

De La Salle “Oaklands”

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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 and doesn’t quite end with the 1974 season. 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 that we see references to bands being established at their schools in Montreal, Kingston, Toronto and Ottawa (the future Lasalle Cadets).



This is De La Salle’s corps logo. It is a modified version of the Blue and Gold logo. In the early years of the drum corps the band logo was still displayed on the corps’ drums.

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



The Blue & Gold - 1951

De La Salle’s Blue and Gold Band beside the school (1951)

DID YOU EVER WONDER where the name “Oaklands” comes from? – Originally, what is now De La Salle “Oaklands” was part of a 200-acre grant by the Government of Upper Canada in 1798 to Chief Justice Honourable John Elmsley. By 1836 the crown land was given by the Elmsley family to St. James Anglican church. Senator John Macdonald bought 35 acres from the Anglican Church in 1858. He named his new property “Oaklands”, as he often admired the splendid oak trees on the acreage. This land ran up the east side of Avenue Road from Cottingham Street, almost to St. Clair Avenue.

twice a year – St. Patrick’s Day and The Glorious 12th of July. 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. As a result, the first published report about the De La Salle Band was about their non-appearance. 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 (Providence Villa). 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 or 1869, it would appear the situation was once again volatile around St. Patrick’s Day. 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. 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. 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 1870s was a period of great growth within in Toronto and surrounding areas. And the Del band was everywhere, doing everything to help, including fund-raising concerts and picnics for new schools and churches. They would continue to be called upon to perform similar services throughout the next 100 years. Unfortunately, on St. Patrick’s Day 1878, a major sectarian riot erupted at St Lawrence Hall only a short block south of De La Salle Duke Street. The result was that the City banned any further St. Patrick’s Day parades and it would be 110 years before there would be another.



De La Salle’s Blue and Gold Band at the CNE

The Cadet Band

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 but there is no further mention of the band until 1910. This is the date generally cited as the beginning in Del’s history of the bugle band/drum corps. During the First World War, 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 (Adelaide East) 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 this connection was the addition of pipers.

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. (They also had a String Orchestra.)

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.



Cadet Corps hat badge



De La Salle Cadets and Band (Toronto City Hall, 1910)

The Blue & Gold

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, raising more than \$2,400, 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 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. 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 and sport interests. Their annual inspections became entertainment events, with up to 3,000 people jamming the upper gallery at the Armouries to watch the spectacle.

In 1938, they replaced their instruments once again, this time with a set of silver-plated bugles and chrome drums, a gift from their biggest supporter, Sen. Frank O’Connor (of Laura Secord



De La Salle’s Blue and Gold band at the 1939 World’s Fair (Flushing Meadows, New York)

fame). 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 Honour Guard for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their visit to Toronto. But 1939 brought war again and De La Salle 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 due to government limits on cadet corps the cadets were disbanded after 1947. This had little impact on the band’s activities and it carried on as before. They made a recording in 1947 which the school used to recruit students from Latin America.

In 1949, the band received a set of “harmony” bugles and 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. Ernie Wesson, Cos Capone, Werner Nuss, Mike Delaney and Bill Parker showed just what could be done.

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



De La Salle Drum Corps’ original uniforms and the band crest on the drums



De La Salle (Nationals, Galt, 1958)



De La Salle Drum Corps in front of the school (1958)

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 two 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



First photo shoot of Del in their new, white uniforms (June, 1960)

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 gave Optimists a real scare. Here is how the season wrapped up: on August 11 Optimists won the NY-Can Championship by 0.4 over Del; two weeks later at the CNE Championship, Del won by 1.3; on September 9 at the National Prelims, Del won by 2.4; in the Finals, Del actually won, but was assessed a 3/10 penalty by the Chief Judge during inspection for a flag pole height; as a result, Del lost the Nationals by 1/20, but won four of the six captions; two weeks later at the Grape Festival, Del again won - this time by more than two points.

NEW CADET STYLE uniforms were introduced in 1966, with only the red capes being retained. Despite major changes, including all new instructors, 66 and 67 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 Lasalle of Ottawa made tremendous strides to knock Del from its perennial spot. The remarkable thing about Del between 1958 and 1966 is that being a school activity, they drew their personnel almost entirely from within the high school. 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 outsiders, it was generally believed you had to be a Del student to be a member, so 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 The 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 in the fall of 66 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



De La Salle (CNE, Toronto, 1960)

FEATURE ARTICLE: De La Salle “Oaklands” Drum Corps (continued)

Cadets Lasalle at the Dream, they finished third behind Lasalle 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 and it turned out to be the perfect mix. The 1968 Del 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. The result: Del 77.1, Optimists 76.0, Lasalle 73.6, Scarborough Firefighters 55.4.

Canadian drum corps would never be the same – and neither would De La Salle. 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 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. After all, it's not often a corps wins every caption but one and still loses a championship. That one caption was a hard to believe two points on drums. 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 as never before. From the very first contest to the very last, they got their revenge on the Optimists. The season wasn't without stress, however. Once again, Optimists 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, with a repeat championship in 1970.



De La Salle in their cadet uniforms (Batavia, 1969)

Even before the 1971 season started there was growing dis-satisfaction within the ranks of how the Canadian Drum Corps Association was being run. As a result Optimists, De La Salle, London Midlanders, and Les Compagnons d’Embrun left the Association. There were now two competing organizations – CDCA and the new Canadian Open National Commission. On Sunday, August 29 the Canadian National Invitational Championship was held in which six major Junior Corps competed, and what many consider to be the real National Championship for 1971. De La Salle won with ease; 4.2 over Optimists, 7.25 over Lasalle, the soon-to-be CDCA National Champs and 10.55 over Firefighters, the recently crowned CDCA Ontario Champs. They also placed third at the U.S. Open that year.

Having established themselves as the premier Canadian corps, Del was 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 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 at the Nationals. Del was back on top in 1973, but sharing the title with Cadets Lasalle. Unfortunately, Lasalle folded almost immediately after.

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 Regiment, Cavaliers, Garfield, Des Plaines Vanguard, Boston Crusaders and others. Del did not attend the 1974 Nationals due to a dispute with

the association once again. 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



De La Salle (1969)

FEATURE ARTICLE: De La Salle "Oaklands" Drum Corps (continued)

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.

Although the name De La Salle Oaklands was never again announced on the starting line, the corps itself continued to exist. 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. There had always been a relationship, going back to the Michael Power days, and a number of ex-Del members were currently managing and instructing Crusaders. 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 (not to mention retaining their DCI standing) to have at least retained part of the name and so Oakland Crusaders was born. The result was massive: 167 members.



Del's guard wearing their capes (Grape Festival, 1960)



Dan Moloney, John McAlpine and Paul Ferri are on the left (1963)



De La Salle's first year with girls (1973)

FEATURE ARTICLE: De La Salle “Oaklands” Drum Corps (continued)

After the 1974 season De La Salle “Oaklands” merged with the Etobicoke Crusaders to create the Etobicoke Oakland Crusaders. They finished in 6th place at DCI in 1975.

Below are a few photos of the 1975 Etobicoke Oakland Crusaders.

(They were extracted from a low-res video of the Oakland Crusaders competing in the 1975 DCI finals).

