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Railmen, November 11, 1944, Armistice Day at a parade in downtown Omaha, NE (photo from the collection of Ken Whittle).

## by Ken Whittle

As World War II was beginning to intensify on the European continent, the patriotic fervor in the United States was being echoed from one unlikely outlet in particular -- the drum and bugle corps activity. That was the case in the heart of America: Omaha, NE.

Drum and bugle corps were in full swing from American Legion posts to Elks Clubs. The year was 1939 and the Union Pacific Railroad was gearing up to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the driving of the Golden Spike, which had taken place May 10, 1869, in Promontory, UT, linking the coasts with ribbons of steel.

It was a race between the Central Pacific Railroad, starting out from Sacramento, CA, and the Union Pacific Railroad, starting out from Omaha.

Three score and 10 years after the "Golden Spike" was driven, all Omahans took to this nostalgic anniversary. Posts to which horses could be tethered replaced parking meters. Male employees of Union Pacific in Omaha sported beards. The showing of Cecil B. DeMille's movie "Union Pacific" premiered in Omaha.

The Golden Spike Days celebration was ceremoniously opened by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Union Pacific Drum & Bugle Corps was founded.

Earlier in the year, then UP President Bill Jeffers noticed UP employee Chris Jensen leading the local Elks Drum & Bugle Corps. The railroad president was so impressed by the corps' musicianship that the following workday Jeffers asked Jensen if he would organize such a marching unit for the

company. Jensen agreed.

Although the intent was to have the corps perform at functions that year only, it was an instant success at the numerous Golden Spike Days festivities.

The UP President called Jensen into his office later that year and asked if he would continue the corps the following year. It was there to stay.

For most of the corps' history, it was made up entirely of children or relatives of

Union Pacific employees. It remained so for the next 44 years.

In an interview before his death, Jensen recounted how he sent out a flyer to families of employees soliciting sons and daughters that were qualified. "We got 18 applications and three were my own children," he said.

He then sent out another feeler for all that were interested. He received 200 responses.

"So we took those 18 kids and the other 200 and inside of three months we had it up to 90 kids who were qualified," Jensen said.

The first two numbers the corps played were *I've Been Working on the Railroad* and

stick?" Jensen asked. "I swiped a ball of twine from the Railroad and wrapped it in tape, put it on a stick and that was our drum stick. We ran pancake feeds to raise money for equipment and, at times, I would kick in to buy what we needed."

With the exception of a couple of out-of-town performances, the corps performed only at local functions. Although buses were chartered to transport members, the trip to Wyoming was made in railroad



Railmen, 1985, at the DCI Championships in Madison, WI (photo by Donald Mathis from the collection of Drum Corps World).

passenger cars. When UP operated passenger service, the cars were coupled to the back of public rail passenger cars between Omaha and Cheyenne.

Following the privatization of rail passenger traffic in 1971, the corps traveled in style with a special train for the marching corps members. It consisted of sleeper cars, a dome car, an equipment car and a diner. Commissioner employees of the railroad served meals and porters ensured all beds were readied with linen and pillows.

Jensen retired in 1971 at age 71 and the reigns of the corps were handed off to assistant director and corps member since 1958, Ken Whittle.

Under Whittle's leadership, trumpets were replaced with bugles, baton twirlers' equipment was traded in for flags and rifles and the whole spectrum of percussion instruments were added to the existing snare and bass drums. Marching bells, xylophones and marimbas

replaced the hand-held glockenspiels.

The familiar steadfast traditional songs the corps was noted for, *Semper Fidelis*, *I've Been Working on the Railroad*, *Omaha* and *When the Saints Go Marching In*, to name a few, gave way to the modern drum and bugle corps musical repertoire.

The corps was ready to jump into the competitive arena in 1983 at its Omaha DCI-sponsored show, "Drums Across the Midlands." Although that first score of 28.35 was nothing to boast about, it was 28.35

# Railmen



Railmen, approximately 1950 (photo from the collection of Ken Whittle).

### *Semper Fidelis.*

Primarily a street corps marching in parades, it also performed at county fairs, circuses, holiday events and even pilgrimages to the St. Paul Winter Carnival in St. Paul, MN, every January. The cold winter trip was replaced with the summer heat at the Frontier Days Rodeo event in Cheyenne, WY, in July.

The corps didn't have much money from the outset, Jensen recalled.

"You know what I used for a bass drum



Railmen, July 22, 1991 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

points higher than the corps had ever achieved.

A year later, the corps competed in a half-dozen contests, the members raising their personal best score to just under 45. In 1985, it appeared in its first DCI Championships.

The corps' name was changed to "Railmen" after the railroad pulled away from sponsorship and the corps separated itself from the railroad's coffers.

It was a mixed blessing. Whittle ventured into the community for financial support. And the corps was finally able to travel and compete



Railmen, 1985, at the DCI Championships in Madison, WI (photo by Donald Mathis from the collection of Drum Corps World).

other states. However, chartering two 47-passenger buses to competitions and

feeding members and staff covered the remaining funding.

The corps competed through 1995, the last marching season for the now-defunct railroad corps.

Upon Whittle's departure in 1988, local band director and former Madison Scout member Shane Macklin directed the Railmen for four years. He also directed the Ralston High School band in Omaha.

In 1993, another local high school band director, Dave Young of Bellevue East High School, led the corps. After a year as a senior corps in 1994, the junior corps rose again in 1995, led by former Railmen Steve Hermach. It eventually folded the following year.

The Railmen board of directors still sponsors the "Drums Across the Midlands" show in Omaha, with Whittle as show chairman.

Although there has been talk of starting up another corps, the financial resources available during a trying economy have put that idea on the back burner for now.

What are the former directors doing now? Jensen passed away at age 91.

freely without the Railroad's restraints, but it could not kick the railroad affiliation in the minds of corporate Omaha. Most monies had to be earned through various fund-raising projects and membership fees.

Whittle no longer works for Union Pacific Railroad and is employed to provide long distance phone service for AT&T.

Macklin moved from Omaha to Sioux Falls, SD, to direct another high school band and he now sponsors a DCI tour show.

Young retired to Lincoln, NE, and helps local marching programs.

Hermach moved with his family to the St. Louis, MO, area.



Railmen, 1994, the one year the corps competed as a senior at the DCM Championships in De Kalb, IL (photo by Walt Niekamp from the collection of Drum Corps World).



*Ken Whittle moved to Omaha from Detroit in 1949 and joined the Union Pacific Drum and Bugle Corps in 1957.*

*At the end of 1970, he took over the corps from director/founder Chris Jensen. With the help of talented band directors in the area, including Mark Arnold who taught at an Omaha high school before taking over the Denver Blue Knights, he transformed the organization from a parade corps to a competitive unit.*

*He worked for Union Pacific Railroad for 30 years before being laid off due to downsizing. He works for AT&T providing long distance service to Hilton Hotels.*

*He is a single parent of five children, the youngest being a trumpet player in middle school. One daughter marched in the Railmen for nine years and his youngest daughter in the Phantom Regiment Cadets.*

*He has been show chairman of the Omaha "Drums Across the Midlands" DCI competition for 25 years.*

Railmen, 1995, at the DCI Championships in Buffalo, NY, the corps' last performance (photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Railmen, August 14, 1990, at the DCI Championships in Buffalo, NY (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).