

A Tribute to Drum Corps as “Archie” Turns 75

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September 15, 2007---Haverford, PA...The Archer Epler Musketeers reminded us on this brilliant afternoon, just one week before the official end of Summer, that the traditional drum corps season does not end in August or even on Labor Day. In fact, as we peruse the October, 1956 issue of Drum Corps World (Vol. 7, No. 10), we find scores for major competitions - including the Nationals – reported well into September and October. And this was a season that began in early May. Congratulations to the Skokie Indians (Senior) and Blessed Sacrament (Junior) for their American Legion Nationals victories and to the Tioga Thunderbirds (Senior) and St. Vincent Cadets (Junior) for the VFW Nationals victories; both contests were held in September, 1956.

What was unique about the Archer Epler show was that it created an atmosphere not experienced in decades. When was the last time that the Reilly Raiders, Blessed Sacrament, Yankee Rebels, Steele City Amabassadors, St. Kevins Emerald Knights and the Archer Epler Musketeers all assembled on a competition field for a formal retreat? When was the last time you saw St. James’ Drum Corps of Dundalk, MD (the oldest corps in the US, having started in 1887)? In the midst we saw or heard the names evoked of the Hawthorne Caballeros, The Skyliners, Bon-Bons, St. Vincent Cadets and the St. Lucy Cadets. And there were performances by the Lambertville Volunteers, Yankee Rebels, Blessed

Sacrament Golden Knights, Steel City Ambassadors, Reilly Raiders, St. Kevins Emerald Knights and Archer-Epler Musketeers.

The occasion was the 75th anniversary of “Archie” – first organized in April, 1932, in the midst of the great depression, as a junior corps, which had a brilliant history. The junior edition of Archie holds the 1938 and 1941 VFW National Championships together with a long string of state, regional and local titles. The corps would re-emerge in 1946 as a senior corps that would battle it out with the Reilly Raiders through the 1950s for all of the top spots. It is noteworthy that Archie won the 1954 VFW Nationals as a senior corps – and thus is the only corps to ever cop the title as both a junior and senior drum and bugle corps. And Archie would find its way into the decade of the 1980s as a DCA contender. But this day was not only to commemorate the achievements of the Archer Epler Musketeers, which thrives as an alumni corps. It was a day to celebrate the history of drum corps.

The festivities began Saturday morning on the Haverford High School football field, with opening ceremonies that included a pass-in-review parade by all of the participating drum and bugle corps. The previous day had been cloudy and rainy, but a brilliant blue sky emerged just prior to the event, and the day proved to be mostly about summer, with just a hint of the coming fall in the air, with an occasional cool breeze.

How can I convey my personal feelings as I scanned the stadium grounds? There were Archie, Reilly, Rebels BS and Kevins – in various stages of preparation, milling around in what would become amazing parade ranks, with full color guards that proudly and respectfully supported the American flag section, according to the rules of Field Manual 22-5. Yes, many of us old timers like the modern drum corps dancers, but we are equally thankful that the strict traditions and skills of military carriage of equipment have not been lost to the drum corps arts. Thank you, alumni corps.

This remarkable day included a tribute to Saint James Drum Corps, which, in 1887, sported nine snare drummers, eight piccolo players, a bass drummer, a cymbal player and two buglers. We celebrated the 77th anniversary of the Lambertville Volunteers, the corps that gave rise to the “alternative drum corps” in 1964 when it decided not to compete on the field, but to provide a more easy-going schedule in which the members could enjoy a few parades, concerts and exhibitions. In a sense, Lambertville defined a genre that would characterize the alumni corps. This is also the 61st year of the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights, organized in 1946 (like so many corps, just after WWII). In many ways, BSGK is the corps that remade itself in the image of its former self, in all important ways. Reflecting the excellence of its brilliant history (nine National titles, 19 NJ State titles, 11 National Dream titles and the winner of the first World Open), almost everything about the corps is the former junior corps. What is different? No mother-of-pearl on the shakos (too expensive today!), black shoes instead of white (for

most of the members) and, of course, the modern 3-valve brass. But that’s about it. The drum line remains traditional (no quads) and the music is authentically Blessed Sacrament. Every tune was played by the junior corps, and most penned by the current instructor, Dick Burns, who was a member of the junior corps from 1954-1963 and who taught the junior corps from 1965 – 1972. In the words of Yankee Rebel Joel Leson (who was a 1960s Drum Corps World staff writer), “Blessed Sac totally remade itself, authentically.”

A close second in authenticity is St. Kevins Emerald Knights – a rival of Blessed Sacrament during the 1950s and 1960s, and one of the few corps to ever beat BS in a National Dream (1964). The cadet uniform has been reproduced, and the scores reflect the same upper register brilliance that characterized St. Kevins back in the day. We were delighted that Kevins made the trek all the way from Dorchester, MA for the event. To see Blessed Sacrament and St. Kevins together on retreat, in their authentic uniforms, was breathtaking! And we must acknowledge just how much tradition has been woven into the fabric of Reilly, Archie, Steel City and Yankee Rebels – however we must acknowledge the transitions these corps have experienced in musical style, musical richness and, generally, finding a new voice. To be sure, these corps echo their traditions in so many important ways, but they thrive on the imaginations of Larry Kerchner, John Flowers, Duke Terreri, Bob Menear, Mike Blazer, Bill Pusey, Bill Kaufmann and Eric Landis to define a new era that balances tradition with innovation. For example, the Yankee Rebels’ Larry Kerchner creates a Rebel-esque

atmosphere with Bound for the Promised Land, Do-Re-Mi, Ghost Riders in the Sky and Lazy River! To be sure, “Johnny” (When Johnny Comes Marching Home) is still there!

The bookends of the field exhibitions were the Lambertville Volunteers – relaxed in their chairs, with music stands and with many percussion toys, with a show that evokes feelings of attending a jazz concert, and the Archer Epler Musketeers, whose repertoire and membership were augmented throughout the performance by other corps members and tunes that were arranged specially for the event. The “Archie Ensemble” played Lambertville and St. Kevins tunes, with a rainbow of uniforms that included Archie, Yankee Rebels, Emerald Knights, Golden Knights, Raiders, Ambassadors and more. What a sight, and what a sound! We all had to smile inside at this ragtag group of aging, former competitors just having a great time playing good old fashion drum and bugle corps music. Who would have thought we would still be doing this? When I asked a fellow Golden Knight when he was going to stop, he replied, “When the first shovel full of dirt hits me in the face.”

And what about in between performances? I can only speculate that most had an experience similar to mine. I walked the grounds, in uniform, with BSGK contrabass Danny Caso. We’ve known each other since 7th grade. We marched in the Middletown Coppertones and the Bayshore Buccaneers together. We joined Blessed Sacrament together in 1967. We have celebrated marriages,

children and grandchildren. And on this wonderful Saturday in September, we laughed, chatted about the possibilities of retirement, shared a drink, joked and poked fun at our colleagues as we did in the old days – and even ran into Allan Vogel, who we marched with in 1967 (and have not seen since). Dan and I were the two contrabasses that played in BSGK’s “Battle Hymn” sextet, in “America, the Beautiful” during the BS performance – right after I dashed off the field in a Yankee Rebel uniform, changed on the track, and made it just in time, as BS and YR were back-to-back. Who would have thought....

Thank you, Musketeers, for such a wonderful event. The old-fashion pass-in-review and retreat were awesome. Thanks to Bill Ives, who chaired the event and produced the commemorative book. Mostly, thanks for the memories, for the ability to relive what were arguably the best years of our lives. As Archie had hoped, we left with smiles on our faces and hearts filled with what drum corps is all about: Music, fun, friends and just a bit more delight to fill a lifetime of memories!

