the purchase of new equipment, and was the Corps director for a period spanning three decades. From the 1950s through '77, there developed an almost symbiotic relationship between the Cavaliers and Paul. Although the Corps unquestionably knew after the 1977 breakup that Vern Acklin would never again march, Paul's death was somehow the final sobering and inevitable confirmation that the Cavaliers were gone forever.

In 2021, Paul Dachille, Jr. (mellophone player and author of this article) renewed an age-old Cavalier ritual of honoring the eponymous Vern Acklin himself by placing a Memorial Day wreath at Vern's grave in the Oakmont-Verona Cemetery. The Corps had followed that sacred custom for many years after Vern's death. The 2021 wreath included maroon and white flowers in recognition of the Cavaliers' oldest traditional colors. Also placed at the grave was one of the last maroon Aussie-style hats worn by the Corps at times from the 1940s through the 1960s, a soprano bugle played by Corps members in the 1960s and '70s, and an urn containing the ashes of Paul Dachille, Sr. It had been forty-four years since the Corps placed a wreath at Vern's gravesite.

V. Moments to Remember. Fifty years ago, the Vern Acklin Cavaliers reunited for their exhilarating, unannounced appearance at Verona's centennial parade. Fifty years from now, there will be no Cavaliers remaining.

We will all be gone. But maybe, just maybe, someone will still know of us. Perhaps in that future time decades from now—perhaps by seeing a photograph or reading an article like this one—someone will know there once was a drum corps from Verona, a drum corps called the Vern Acklin Cavaliers, a drum corps that marched far and played its signature *Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White* to entertain crowds at every opportunity.

Long live the memory of the Vern Acklin Cavaliers Memorial Senior Drum and Bugle Corps.

With Cavalier Memories,
Paul R. Dachille, Jr.
Mellophone 1971-77
Vern Acklin Cavaliers Memorial Senior D&B Corps