
**by Dallas Martin
and Mark Arnold**

Blue Knights

The story of the Blue Knights began in an improbable way. The corps was founded by Fred and Fae Taylor, former vaudeville comedians and musicians who had appeared at many East Coast nightclubs (including the famous Palace Theater) and on the "Ed Sullivan Show."

Growing tired of life on the road, the Taylors moved to Denver in 1951 to look for steady work. Shortly after they arrived, Denver's first television station, KFEL Channel 2, hit the airwaves and was in desperate need of programming to fill up its airtime.

They talked the station's owner into letting them produce a teen-age "Soda Shop" show, which quickly drew the loyal following of many Denver adolescents after they got home from school.

The Taylors quickly become fixtures of early Denver television. In 1955, they moved to a different station and created "Clubhouse Gang," an early knockoff of the Mickey Mouse Club aimed at a toddler audience.

Two years later, they debuted "The Fred and Fae Show," which was to continue for more than a decade. Like all 1950s local television shows for children, it was produced on a small budget (and it looked it), the jokes were hokey and the music sounded tinny coming over the poor speakers of early TV sets. The kids couldn't get enough of it.

Parents quickly learned how mesmerizing a "radio with pictures" was to their youngsters and they were happy that wholesome programs like "The Fred and Fae Show" were available.

Fred Taylor was, among other things, an accomplished drummer. In 1957, he joined the Denver American Legion Centennial Grenadiers senior corps to give himself an opportunity to play his favorite instrument. Fred was familiar with drum corps from growing up in the East and enjoyed performing with a bigger ensemble than he'd been used to in nightclubs and on television.

At the same time, the Taylors opened the very popular Fred and



Blue Knights, 1982 (photo by John Wacker from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Blue Knights, 1972 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Fae Talent School, which provided their many followers a chance to receive voice and instrumental music lessons from the popular duo.

Fred gave percussion lessons at the school and found himself with many talented

named its first board of directors.

So, instead of being part of the youth activities of a veteran's organization as was so often the case in the post-war 1940s and 1950s, the Blue Knights grew out of an interest in drumming as an outlet for musical

students who had no place to perform. Recognizing the great opportunity that drum corps provided to him and his fellow Grenadiers, Fred and his wife decided to start a junior drum and bugle corps.

This coincidence of events, Fred's drumming prowess and senior corps experience coupled with the desire to give expression to the talents of percussion students at the school, brought about the formation of the Blue Knights in 1958. Fred Taylor, George Young and Ray Route were

Blue Knights, 1977, at DCI Championships in Denver, CO (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).



expression. This was a unique viewpoint because in the early days, drum corps was focused primarily on the brass.

Military "bugle calls" played on pistonless Boy Scout horns formed the repertoire of early junior corps, with drumming viewed merely as an accompaniment. With the Blue Knights, percussion has always been of great importance and this emphasis on and respect for drummers continues to this day.

In the first Blue Knights corps, a parade unit, each member of the snare section had to bring his or her own drum, with Fred providing a bass drum and a pair of cymbals from the school. A very small bugle section, directed by Young, played on borrowed brass bugles. Uniforms were makeshift and often didn't precisely match, but that was secondary to the chance to march down the street in front of a crowd.

Back in those



(Above) Blue Knights, 1991, at the DCI Championships in Dallas, TX (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Blue Knights, 1983 (photo by Paul Rodino from the collection of Drum Corps World).



days, there were many parades -- more than one sees in the 21st century. Counting local and national holidays and events, a drum corps could perform in as many as 20 parades a year in a metropolis the size of Denver. The corps had a ready-made reputation and gained attention at these events due to the involvement of the Taylors, who were highly recognizable celebrities around town.

Route was director from its inception in 1958 until 1972. His sons, Gary (drum major 1969-1970) and Ron

(who went on to become a Rear Admiral in the Navy), marched in the corps. At that time, the Blue Knights were run like any local youth sports team or scout troop, with parents providing instruction, fund-raising and operational support.

Route, along with Fred Taylor and Young, provided the leadership to keep the organization going in the early days. Route said this about his experiences on the occasion of the Blue Knights' 40th anniversary in 1998:

"No one experience stands out in my memory more than the knowledge of being a part of a group of dedicated people who gave birth to an organization that has weathered the test of time for the last 40 years. I was honored to have been given the privilege of being one of the original directors.

"In that position, I was able to touch the lives of many young people, encourage their self-esteem and help prepare them for adulthood. This goal was accomplished through discipline, organization, music, marching and participation in the total drum corps experience. Most of these young people have taken their place in society and have made us all proud of them."

The corps quickly gained experience and decided to enter into field competition, its first being in Greeley, CO, in 1958. The following year, the corps raised money to go to Minneapolis, MN, for the American Legion Championships, where it placed 23rd out of 24 junior corps. In 1961, American Legion Nationals were held in Denver and the Blue Knights placed ninth in a competition that included the Garfield Cadets, Troopers, Royal Airs, Argonne Rebels and Marion Cadets.

One great memory of those early years was in Seattle in 1963, when the corps won the national color guard championship and posted a 10th-place finish.

The Blue Knights joined the Great Plains Drum and Bugle Corps Association in 1963. With this affiliation, the corps began many years of regional competitions in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska.

The Taylors would be proud, and probably a little surprised, that their corps is the only surviving Great Plains Association unit today. But back in the 1960s, each year included visits to places like Hutchinson, Great Bend, Wichita, Newton, Casper and Enid.

The corps settled into its place in the lower echelon of the association alongside the Trailblazers, Scarlet Lancers, Plainsmen, Phantoms and Legionettes. This pattern continued throughout the rest of the 1960s. In 1968, Larry Roads, a former Blue Knight, formed another corps, the Eldoradans, in the Denver area, sparking a cross-town rivalry.

Throughout the 1970s, while the corps generally struggled on the competition field, the color guard achieved a significant



Blue Knights, 1988, at DCI Championships in Kansas City, MO (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

milestone in 1973 by beating the world-famous Troopers guard in the separate color guard competition that used to be held prior to drum corps shows.

The Blue Knights became a perennial small corps (what would be called a division II/III unit today) that was entertaining, but whose main attribute was that it remained in existence year to year.

As the 1970s drew to a close, the corps

was facing a substantial debt and was on the verge of becoming yet another drum corps casualty. At this time, Roger and Marion Newcomer entered the picture. Marion had been involved with the Phantom Regiment as a brass instructor and, with

the help of Roger, began the task of rebuilding the corps. Their motor home served as the equipment and food truck.

In 1978, the faithful 25 members marched in parades, shopping mall grand openings and anything to raise money. In 1982, the corps again fielded a full unit and performed at "Drums Along the Rockies," signaling the beginning of a new era in their history.

The corps had the privilege of hosting the 1977 and 1978 DCI Championships in Denver. These were special experiences for the Blue Knights, ones that the corps looks forward to repeating as the championships return to Denver in 2004.

"Drums Along the Rockies" was resurrected in 1971 (the phrase was coined in 1964 in reference to the Great Plains show held in Denver, but the name was dropped for a few years before returning for good in 1971) and has become the signature event of the Blue Knights. From its beginnings at Jefferson County Fairgrounds to its longstanding run at Mile High Stadium, to its new home in Invesco Field at Mile High, the show has always drawn inordinately large and loud crowds that have showered the corps with support. It remains an important regional competition, as well as the corps' single largest fund-raising event.

Bingo came to the corps' rescue in 1983 when they opened their own hall. The revenue from this source enabled the corps to

purchase buses, new horns and uniforms. This was also the year the Blue Knights embarked on their first full summer tour which included their first appearance in a DCI Championships since DCI was in Denver.

The fortunes of the Blue Knights took another important step forward with the arrival of George and Lynn Lindstrom in 1984. George had been a director and a marching member of the Racine Kilties, one

corps always has its memorable moments. One night in Port Huron, MI, in 1984, the Blue Knights shared housing with the Santa Clara Vanguard. As retold by member David Pressley, "Shortly after lights out, an SCV instructor entered our side of the partitioned gym and announced SCV's schedule for the next day, never realizing that he was talking to the wrong corps until someone asked him, 'Hey, man, who's the Vanguard?'"

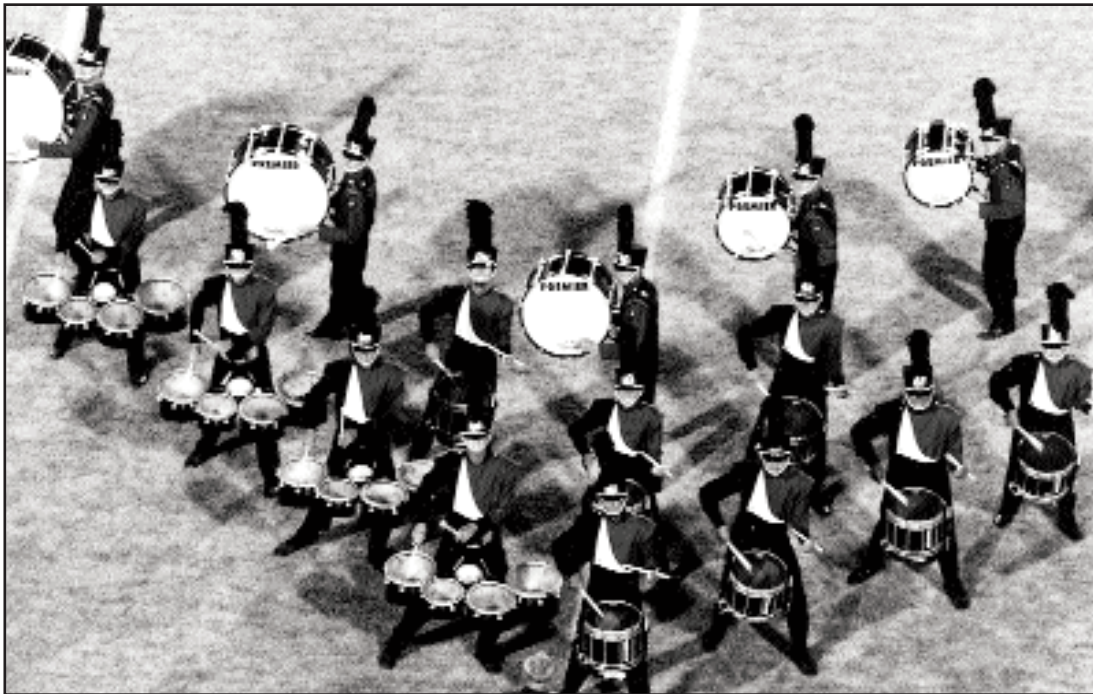
Mellophone Leslie Geist says one of her fondest recollection was of "Frank Meachum drinking the three-bean salad juice out of the cooler because he thought it was lemonade!"

Toward the end of 1985, Mark Arnold took over as the Blue Knights director. Arnold had been on staff for the Troopers under Jim Jones and was working with the Railmen that year. He happened to be in Casper visiting his friend, Casey Smith (later the "walk around the stands" announcer for "Drums Along the Rockies"), who

had also been on the Troopers' staff and had been working with the Blue Knights.

Smith got a call from the Denver corps asking him for a recommendation for its vacant director position. He replied, "I know just the guy. He's sitting right here."

Under Arnold's early years at the helm, the corps went from 31st in 1985 to a DCI finalist in 1991. Legendary instructors such as



Blue Knights, 2000 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).

of the most prominent corps of its day, and for the first time the Blue Knights had a leader who taught the members the kind of effort that was needed at rehearsals and on the field to "be a real drum corps." Lynn was a long-time color guard member and instructor, and a key player in WGI.

Here the corps took a major leap in its professionalism. Summer travel in a drum

Blue Knights, June 30, 2001, in Seattle, WA (photo by Francesca Colombini from the collection of Drum Corps World).



George Zingali and Ralph Hardimon came to work with the corps. Finally, after 35 years of relative obscurity, the Blue Knights were approaching the "elite" status to which all corps aspire.

In the last decade, the Blue Knights have enjoyed success on the competitive field, having placed as high as sixth at DCI Finals in 2000. Another key achievement for the organization in the 1990s was its leadership role in creating the most successful percussion ensemble program in the country.

Continuing a longstanding focus on the percussive arts, the two Blue Knights ensembles have developed into respected performance groups, both locally and internationally, since starting in 1993.

The program's initial purpose was to train local talent for possible future membership in the Blue Knights. As the corps continued to improve, so did the talent level of those who were accepted for membership, especially in the area of percussion.

Each year, more highly qualified drummers and keyboardists came from outside the Denver area and local talent was being turned away. Answering the need to have a means for involving these local percussionists, the program was launched and since that time the integration of this organization with the competitive drum corps has been impressive.

Today, more than 50 percent of the percussionists marching in the corps have been members of the percussion ensemble program. Students from 23 Denver-area high schools and colleges participate.

The Blue Knights were the driving force in the establishment of the Rocky Mountain Percussion Association in 1994. The Blue Knights World Ensemble is the 2003 reigning world champion, having earned the title at the WGI World Championships in Dayton, OH, under the leadership of Charles Craig (1994-1995) and Dan Burke (since 1996).

They have placed no lower than third at this event since its inception and hold three

other world championships at WGI.

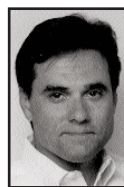
Even with the success organization has achieved, the focus has remained on the growth and enrichment of youth. The corps' theme song, *I Go On*, is an important tradition for the members. The song's lyrics convey the ideal that the corps lives by: how one succeeds is not nearly as important as how one faces and overcomes challenges and adversity, in drum corps and in life. The corps continues to strive for performance excellence, but the greater goal is to remain true to the objectives of Fred and Fae Taylor, who started the corps for the purpose of giving young people an outlet to express themselves and gain self-esteem through music and performance.

As long as members of the Blue Knights continue to feel they have gained the benefits of hard work, camaraderie and group achievement, then the organization will have



Blue Knights, 2002, at the DCI Championships in Madison, WI (photo by Larry Stolldorf from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Blue Knights, 2002 (photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Dallas Martin has been involved in the activity for more than 40 years. He marched in the Trailblazers/Frontiersmen in Overland Park and Argonne Rebels in Great Bend, KS, and served on the staff of both organizations.

He has been a Drum Corps World writer for more than 25 years and is a member of the corporate board of the Blue Knights.

An attorney specializing in intellectual property and corporate law, Martin is vice president and general counsel of SwitchPoint Networks, Inc., a broadband telecommunications company in Denver.

Mark Arnold is currently the executive director of the Blue Knights, a position he has held since 1986. He began his drum corps career with the Troopers 1978 under the tutelage of DCI Hall of Fame member Jim Jones. In addition to his duties with the Blue Knights, Mark has served the activity in numerous capacities including stints as the president of Drum Corps West and chairman of the DCI Board of Directors.

