


(Left to right) De La Salle Oaklands, August 13, 1967 at the National Dream in Jersey City, NJ (photo by Ron Da Silva); the drum line, same show (photo by Ron Da Silva); 1973 (photo by Peter McCusker, photos from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) 1940, 1913 (photo from De La Salle archives).

by Murt Howell

The history of the De La Salle Bugle Band and Drum Corps is generally thought to be the period that spans 64 years -- from 1910 to the end of 1974. However, the story begins much earlier, in 1866 to be exact, and doesn't quite end with the 1974 season.

The early years

In 1863, 12 years after establishing their first elementary schools in Toronto, the Christian Brothers began an academy to prepare boys for careers in business and commerce. The name was changed in 1870 from the Christian Brothers Commercial Academy to De La Salle Institute when they acquired property on Duke Street.

In 1880, it was renamed De La Salle College, because by then the commercial studies were only part of a broader academic curriculum.

The last half of the of the 19th century was the glory days of the brass band and it is obvious that the Christian Brothers had a fondness for the activity, for it is about this time references to bands being established at their schools in Montreal, Kingston, Toronto and Ottawa (the future La Salle Cadets).

In July 1864, for example, the band of the Montreal school performed at the examinations for the Kingston school.

By March 1865, the Kingston school had its own 52-piece band plus drum major, all in uniform, and had been playing for about six months. Shortly after, Brother Arnold, the

De La Salle Oaklands

director of the Kingston school, would take over the Toronto Academy and have a direct and lasting impact on De La Salle Toronto.

We can reasonably assume the first De La Salle band was formed in the fall of 1865, since its first scheduled performance was to be the St. Patrick's Day parade in March 1866. Unfortunately, their appearance was cancelled out of fear for their safety. Racial and religious discrimination was a common occurrence in Toronto in those days and sectarian violence could be guaranteed at least twice a year -- St. Patrick's Day and July 12.

Added to that was the growing fear of invasion from Irish Fenians in the United States, which was expected to happen around St. Patrick's Day. Given the tensions of the time, there was a very real possibility of Orange violence during the Toronto festivities.

As a result, the first published report about the De La Salle Band was about their non-appearance: "The members of the Hibernian Benevolent Society beg to return their thanks for the laudable and patriotic efforts made by the Christian Brothers, in training so efficiently their pupil band, which were prevented turning out only from a dread of riot. The band reflects credit on its teachers and is a proof that among the meek and pious brothers are to be found true-hearted Irishmen." (*The Irish Canadian*, March 21, 1866)

It is ironic, then, that the band's next reported performance was on

Queen Victoria's birthday, May 24, at a fund-raising picnic for the House of Providence. The *Canadian Freeman* reported, "The juvenile band of the Christian Brothers' school enlivened the scene by their excellent rendering of several national airs."

Two of their biggest hits were *St. Patrick's Day* and *Garry Owen*. It would be another year before we read of the band again, once more at a fund-raising picnic on July 1, 1867, celebrating the creation of Canada.

Since there are no reports of the band in the local press during March 1868, it would appear the situation was once again volatile around St. Patrick's Day that year, as well as the next. They contributed their talents to a number of fund-raising events and religious festivals during 1867 and, by 1868, were performing about once a month, including a big concert at the Academy on St. Patrick's Day.

In May 1868, it was reported they were wearing uniforms for the first time and had new instruments. In that year they also began performing concerts at the St. Lawrence Hall, Toronto's premier music venue. At one such concert in 1869, the hall was packed to overflowing, with an estimated 500 people turned away.

Their repertoire, however, was not limited to toe-tappin' Irish music. They could, when appropriate, play more refined concert music, including Mozart, and on occasion they provided the musical accompaniment for a 100-voice choir at the cathedral.

On March 17, 1869, the band not only participated in the St. Patrick's Day parade for the first time, but also took up its position at the head of the procession. It would lead the parade every year thereafter -- quite an honor, considering the number of society bands that participated.

By 1872, they had two bands, the main

band at the head of the parade and the junior (or No. 2) band further back, leading the students of De La Salle and the elementary schools.



The 1860s and 1870s were a period of great growth within the community, not just in Toronto, but in the surrounding rural areas as well. And the "Del" band was everywhere, doing everything to help, including fund-raising concerts and picnics for new schools and churches, performing at the laying of the corner stones and at the final dedications.

They would travel by steamship to places near Niagara or by train to the outlying regions north, east and west of the city. It was in this period that De La Salle's reputation was first established. They would continue to be called upon to perform similar services throughout the next 100 years.

The driving force was without doubt Brother Arnold, who took the band into the community at every opportunity. Unfortunately, he was recalled to Montreal in January 1878 and with him went the heart of De La Salle and a large part of the community spirit. Two months later, on St. Patrick's Day 1878, a major sectarian riot erupted only a short block south of De La Salle. The result was that the city banned further St. Patrick's Day parades and it would be 110 years before there would be another.

The cadets

The cadet movement first took root in the elementary schools during the 1890s and had expanded to many high schools in the first few years of the new century. De La Salle had established a cadet corps by 1903 and, although there is reference to the school band in 1901, there is no further mention of one until 1910.

This is the date generally cited as the beginning in Del's history of the band and drum corps, although the first cadet band was in fact a fife and drum corps. By 1912, they had switched to B-flat bugles and would remain a bugle band from there on.

During World War I, the cadets and band played an extremely active role in victory bond drives and parading with the troops heading overseas. In 1915, the school relocated after 45 years on Duke Street to a new building on Bond Street, next to the cathedral. It would be the home of the band until 1931.

It was also at this time that each cadet corps became affiliated with one of the local regiments and De La Salle was attached to The Irish Regiment. Given their history and heritage, it was a very logical connection that resulted in a return to their musical roots of 50 years before. They would continue to play Irish music as part of their repertoire for the next 50 years.

Another aspect of



De La Salle Oaklands, July 6, 1974, Oshkosh, WI (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

this connection was the addition of pipers. Although there may have been six pipers attached to the band initially, a newspaper report of June 1919 (when they were declared the best cadet corps in Ontario) refers to the 200 cadets being paraded by both their pipe band and bugle band.

Another newspaper from the month before reports the cadet orchestra provided the entertainment at a social event, so they seem to have been quite an accomplished and versatile group.

The cadet corps and band quickly established an international reputation as one of the finest in the world and maintained that level of excellence until they ceased operation in 1948 and 1958, respectively. This is no idle boast -- they have the hardware to back it up, including The King's Cup as the best cadet corps in the British Empire.

The Blue & Gold Band

The band gradually took on a life of its own, mainly due to its entertainment value, beginning in 1928 with the arrival of Bill Jordan and Johnny Jackson. They were assisted by Percy McGillivray, who would devote more than 20 years to the band as both a playing member and instructor. Together, they took the band in a whole new direction.

The first major change was to the famous blue and gold uniforms, which would be worn until the beginning of the drum corps era. A campaign was launched to raise \$1,500 to equip and uniform a 70-member band, although more than 100 attended practice every week. The response was so successful (more than \$2,400 was raised) that they were able to increase the size of the band, order new military drums with metal shells and plan to outfit 100 cadets in the same uniforms.

On March 19, 1929, the Blue & Gold made its first public appearance, followed two months later by its participation in the annual Garrison Parade with 95 members. The new band created such a stir that by the following September there were 100 new applications to join



De La Salle Oaklands, 1973 (photo from the De La Salle archives).

during the first week of school.

Not only did they look better than any other band (cadet or otherwise), they were also bigger, usually with 120 members throughout the 1930s, 1940s and much of the 1950s.

Can you imagine the sound of a 48-piece

drum line coming at you down the street? It might have been difficult to hear the 64 horns or eight glocks.

One of Jackson's innovations was a form of indoor drill, unlike the typical military parading of the time, and entire military shows would be built around Del's participation. Jackson remained with the band as director and drum major until 1951.

In September 1931, the band and cadets moved to the new campus, the 13-acre estate called Oaklands, although Bond Street continued operating until 1954. The band had become such a Toronto institution by then that they were being asked to also participate in a variety of civic and social functions.

In 1931, they performed for the first time on radio in aid of a charity and for many years they were the advertised drawing card for numerous commercial interests. Their annual inspections became entertainment events, with up to 3,000 people jamming the upper gallery at the Armouries to watch the spectacle. People would never have realized what a large repertoire they had if the crowd hadn't kept shouting for encore after encore.

In 1938, they replaced their instruments once again, this time with a set of silver-plated bugles and chrome drums, a gift from one of their biggest supporters, Sen. Frank O'Connor.

Their reputation became so widespread that in 1939 they were invited to perform for a week at the New York World's Fair. While there, they participated in a number of other events, including the American Legion parade. Also that year they formed an Honor Guard for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their visit to Toronto.

But 1939 brought war again and once more Del threw itself into the effort at recruiting rallies, victory bond drives, parades and concerts. At the conclusion of the war, De La Salle had 250 cadets plus 110 members in the band, but the public mood was now changing toward all things military and Del disbanded the cadets after 1947.

The absence of the cadets had little impact on the band, which had been involved in non-cadet activities for decades and it carried on as before. In 1947, a recording was made of the band for the first time and the school used it as part of a program to recruit students from Latin America.

In 1949, the band received a set of "harmony" bugles and so for the first time had an opportunity to play bugles with valves.

Throughout the 1950s, they continued to participate in parades and religious festivities, but their last big outing was the Montreal St. Patrick's Day parade in 1954, where they once again performed on radio. By the late 1950s, with opportunities to perform becoming fewer, the school decided it was time to take the band in a different direction or cease operations.

For those fortunate enough to have seen the band in its glory days, it must have been impressive, because there are very elderly gentlemen alive today who, as members of other bands in their youth, still speak in awe of the Del Blue & Gold.

The drum corps

From the demise of the great band evolved the drum and bugle corps in the fall of 1957. Once again, new instruments were required, and within two weeks \$7,000 was raised through sales of magazine subscriptions. New uniforms would take a little longer, so they entered the field of competition in 1958 with an interim uniform, retaining the cap and blue pants from the old uniforms (now with a red stripe instead of gold). The new part was a silver satin blouse with red cummerbund and red gloves.

That first corps consisted of 22 horns, a nine-piece percussion section, five glocks and a four-man color party. In a show of typical Del confidence, they skipped the lower competition classes and went head-to-head with the best.

In their first M&M competition on June 21, 1958, at East York Stadium, they placed second, three points behind Scout House, the reigning Canadian champions. They placed third at the nationals that year behind Optimists and Scout House. In 1959, they took to the field with 24 horns, a nine-piece percussion section and eight in the guard (including the color party). The glocks were finally retired after three decades.

In 1960, they appeared in new white uniforms with green and red trim and a full-length red cape. The cape, which primarily served to keep the uniform clean, was only worn in parades, off the field and on the starting line. Removing the capes before the opening gun would become part of the show.

The 1960 corps consisted of 32 horns, a 10-piece percussion section and 13 in the color guard. That year they won the Ontario Championship and placed second at the nationals. They held that position for the next five years, although in 1961 they won three of the five meetings against the Optimists (including the prelims), but lost nationals by one-twentieth of a point.

New cadet-style uniforms were introduced in 1966, with only the red capes being retained. Despite major changes, including all new instructors, 1966 and 1967 proved to be difficult years and Del dropped to third place at the nationals for the first time since 1959.

It is always convenient to look back on an unsuccessful season and claim it was a rebuilding year, which was true to an extent, especially in 1967, but credit is also due to

the quality of the competition. Cadets La Salle of Ottawa made tremendous strides to knock Del from its perennial spot.

There are two remarkable things about Del between 1958 and 1966. First, being a school activity, they drew their personnel almost entirely from within the school. Second, all their instructors were former members of the band or corps.

So, even while working from a smaller resource pool than other corps, they continued to remain competitive throughout this period. Although they always had a few members that did not attend the school, it was generally believed you had to be a Del student to be a member.

As a consequence, many who would have joined Del in an instant never tried and the corps never recruited. However, the end of the 1966 season was a watershed. With the demise of York Lions and Golden Monarchs, those still serious about the activity were looking for a new home and there were really only two choices -- Del or Toronto Optimists.

There had been other years when the corps had to deal with a large influx of new members, but never on a scale like this and certainly never so many outsiders. That first migration from York Lions, Golden Monarchs and Michael Power Knights after 1966 was the beginning of a trend that would ultimately play a part in Del's demise.

The 1967 season started with fireworks and great expectations. On New Year's Eve, De La Salle led a massive parade up University Avenue to the Ontario Legislature to celebrate the beginning of Canada's centennial year.

From the balcony of the Legislature, three sopranos played the Royal Salute as the Vice-Regal party arrived. But despite everyone's best effort on the field, the corps fell short again that year. Although placing ahead of Cadets La Salle at the Dream contest, they finished third behind La Salle at the nationals three weeks later. There were, however, signs of great possibilities.

In the fall of 1967, two new instructors joined Dave Parker, the drill instructor. Terry McKolskey on horns and Harry Clark on drums turned out to be the perfect mix. The 1968 Del corps was a very different animal -- aggressive, daring, talented and experienced -- and served notice from the beginning of the season that they would no longer settle for being the bridesmaid.

That point was made very clear July 6 in Brantford, ONT. The result: Del 77.1, Opti 76.0, LaSalle 73.6, Scarborough Firefighters 55.4. Canadian drum corps would never be the same -- and neither would De La Salle.

With so few major corps in Ontario and only one or two shows there with American competition, Del, along with the others, found it necessary to travel outside the country. Although having made brief trips into the United States since the early 1960s, it wasn't until 1968 that they began making

extensive visits.

Beginning that year, they started doing an annual tour of the Midwest and then the East Coast. The opportunity to compete regularly against the best American corps contributed greatly to their improvement and later success. It may even have paid some immediate dividends, because 1968 turned out to be Del's greatest season since becoming a drum corps, with victory after victory over its arch-rival, including at the Ontario Championship.

As the season progressed, so did the Optimists, getting closer with every show. At the nationals, in the only contest that really mattered, Del again experienced the bitter taste of defeat by less than a point.

It was a heartbreaking way to end the season, but rather than being demoralized, the corps was inspired. The Optimists no longer intimidated them and they immediately began working toward making the next year a complete success. The greatest improvement was in attitude.

With new found confidence and a total commitment to each other, Del 1969 came together like no other corps. From the very first contest to the very last, they got their revenge on the Optimists.

The season wasn't without stress, however.



Oakland Crusaders, 1977 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Once again, Opti closed the gap as the summer progressed. More than one person was no doubt thinking, "Not again!"

But Del remained composed and confident. In an ironic twist, De La Salle won the 1969 nationals by the same margin they had lost by in 1961 -- one-twentieth of a point. For Del, there was no turning back. They established themselves as the premier Canadian corps, with repeat championships in 1970 and 1971 (ninth and third at the U.S. Open those years) and were invited to join DCI. In fact, being the only founding member not based in the United States, they put the "I" in DCI.

The 1972 season brought significant changes in staff and membership. More and more corps were falling by the wayside and the premier corps were like a magnet, drawing members from those that died as well as those that remained. Although still not deliberately recruiting, Del didn't turn people away either.

At this point, there were members traveling hundreds of miles every week just to get to rehearsals. Del placed ninth at the U.S. Open and 16th at the first DCI in 1972, missing finals, but so did some other great corps like Madison and Garfield. The Optimists recovered by the end of 1972 to edge out Del by one-tenth of a point at the nationals, but that was their last hurrah.

Del was back on top in 1973 (sharing the title with Cadets La Salle). That year, for the first time in Del history, females joined the corps (21 years before they were allowed to enroll at the school). When it was decided to introduce a female guard, signs were posted at the various girls schools in Toronto. Within days all the spots were filled. Del finished second at the U.S. Open that year and just missed out on the DCI Finals in 13th spot by a point, but ahead of Phantom



(Above) Oakland Crusaders, 1993 (photo by Kathie Gombetto Bump from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Oakland Crusaders during their last season of competition, 1995 (photo by Dan Scaifidi from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Regiment, Cavaliers, Garfield, Des Plaines Vanguard, Boston Crusaders and others.

Neither Del nor LaSalle Cadets attended the 1974 nationals due to a dispute with the association about age limits. This was unfortunate, as it turned out, because it was to be the last year competing under the De La Salle name. They were in a class of their own that year, placing fourth at the U.S. Open, sixth in DCI Prelims and seventh in finals, and they would have walked away with another Canadian title.

So Seneca Princemen (the former Scarborough Firefighters), that Del had beaten by more than 15 points all season, won their only Canadian Championship over Optimists and Etobicoke Crusaders. With the end of that season came the end of an era. The school, no longer able to cover escalating costs of operating such a competitive activity, especially with more and more non-student involvement, withdrew its support.

Oakland Crusaders

Although the name De La Salle Oaklands was never again announced on the starting line after 1974, the corps itself continued to exist. Faced with the school's decision, the

members voted to stay together regardless and began investigating a number of options.

With the trend toward even larger corps, a merger seemed to be the best solution and a perfect fit was found with Etobicoke Crusaders, since there had always been a friendship, going back to the Michael Power days. And so, with a great deal of sadness, but an eye on the future, the entire corps moved to Etobicoke.

They could have just as easily joined Etobicoke Crusaders, but it showed tremendous respect for the school and its history to have at least retained part of the name and Oakland Crusaders was born. The result was massive: 167 members.

Etobicoke Crusaders were not without some history of their own. Their roots went back to the famous Columbus Boys Band, one of Toronto's great bugle bands, which made the switch to drum corps in the early 1960s. Knights of Columbus moved their operation to Michael Power, a boy's high school in the west end of Toronto, and the Michael Power Knights began competing in 1965.

It just so happens that Michael Power is located right next door to an all-girl school, St. Joseph's. In the fall of 1968, girls were invited to join the corps and nearly all were from St. Joseph's. They managed to get in one season with a mixed guard before the school folded the corps. A group of parents led by Vic Lang immediately took steps to keep the activity going and in just over a month they performed as the Etobicoke Crusaders, November 11, 1969.

Within a couple of years, they were a fully mixed corps. They won the junior B championship in 1972, were fifth in the open class in 1973 and third in 1974. For being essentially self-supported, they were tremendously successful at building a large corps, contributing about half the members of the Oakland Crusaders.

In 1975, Oakland Crusaders immediately picked up where Del had left off. They were Canadian Champions, second in the U.S. Open, fourth in DCI Prelims and sixth in the finals. In 1976, they were champions again, second at the U.S. Open, sixth in DCI Prelims and eighth in the finals. But that was to be the last of the glory years. They lost the 1977 nationals to Seneca Optimists (the merger of Optimists and Princemen in 1976) and placed 15th at DCI, missing the final 12 by 1.55.

The 1977 corps did, however, leave its mark in the annals of drum corps. The score earned by the drum line at DCI that year had not been beaten 25 years later.

In both 1978 and 1979, they placed second at the nationals behind L'Offensive Lions from Quebec. They did not attend in 1980. On the DCI front, they dropped to 17th place in 1978, 25th in 1979 and 32nd in 1980. The Oakland Crusaders continued on a smaller scale until folding in 1995.

So a great journey came to an end -- 64 continuous years under the De La Salle name, another 20 as the Oakland Crusaders, and a musical heritage begun in 1866.

In their 23 years of competitive drum corps, they attended the nationals 21 times, winning six Canadian Championships in eight years. They placed second 11 times (by a point or less three times) and were third the other four times.

Being in the top three at all 21 nationals in which they competed is something of an achievement. They were DCI finalists three times and came close three other times. All told, they placed 17th or better at DCI seven years in a row.

This is quite remarkable for a boy's high school from Toronto, but then, Del was never just any school. One has only to look at its academic and athletic accomplishments from 1863 to the present day to understand there is a special pride in being part of Del, even for those corps members that did not attend the school.



Murt Howell is a writer and artist living in Toronto. Born in Ireland, he moved to Canada in the mid-1950s, where he spent much of his youth involved with bugle bands and drum corps.

He began playing soprano with Leaside Lions (the feeder corps for the Jungle Kings) in the late 1950s, but when it folded he moved on to the Sea Cadet program, playing with the Vanguard Sea Cadet bugle band for a number of years.

In 1965, he left cadets to join Golden Monarchs and concentrate on what mattered most, because in the 1960s there was nothing more important or exciting than drum corps. At the end of the 1966 season, he joined De La Salle, where he finished out his last three years of junior corps. He continues to be involved with the hobby through De La Salle Alumni and teaching the horn line of Haida Sea Cadet Corps.

Howell divides his time between technical writing and creating custom designs in fine pewter. Most of his working life has been spent in the area of information design and he taught college courses in that area for 18 years. He continues to offer a variety of writing/design services through his company, Graphiteria Communication Design. Since 1988, however, he has also been producing pewter collectibles under the name Heritage Pewter Studios for many of Ontario's historic sites, in addition to private and regimental commissions.

He will be releasing a series of limited edition figurines this summer called "Drum Corps Classics -- The Golden Age of Drum Corps in Fine Pewter."

On behalf of the De La Salle Alumni, he invites all drum corps fans and members to join Del for an evening of good cheer and tall tales. If you're in the Toronto area on the third Thursday of any month, contact him at graphiteria@sympatico.ca to make arrangements.