

The early history of drum corps in the Pacific Northwest

by PacificNorthwestDrumCorps.com

1886 through 1960

In this article we're discussing Pacific Northwest drum corps from 1886 through the early 1960s. Other parts of the country have their own history which may or may not be similar to ours.

Prologue

Most corps prior to the mid-1960s had less than 100 members. The further back in time you go, the smaller and simpler they get. In the 1920s, it was not uncommon for corps to have 25 members or less. Before 1900, five or six members was fairly typical.

Corps prior to 1960 did not have a color guard as we know them today. Maybe an American flag and one rifle (a real one, not the twirling kind). The selection of horns was limited. Valve-less, then single-valve bugles limited song selection. GAR corps had a fife instead of horns. Drum sections typically consisted of snares, base and cymbals. No tympani, xylophones, marimbas, no tri-quads or quints . . . you get the picture.

Simple. (Top right, 1908, Spokesman-Review, GAR drum corps)

The music of early corps was typically patriotic in nature. Marches, stuff people knew. Some corps learned music by rote. Nothing was written down. You only had to learn three or four simple songs, not 11-1/2 minutes of music for a field show.

(Right, 1911, Astoria Centennial Corps, OR; below, 1900, Oregon GAR corps)

1886 -- Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)

The predominant drum corps of this period were Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The GAR was a civil war veteran (union) fraternal organization. The organization itself was founded in 1866 and ran until its last veteran member passed away in 1956. Note, they were actually called a fife and drum Corps. (

NERD ALERT -- High school U.S. history refresher. The Civil

War ended when? In 1865. The GAR was created in 1866. The dates are eerily coincidental, yes?

Typical GAR

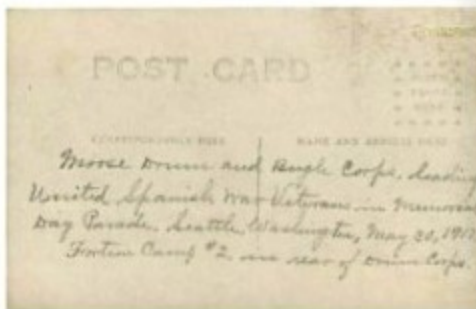
drum corps had five or six members. A snare or two, a bass drum, a cymbal, and a fife. They were mostly parade or concert corps, a local asset for festive occasions and a patriotic reminder of conflicts past. (Above, 1917, Moose DBC text)

G. A. R. Drum Corps, North Yakima



THE YAKIMA, Wash., June 20.—The Yakima G. A. R. Drum Corps, which has been organized, is a part of a larger organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, a national organization of Civil War veterans. The corps is composed of five members, and is the first of its kind in this section of the state. The corps is organized for the purpose of maintaining the traditions of the Grand Army of the Republic, and for the purpose of promoting the interests of the veterans of the Civil War. The corps is organized for the purpose of maintaining the traditions of the Grand Army of the Republic, and for the purpose of promoting the interests of the veterans of the Civil War.

June 1908 - GAR Fife and Drum Corps Yakima, Washington



FAMILIAR FIGURES GREET STATE FAIR CROWDS



September 1927 - GAR Fife and Drum Corps Salem, Oregon

HERE IS THE EUGENE GIRL SCOUT BUGLE CORPS



Above is the bugle corps of the Eugene Girl Scouts, said to be the only one of its kind in the United States. The group is sponsored by the Eugene American Legion Auxiliary as a part of the latter organization's community service work. Mrs. S. S. George from the auxiliary and Mrs. Anna Schmitt, Girl Scout's director, are looking after the corps. "Florence Powers is leader." The girls are as follows: Front row, left to right—Catherine Van Dusen, Margaret Wright, Cora Bowen, Alice Thomas, Florence Smith, Mary Skougstad. Middle row, left to right—Lorraine Ward, Jessie Smith, Marie Anderson. Back row, left to right—Catherine Gallagher, Anna Ross Caldwell, Pauline Springs, Jessa Holden, Elizabeth Schumann. The group meets twice a week, for practice.

competed from 1977 to 1994. (Right, 1928, Tacoma, WA, Elks Junior D&BC, winner of Washington state 1928 and 1928 Elks Conventions)

There were a multitude of Scout corps. Our count is over 30 documented examples in Washington and Oregon between 1910 and 1960. Anywhere you have a Scout troop, you can have a drum corps. We are sure there were probably just as many undocumented Scout corps as documented.

The first known documentation by this site of a PNW GAR corps was in 1889, the same year that Washington became a state. We have no idea how many GAR corps there were in the PNW, but certainly significantly less than any state that fought in the union. We had a few GAR corps still existing until the late 1920s or early 1930s. They were pretty old guys by then.

Not to deep dive into drum corps supporting organizations, but it should be understood that groups like the GAR and the Spanish War Veterans only contained veterans from those specific conflicts. When those veterans passed away, the organization did not replenish its ranks, so when the last man died, so did the organization. With the creation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1899 and the American Legion in 1919, any war vet from any war could join either organization, thereby keeping the ranks of those organizations replenished and alive to this day, over 100-years later.

1910 -- the Boy Scouts of America

The Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910 and this is when our first Boy Scout drum corps appears on record. They were the Spokane, WA, Scouts. The group ran from 1910 through 1929. Then in 1934, the Spokane Scouts All-City Drum & Bugle Corps was formed, allowing Scouts from all over the city to join, regardless of their troop affiliation.

(Top left, 1917, Seattle Moose D&BC leading Spanish American War parade)

The first Boy Scout Drum & Bugle Corps that we could find in Oregon was the Astoria Scouts, formed in 1911 and ran until 1922. Astoria is a small town on the very northwest corner of Oregon that gave birth to seven or eight drum corps -- that we know of -- between 1911 and 1966. (Middle left, 1927

GAR corps, Salem, OR, Capital Journal)

The first all-girl junior corps in the Pacific NW was the Eugene, OR, Girl Scouts (left, 1928, Eugene OR, junior all-girl corps, first in the Pacific Northwest). They existed between 1928 and 1932. See them on the all-girl drum corps page on our site.

The last Boy Scout Drum & Bugle Corps formed in the PNW was the Longview-Kelso, WA, Scouts. The year was 1953. This corps went through several iterations through the years, finally ending up as the Longview Marauders that



Tacoma Elks Lodge #174's Drum & Bugle Corps, won numerous honors.

The majority of these Scout corps had two primary sponsors, the Boy Scouts of America and the American Legion. These sponsors usually split the corps funding between them. Then, as now, funding is the great bottleneck of drum corps. (Right, 1930, Eugene, OR, Girl Scout D&B Corps)

Official American Legion policy at the time was to sponsor junior drum and bugle corps.

We consider 1910 to be the birth of junior drum corps in the PNW. Their population explosion was directly related to the creation of the Boy Scouts of America. (Middle right, 1932 Capital Post drum major)

1919 -- American Legion and VFW

The American Legion was founded in 1919 as a fraternal organization for World War I veterans, and resulted in a proliferation of American Legion senior drum and bugle corps. (Right, 1933, Seattle Star, Scouts drum corps policy)

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) was founded in 1899 for similar reasons, but in our neck of the woods, had a much smaller impact on the activity. (Bottom left, 1930 Girl Scout D&B)

In Washington and Oregon, American Legion senior drum corps outnumbered VFW senior corps by 55 to 16.

These two organizations added quite a bit to the evolution of drum corps by creating unified rules and judging, within their respective organizations, across the U.S., by promoting drum corps and elevating the quality of shows and by dumping a ton of money into the activity . . . resources that no other countrywide organization had. (Bottom right, 193 All-American Drum Corps medal)

The first Washington State American Legion Convention was in 1919. The first documented drum corps competition at a convention was August 20, 1926 in Longview, WA. The last convention show we could find was in 1978. In Oregon, the first Legion convention contest was on June 12, 1924, the last was in 1974. That's a half a century of drum corps. Amazing!

All American Legion and VFW senior corps started disappearing in the late 1950s and were completely gone by 1970. The last PNW show with a senior division in competition was the August 30, 1970 American Legion Nationals held in Portland, OR. The last active PNW senior drum corps in that competition? The Bremerton, WA Grenadiers! Originally called the 4th District VFW corps when they were established in 1953, they were Washington State VFW senior champions in 1959 and 1960. (Above, 1936, Spokane Chronicle, auxiliary drum and bugle corps)

American Legion and VFW posts also spawned junior corps. Some of those junior corps split off and became



ISNT THIS A SNAPPY GROUP? Photo by Eugene, OR, 1930, Eugene, OR, Girl Scout D&B Corps

Boy Scout and Bugle Corps to Get Money

With the proceeds going to the Seattle Boy Scouts Drum and Bugle Corps, Maple Leaf post, No. 21, American Legion, is sponsoring a dance Saturday night, July 1, at the Civic Auditorium annex, Third avenue N at Mercer street. Music for the dance, which is in commemoration of Dominion day, will be by the West Seattle Post orchestra.

The Maple Leaf post is sponsoring the Boy Scout Drum and Bugle Corps as an activity, in line with a national policy instigated by American Legion posts. Thomas Hibben, a member of the Maple Leaf post and connected with Boy Scout work for 20 years, is the director and leader of the Scout Drum and Bugle corps.



American Legion Auxiliary Drum and Bugle Corps Race Snappy, New Uniform



Photo by Eugene, OR, 1930, Eugene, OR, Girl Scout D&B Corps



Photo by Eugene, OR, 1930, Eugene, OR, Girl Scout D&B Corps

independent units with new sponsorship, some did not.

Other national organizations active in the PNW

There were other national organizations active in the PNW that sponsored their own drum corps such as Spanish War Veterans, Fraternal Order of Eagles (FOE or Eagles), Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (BPOE - Elks), Loyal Order of Moose (Moose), DeMolay (named after the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar), Shrine (Masonic Order) and the Knights of Pythias. (Left, Pasco, WA, Post #34, junior corps started as a Boy Scout troop, eventually becoming the Columbians)

Some of these organizations had their own shows and gatherings, some like the Eagles and Elks, had statewide and national conventions with drum corps competitions. They also mixed it up with other local corps in parades and competitions.

These corps typically had the organization's name in their title. E.g., Seattle Moose or Coos Bay Eagles. People knew what city and which organization they represented. If there were multiple corps of the same organization within the city, then typically they would add their "Lodge," "Aerie" or "Post" number to their name.

Most of these organization's corps existed from the 1910s through the mid-1950s in the PNW. (Left two photos, 1949, Walla Walla, WA, all-girl corps, formally the YWCA corps in 1934)

Adjudicating Bodies

The All-American Drum and Bugle Corps and Band Association was formed in 1932 and was active in the PNW as well as across the country. They helped set judging standards, promoted judging clinics and provided judges for shows. The AADC was active in the PNW through the mid-1970s.

Locally, we had our own drum corps associations, two of which were the Washington State Drum & Bugle Corps Association (1920 through 1966) and the Northwest Drum Corps Association (NWDC), 1965 through 1983. Both of these entities had member drum corps and sponsored shows. They were also our local rule making / adjudicating bodies. (Above left, 1950, Auburn, WA, Post #78; Washington state American Legion champions, 1941, 1942, 1947, 1949, 1950, 1952, 1954 and 1958) bottom left, 1950 Shrine D&B, Seattle, WA.

Sexism?

Since the Civil War, drum corps have been a male-dominated, militaristic activity. When the American Legion and VFW were formed early in the 20th Century, the wives of those

belonging to the AL and VFW, while not allowed to march with their husbands, were allowed to form auxiliary drum corps and drill teams at those posts. Sexist by today's standards, it was the norm at the time.

PNW drum corps continued to be mostly segregated in this manner until the early-mid 1960s. For example, the Seattle Thunderbirds went co-ed in 1959, the Shamrocks in 1961, the Flamingos in 1962 and the Columbians in 1966. All of these corps, and more, started life as all-boy corps. (Right, 1950 Walla Walla, WA, Eagles D&B)



Photo by Eugene, OR, 1930, Eugene, OR, Girl Scout D&B Corps



1913 - This group was one of the original members of the first band of the American Legion in Seattle, WA. The group was organized in 1913 and was the first to be recognized by the American Legion. The group was the first to be recognized by the American Legion. The group was the first to be recognized by the American Legion.



Meanwhile, up north in Western Canada, the segregation of some male / female drum corps continued into the 1970s. While almost all early local drum corps were all-male at inception, there were all-girl drum corps in the Pacific Northwest as far back as 1928.

Epilogue

Throughout the first six or seven decades of the 20th Century, there has been robust drum and bugle corps activity in the Pacific Northwest. We have been fortunate. From an estimated population of two hundred individual drum corps from 1900 to 2022, the Pacific Northwest now has just two remaining active drum corps, the Columbians and Seattle Cascades (below).



The GAR drum corps of 1900 would not recognize the drum corps of today. The activity has definitely evolved through the years. Question is has it been for the better?

Long live drum corps! --
PacificNorthwestDrumCorps.com.



(Below: Tri Cities, WA, Columbiana, 2019, Donny Helvey; Seattle, WA, Cascades, 2019, Rebecca Lyon)



(This page, top to bottom: 1953, Langview-Kelso, WA, Boy Scouts junior corps; 1963 VFW Nationals medal; 1970, Port Angeles News, WA, Bremerton, WA, Grenadiers, the last competing senior in the Pacific Northwest, American Legion Nationals, Portland, OR; VFW, American Legion and All-American Judges Association patches; 1970, American Legion Nationals medal; All-American medal)

FIRST NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN LEGION Minneapolis, Minnesota November 10, 11, 12, 1919

Resolution No. 87: Support of Boy Scouts of America
Origin: Convention Committee on Resolutions
Submitted by: Convention Committee on Resolution

RESOLVED, By The American Legion in National Convention assembled in Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 10, 11, 12, 1919, That The American Legion heartily commends the principles and achievements of the Boy Scouts and recommends that each post assist the Scout troops in its community in whatever manner practicable.

THIRD NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN LEGION Kansas City, Missouri October 31, November 1, 2, 1921

Resolution No. 200: Post Commanders Cooperate in the Boy Scout Movement
Origin: Convention Committee on Organization
Submitted by: Convention Committee on Organization

RESOLVED, By The American Legion in National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, October 31, November 1, 2, 1921, That post commanders cooperate in the Boy Scout movement and encourage members of the Legion to render such service as they may be able, especially as organizers and leaders of Scout troops.

FIFTH NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN LEGION San Francisco, California October 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 1923

Resolution No. 390: Boy Scouts
Origin: Maryland
Submitted by: Convention Committee on Americanism

WHEREAS, The American Legion, through its National Americanism Commission, has fostered the Boy Scout movement throughout our land; and
WHEREAS, We believe this to be one of the best movements for the future development of America; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, By The American Legion in National Convention assembled in San Francisco, October 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 1923, That The American Legion not only heartily endorses the Boy Scout movement, but urges all of its posts to adopt a Scout troop; and, be it finally

RESOLVED, That we cooperate in every way possible with the Boy Scouts of America in perpetuating and furthering their work.