Archer-Epler Musketeers

by Bill Ives

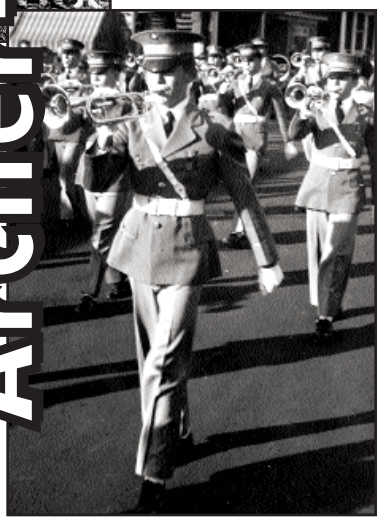
This legendary corps was first organized on April 18, 1932, and its association with VFW Post No. 979 of Upper Darby, PA, has continued ever since. Although other corps were formed before the arrival of Archer-Epler, few have survived into the new millennium.

Regrettably, only a few individuals can be acknowledged in this brief history. However, the closing words of the corps' song capture the undying spirit shared by all fortunate to have belonged to this remarkable unit: "Come what may, stand or fall, all for one and one for all."

Archer-Epler was one of many corps that started humbly during the depression. Representing veterans (Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion) or other organizations (Catholic Youth Organization), most corps of the 1930s were neighborhood groups harnessing youthful energies long before activities like Little League emerged. Often, junior corps provided a rare opportunity for a youngster to travel away from home.

From its first contest in 1933, Archer-Epler became one of the most successful junior corps of that era, in part because of starting a long tradition of innovation.





(Above) Archer-Epler junior corps, 1934; *(right)* 1941 *(photos from the collection of Bill Ives).*

First, the corps was fortunate to acquire the services of Walter A. Fuller as horn instructor, arranger and composer. A talented trumpet player and recent graduate of West Chester State Teachers College who had already performed under the direction of John Philip Sousa, Fuller's knowledge and superb teaching ability led to outstanding horn lines.

Among his innovations were introducing G-D piston bugles to the Philadelphia area and perhaps the first performance of classical music by a drum and bugle corps anywhere. In turn came greater use of harmonies and more pleasing repertoire, quickly gaining considerable notoriety for the junior corps.

In particular, the new horns generated so much controversy that judges once demanded the pistons be taped stationary to lessen the corps' advantage over its competitors. However, with standing ovations at each contest, Archer-Epler set an example that its competitors soon felt compelled to emulate.

Thus, with a unique sound and inspiring musical programs, Fuller started an "Archie" tradition carried on by others to the present, most notably by Lee Wolf and Ray Fallon.

In 1937, Bill Reamer joined the corps and soon became its drum instructor. Also a gifted performer and teacher, Reamer was primarily responsible for the introduction of rudimental drumming to the Philadelphia area. Counted among his successes were individuals who themselves became well-known instructors (Jack Corey, Don Mihok, Dick Filkens and Bill Kaufmann) and area corps (McCall Post of Philadelphia and the Audubon Bon Bons). His custom-built sticks and expertise in the restoration of ancient drums is still widely sought.

Kaufman, Eric Landis, John Flowers and Dennis Marta have continued the tradition of drumming first inspired by Reamer.

Another noteworthy tradition has been the loyalty and dedication to Archer-Epler by its members, illustrated by long service records: George Ritchie (deceased), the first director in 1932; Dan Goettel in 1932 (deceased); Jack Reilly in 1946 (deceased); Vince D'Agostino (1947-present); Thomas and Anna Ward in 1932 (both deceased); Mary (Lamb) Ziegenfuss in 1941; and Ed Byrne (the current commander of Post No. 979).

As an example, with an association with the corps that spanned 60 years until his passing in 1992, Goettel was a charter member of the junior corps and later played an instrumental role in organizing the senior corps; he also participated in the formation of Drum Corps Associates, the Great Alliance of Seniors and was posthumously elected to the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame.

By combining innovative approaches and outstanding instruction with a hardworking contingent of young people, the Archer-Epler junior corps went on to win numerous state championships as well as the 1938 and 1941 VFW National Championships.

But soon after, the expanding war effort jeopardized the survival of junior corps everywhere. Although the Archer-Epler color guard won the Philadelphia championship in 1944, that competition would be the last for the corps until 1946.

Fortunately, after World War II most of the "boys" of the junior corps were now returning veterans eager to form a senior unit. Having to start fresh, Archie's first rebirth was not easy. Rebuilding a corps of sufficient size and talent took considerable effort, especially given the strict VFW eligibility requirements faced by the corps and its principal competitors, the Reilly Raiders of Philadelphia, PA, and the Lt. Norman Prince Post of Malden, MA.

However, within six months there was an influx of members from Upper Darby Post No. 214 (and from some of the other junior corps against which it had competed earlier), so Archer-Epler could participate in the 1946 VFW National Championships, placing fourth.

Soon after, an intense rivalry developed between Archie and Reilly and the name "Musketeers" was adopted. Except for occasional victories by the Princemen, the Hawthorne Caballeros and the New York Skyliners, Archie and Reilly dominated the senior corps scene until the 1960s, typically battling one another for first place, with the higher placing corps gaining one week's rights to the "crying towel" that was formally exchanged at retreat.

Archer-Epler achieved its all-time peak in 1954. Except for that year's first contest in Hershey, PA, the Musketeers won all remaining competitions, including the National Dream and the first "March of Champions" in Baltimore, MD, later retiring that show's huge trophy with victories in 1955 and 1956.

With a score of 90.45, the corps secured the VFW National Championship, overwhelming Reilly by 1.7 points. Unlike larger corps today, the 1954 championship corps consisted of 51 marching members (33 horns, nine drums, eight color guard and one drum major). Interestingly and not realized at that time, Archie had managed to achieve a feat that might never again be duplicated: winning national championships as both a junior and senior corps.

The 1950s are another period that drum corps fans associate with Archie's preeminence in music, a tradition started by Fuller that continued with the addition of Wolf as music arranger and instructor. Having earlier introduced Broadway and show music to drum corps, Wolf began an association with Archer-Epler that was to change the very face of drum corps music.

Perhaps among his most daring innovations was the use of the "King and I" for the corps' entire show in 1957, a production that featured Vince Deegan as a Yul Brenner look-alike. Wolf's full-bodied approach to instrumentation and his introduction of jazz (*The Dipsy Doodle*) and Dixieland (*South Rampart Street Parade*) continue to influence modern day corps.

Many other innovations besides musical ones emerged from the Musketeers of the 1950s. William "Rip" Bernert and Bud Johnson devised new drill concepts, like the



Archer-Epler Musketeers, April 21, 2001 *(photo by Moe Knox from the collection of* Drum Corps World*).*

breathtaking pass-through and, along with several others, were active in teaching a host of junior and senior corps. Similarly, spurred by Bill Mullen and later by Bill Lawler, Archie produced a large number of judges and thus influenced the future direction of corps as well as high school bands.

The 1959 show was probably the most influential in changing the shape of the drum corps activity forever blending a varied and popular musical program highlighted by *The Dipsy Doodle*, a brand-new and non-traditional uniform (sometimes referred to as a "maternity" blouse), a beautifully designed drill and the thrilling leadership of Jimmy McConkey as drum major.

With 1960 came a new decade and new music, including *April in Paris* and *South Rampart Street Parade*. Unfortunately, the 1960s also foretold the eventual demise of the corps along with that of its arch-rival, the Reilly Raiders. There would still be plenty of highlights in store for the corps' fans: Wolf duplicated his earlier "King and I" successes with the "Camelot" productions of 1962 and 1963, and pioneering in drumming was continued by Kaufman and Filkens.

The 1963 and 1964 corps still exemplified Archie's remarkable spirit. Nonetheless, following the DCA Championships in 1967, the end of the corps seemed inevitable. After a brief merger with Reilly Raiders in 1968, both corps disbanded, thereby bringing to a seeming end two of the "greatest of the greats."

Not having Archie around was a melancholy experience for many Musketeers and fans alike. Fortunately, ongoing personal friendships led to occasional social gatherings. Finally, in February 1974, the decision to attempt a comeback was made. Building on a tradition of song that was led enthusiastically by "Big Jack" Werner, the corps' spirit was rekindled by the determined leadership of Mark Fulcomer, Harry Mathias, Jack Reilly, Harry Welsh, John Bartolomei and Dan Goettel.

By October 1975, the corps was able to begin practices with borrowed G-D bugles. Without realizing it at the time, Archer-Epler's second rebirth marked the start of what would later be referred to as the "alumni movement." More recently, many other corps have been similarly successful in returning with performing units following the formation of an alumni organization.



Archer-Epler Musketeers, 1962, at Jersey City, NJ *(photo from the collection of Bill Ives).*

However, this new movement did not start quickly, for it was not until 1987 that another alumni corps joined in the activity with Archie.

While uncharacteristic for such a legend, this rebuilding produced a renewed sense of pride and determination. No other corps had sustained a successful comeback, especially one starting with no equipment at all.

Before long, the instructional efforts of Wolf, Charlie Dreher and Kaufman had combined with the hard work of alumni and new Musketeers to produce a respectable parade corps and audacious proclamations that "Archie is back."

Most noteworthy in the corps' early comeback was its participation in the 1976 Bicentennial Parade in Philadelphia, during which the corps (and not "Memorex" as in a famous Ella Fitzgerald commercial of that time) shattered a plate-glass window in Lit Brothers Department Store.

Although there were persistent rumblings about Archie returning to the field of competition, the corps opted for a long, often painstaking route of first building a firm organizational foundation. As the corps continued to grow and improve, it was also able to acquire better equipment.

By 1978, the corps was prepared to take its first major step toward competing. Using a show concept developed jointly by Howard "Whitey" Roberts, Fallon and Kaufman, the corps prepared a special segment titled "Nostalgia," which was a musical, drill and uniform tribute to three then-defunct corps (Princemen, Yankee Rebels and Reilly).

This show was first performed in exhibition at the Dream Contest in Jersey City to the delight of the spectators. Perhaps even more astounding, all three of the corps that Archie saluted then have now returned as part of the alumni movement.

In June 1981, the corps returned as a competitive unit, starting with an exhibition at Hershey, PA. Instructed by Landis and Dale Adair on percussion, Fallon on music, Bruce Silfies and Dave Light on marching and maneuvering and Donna Borrelli working with the color guard, the 1981 corps was large (56 horns, 17 drums, 27 color guard and three drum majors) and had a repertoire that included *We Are the Musketeers*, *Coronation March*, *Scheherazade*, *God Bless the Child* and *Stars and Stripes Forever*.

Despite missing full DCA membership by a mere five-tenths of a point, the corps was buoyed by the appreciation of audiences to its rapid improvement. The corps achieved its goal of making the top 10 in DCA by placing ninth in 1982-1984.

Following the 1984 season, the corps decided not to continue as a competitive corps for the third time since 1932. However, rather than an end, what happened next marked the beginning of yet another chapter in the long history of Archie, one that was to resonate throughout the entire activity. While no longer competing, Archer-Epler continued to perform as a drum corps, preparing more foundation for what eventually became known as the alumni corps movement.

Then, in March 1985, Archer-Epler and the Princemen met at Hawthorne, NJ, for a reunion. Attended by 135 individuals, the idea of annual reunions soon became popular, leading to the formation and tremendous growth of the Great Alliance of Seniors, now an international organization.

As a charter member of GAS, Archie has hosted three reunions (1987, 1990 and 2000) and since 1985 is delighted to have witnessed the re-emergence of many other previously defunct corps, junior and senior, either as alumni corps or as alumni organizations represented at the GAS reunions.



Archer-Epler Musketeers, 1981, at DCA Prelims *(photo from the collection of* Drum Corps World*).*

While its indomitable spirit has enabled the corps to survive since 1932, Archie is perhaps proudest to have served as a many-faceted role model of innovation for others in the activity.



One of the best things my parents did for Bill Ives was to introduce him to the world of marching. From the age of eight, when his family joined the Chaplain Dale Fife and Drum Corps, he spent the next 14 years playing the fife, glockenspiel, snare drum and bass drum.

He also marched in the competitive color guard activity as a member of the Golden Falcons and Royal Crusaders in Philadelphia, and Blue Max of Gloucester, NJ. He also spent two years with the Broomall Bagpipers of Pennsylvania.

He has taught color guard and marching bands in Norristown, PA, and Gloucester, NJ.

In 1981, he joined the Archer-Epler Musketeers as a member of the color guard and competed with the organization for four years. From 1985 to the present, he has been playing the bass drum and serving the corps as its historian.