

Stony Creek Drum Corps

Founded 100 years ago by six local men

By **BILL HERN**
Special to the Review

Fifes and drums will be marking the historical significance of the Stony Creek Drum Corps this year, but there was little thought of heritage when six men met in a village blacksmith shop on School Street to organize a century ago.

The topic of the day was of the arrangements being made in New Haven to dedicate, in 1888, the impressive Soldiers and Sailors monument at East Rock.

The early records of the corps were destroyed when Art Webb's frame house was destroyed by fire a score or more years back but three of the founders were Jack (Button) Russell, Franklyn Bradley and Jack Welch. Idly, they discussed forming a musical unit to participate in the parade and celebration. As they recalled the veterans of the Civil War who had served as Union drummer boys, they became imbued with getting on with it. Ned Howd was the first to enlist his services. In short order the unit expanded to 19 with the

enrollment of Webb, Name James, Jack Edwards, Robert Deon, Enos Clark, Ed Bradley, Clinton Russell, Almond Dower, James Fitzgerald, Charles Dibble, Frank Redfield, Gene Graves, Louis Willard, Anthony Normal and James Sawyer.

All could not claim a Civil War background. Hence they were schooled in varied techniques and the need for unity was apparent. Sawyer, a Clinton resident, became the designated drum instructor.

The fledglings spurned voting for a president but did name Russell the secretary and Normal treasurer. Stiff dues of a dollar a week were assessed, for the immediate needs for uniforms was apparent. They weren't bought with the early dues however. On one dark night the treasurer bolted the village taking with him the corps' total finances.

Enthusiasm ebbed until Russell flagged their resolution with his rallying cry: "I don't give a button for anything else, we must be faithful to the corps!" rededicated, they practiced diligently.

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Photo courtesy of the Stony Creek Drum Corps



MEMBERS OF THE STONY CREEK DRUM CORPS on a ferry trip to Long Island around 1900. Members included Bob Northam, eating the sandwich on top of the boat house, Jack Russell, center, and Ed Bradley, hand in pocket.

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mostly in an oyster house although in the winter Russell, who was the janitor, would let them into the schoolhouse where the heat from the banked fires was most welcome.

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pay his own way by trolley to practice. At 17, he became a full-fledged member.

Clare grew up in the tradition of the corps. Schooled by his father, brother, uncles and cousins, he was playing rhythms at age six, long before he could tote the deep barrel drums. He practiced on a "trap" drum Kid fashion he developed a "brush" technique familiar

to the devotees of dance music. Consequently, his execution was flawed in later years when he sought recognition among the elite members of the Connecticut Fifers and Drummers Association which the Creek joined in 1929.

Despite the handicap, Clare was a master at setting the Ancient's beat (110 steps to the minute). More noteworthy was

his willingness to experiment with the different rudiments. In drum corps' circles, today he is remembered for developing the "single long roll" which was to widely copied.

Editors note: this is the first, in an occasional series of articles, focusing on the Stony Creek Drum Corps which is currently observing its century year.

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Not unlike the tides lapping on the shore of Long Island Sound, membership ebbed and flooded depending on available work. Stony Creek did not live on its crustacean catches alone for the Norcross Quarry was booming, its fame enhanced after supplying its beautiful granite for the base of the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor.

Many stonemasons and stonecutters of foreign upbringing were imported to fulfill the manpower needs of the Quarry and most brought with them a musical culture. It was natural for their youngsters to gravitate to fifes and drums. They became proficient but lacked confidence for the library was scant and techniques were basic.

During World War I, Stony Creeks playing ranks were nearly depleted. Practices became spasmodic and knowledgeable talent from Guilford and Branford was enlisted to flesh out the rows.

Then, at the time when cornet bands tried to steal the thunder from the corps, James Francis Kelly and Clarence (Clare) Bradley brought to torch ambition's cold coals.

William (Budge) O'Neill, a mainstay with Branford's TAB Corps, was considered the area's best drummer at "bringing down a long roll". At the time that he was squiring Jim's sister, Mary, he undertook to teach Jim to drum who, one day, would become the "noblest Creeker corpsman" of them all.

So avid did Jim become that he used to

pay his own way by trolley to practice. At 17, he became a full-fledged member.

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Photo courtesy of the Stony Creek Drum Corps.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, the Stony Creek Drum Corps was founded. In this 1880's photo, corps members rehearse in a shop on the Russell Property. Man with the fife and the derby hat is unidentified, but is thought to be a relative of Clair and Milton Bradley, early corps members. Edward Bradley, standing with the snare drum, was the founder and owner of The Oasis Restaurant. Jack Russell and a Mr. Sawyer are seated with their snare drums.

Stony Creek Drum Corps

Dressing up and playing hard through Depression

By BILL AHEARN
Special to the Review

Last week the Stony Creek Drum Corps tests its mettle.

Although the cadence of their drums and the high pitch of their fifes were considered the main sources of Ancient Corps' competition, units of the Depression days vied for such additional trophies as numbers in ranks, competitors from the furthest points, appearance passing the reviewing stand, individual excellence in playing, plus baton twirling.

It was unusual for ancient corps to go after the twirling prize but Stony Creek's Elmer Reff, a crack marching drum major, was aware of the availability of the medal and after one winter of practice left the novice ranks to become a gold medal winner. Buoyed by Reff's success, the "Creekers" became even more imaginative.

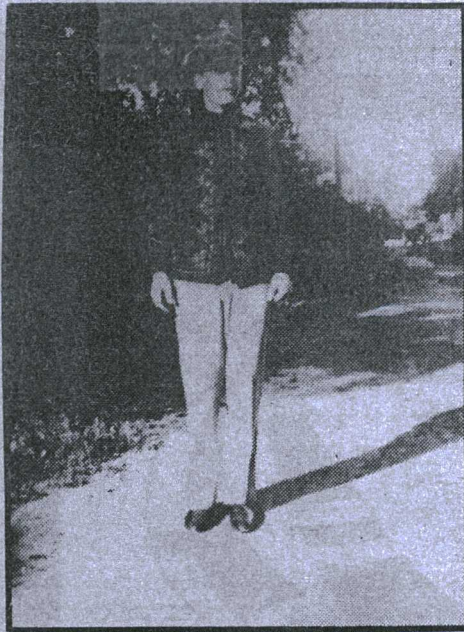
Lancraft, in the 1930's, made much of an Indian in full regalia in its color guard. Relying on native pride, the Corps contacted Al Burne, Stony Creek born and bred, who was associated with the Paramount Movie Studio in Chicago. He uncovered a forgotten costume suit for an Uncle Sam complete with red and white striped trousers, a blue vest with white stars thereon, and a high hat with stripes and a band in red, white and blue. The motif was adopted from the early cartoonists conception of a lanky Yankee in contrast to a roly-poly English depiction of a Johnny Bull.

In a village search for a 6-foot, 3-inch body to fit the suit, the corpsmen uncovered John Seastrand, brother of the first major Charlie Seastrand. A complete Uncle Sam, to the gray, clipped chin

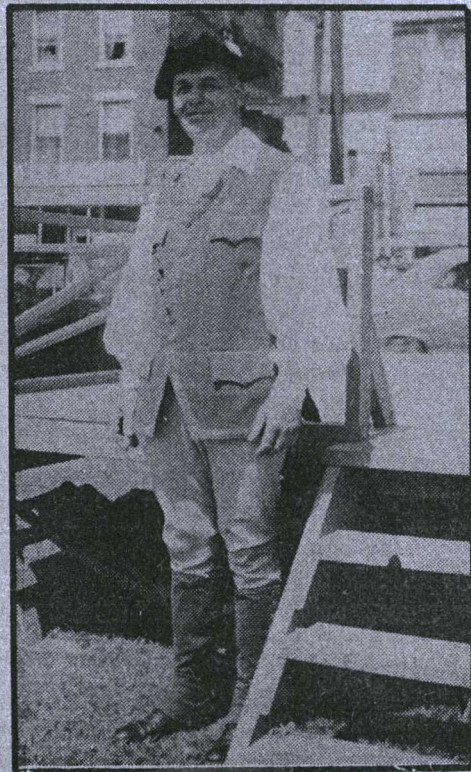
whiskers, John gave Stony Creek a needed identity as did Tom Bernard, Jim Laird and Kenneth Wall, prior to the current Ron Chernosky, no less aristocratic.

When faced with the possibility that they might return empty-handed from a New York State convention, the determined shoretowners decided to bolster their ranks with costumed non-performers. They put two Pilgrims, carrying bell-shaped rifles into the color guard to guard the flag-bearer. It was a gimmick that portrayed the imagination of the once-heralded Stony Creek Parish Players who had their own theater in the village. (Some years later, in the world premiere of "Ceiling Zero" first played on Stony Creek's stage, Henry Pullman was borrowed from the Corps for the off-stage sound effects, snapping off single rolls on his drum to emulate machine gun fire.)

The gimmick won best appearance and most men in the line of march for the Branford unit, who also had enlisted junior corps members to fill out the senior ranks. (The bell shaped gun barrels were turned out by Kelly in his garage workshop. Jim, in subsequent years, was to manufacture barrel drums for the juniors first out of veneer-thin boxes which shipped fish to the Oasis Restaurant, owned and managed by Ed Bradley, who had dropped out of the corps' playing ranks and was succeeded as president by Kelly. They were good drums, according to the manufacturer, but the corps never could get rid of the fish smell. Subsequent shells were steamed into shape out of boxes in which large radios were shipped.)



BEFORE AND AFTER the big uniform switch. Louis Lavassa wearing the Stony Creek Drum Corps "Hessian" uniform and the colonial uniform worn today.



At the same convention, a year later in Peekskill, NY, the Creek tied with Lanecraft for best playing out-of-state corps after a four mile-plus march on a sun-strafed day with temperatures of 104 degrees. Following competition, base drummer Carlos Balestracci was prostrated by the heat and was removed to a hospital.

In a playoff that night, Stony Creek was about to forfeit when Balestracci reappeared. Resolutely, he marched stiffly onto the floor and set a perfect 110-beat for both "stand" numbers. He filed off the floor, unbuckled his drum, and collapsed again. Carlos heard the news of Stony Creek's playoff victory in a hospital bed.

In Poughkeepsie, NY, another year, street-side onlookers derided Stony Creek's "Hessian" uniforms. "What time does the circus begin?" one leather-lunged viewer shouted. Quickly, the "Apple Knocker" (Kenneth York), whose voice resembled a Downeast farmer's twang, retorted, "When you monkeys get back in your cages. That's when the circus begins."

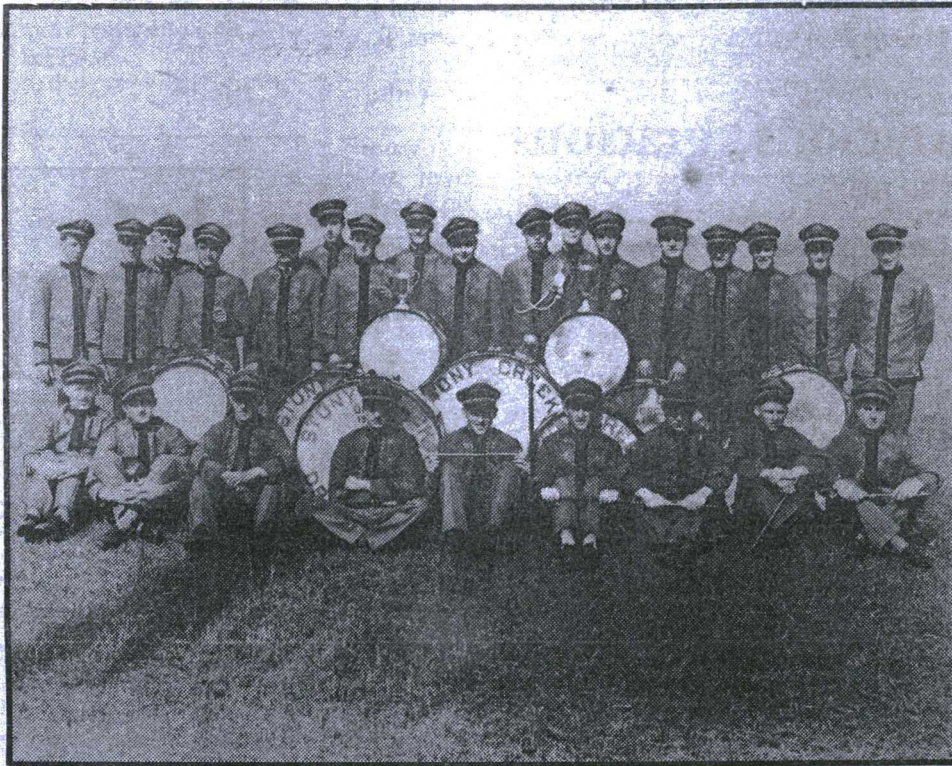
Free of tension thereafter, the Branfordites posted another first place trophy. The following practice night, that reference to the circus rankled and it was voted to purchase Colonial uniforms not unlike Talesville, Mattatuck and Lanecraft.

Hometown pride peaked in 1935 when Stony Creek displayed their new "Continental Army" uniforms, buff breeches and weskit, black gaiters, blue swallow-tailed coats, faced with red and buff trim. Black tricornered hats completed the regalia. A unique color guard line: Sabre-bearers depicted early American strawhatted sailors. A Civil War Artilleryman bore the traditional American flag. Uncle Sam, in solitary grandeur, lent the supreme touch.

Mindful now that the Corpsmen now had historical significance, the townsfolk glowed with each trophy addition. Joy knew no bounds when the Creekers captured the Connecticut State championship six years in succession. As the job picture changed, Lavassa, Kelly, Addison and Milton Bradley returned to instructing new recruits to fill diminishing ranks.

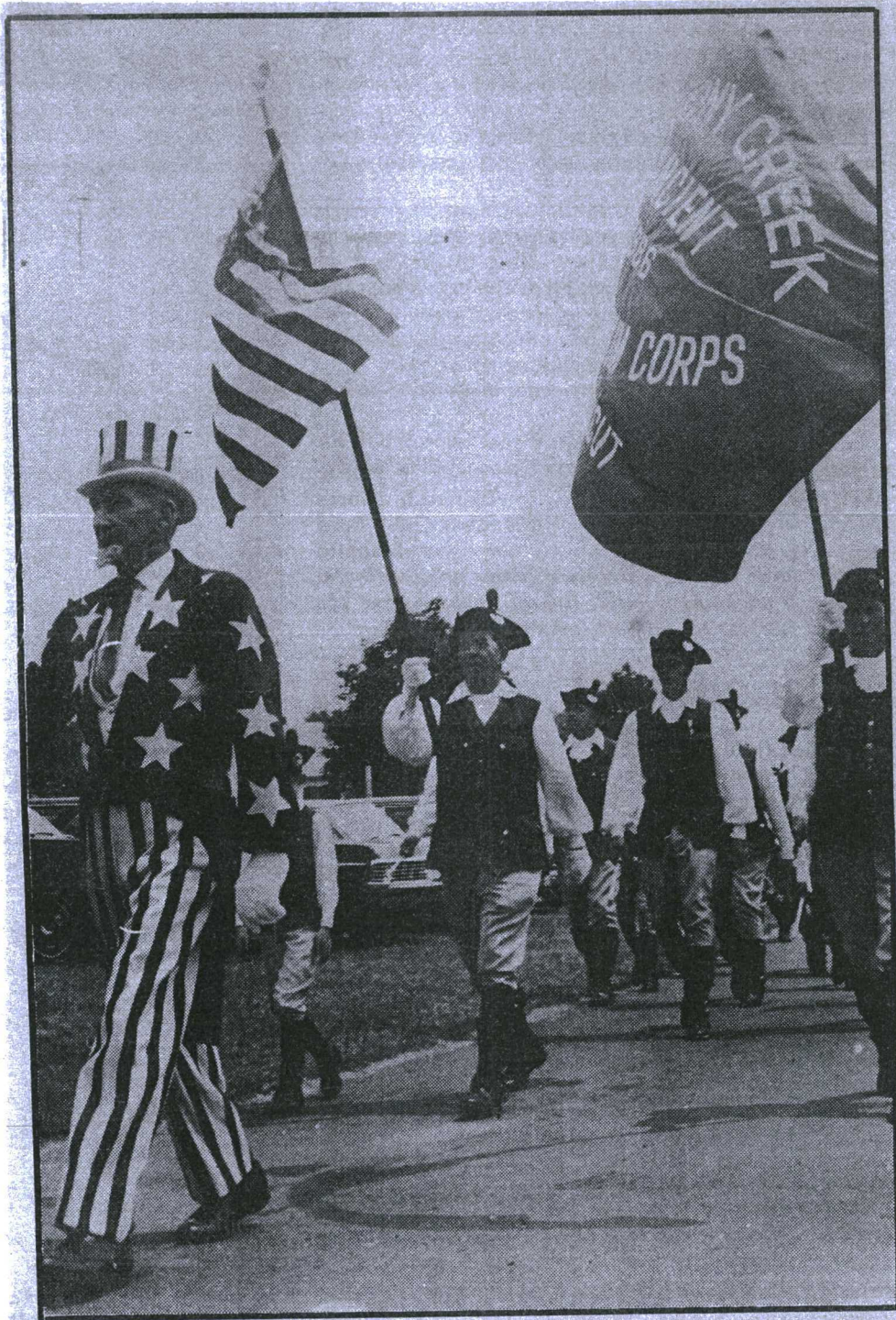
In that same span, the corps purchased Seaside Hall and, with their own labor reconstructed it for their own purposes. Lavassa, who for years had tried to convert the corps to using wooden fifes, succeeded. The wooden fife was mellower but required more care lest the wood split. Traditionalists wanted to keep the metal

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THE "HESSIAN" UNIFORMS worn by the Stony Creek Drum Corps in the early part of this century drew some derisive comments from onlookers and were later abandoned in 1935 in favor of the corps present colonial attire. Here is the corps assembled on Memorial Day, 1931. Sitting are, from left: Addison Bradley, Henry Pullman, Raymond Webb, Carlo Bolo, Kenneth York, James Kelly, Tony Cinquanta, Elmer Reff and Joe Infantino. Standing are, from left: Milton Bradley, Alex Cinquanta, Edward Bradley, Mike Infantino, John Russell, David Baldwin, Carrol Dougherty, Herbert Stanard, Fred Howe, Charles Seastrand, Louis Lavassa, Rolland Paine, Melvin Webb, Albert Calhoun, Clare Bradley, Keith Milne and Bill Abern.

Photos courtesy of the Stony Creek Drum Corps



JAZZING UP THE PRESENTATION: the Stony Creek Drum Corps added several visual elements to their parade formations. Uncle Sam, portrayed by Jim Laird in this 1960s photo, is perhaps the corps best known flourish.

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instruments fearing the corps would lose some of its identity. The public scarcely noticed for the drummers still beat out its heavy cadence, although now with clean, unified rhythm.

Lavassa and Addison Bradley were to become instructors for the newly formed North Branford Ancient Corps who had a meteoric rise among the state's junior corps prior to World War II. Bradley was replaced by the noted J. Burns Moore, of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, the Lancraft Corps and the Governor's Foot Guard Band, Second Company. He created a controversy when he introduced shaded beats into the ranks. Old-time

stylists thought that it was heresy, citing the history of drumming and its rudiments which identified settlers of Church Meetings, and imminent attacks.

North Branford's latest style was acclaimed for a period and the players from under Totoket Mountain ruled the roost for a period then disbanded. Many joined up with Stony Creek once the war was over.

It was a dismayed Lavassa who returned from service. The Corps' ranks were depleted.

(Editor's note: this article in part of an occasional series commemorating the Stony Creek Drum Corps centenary observances.)

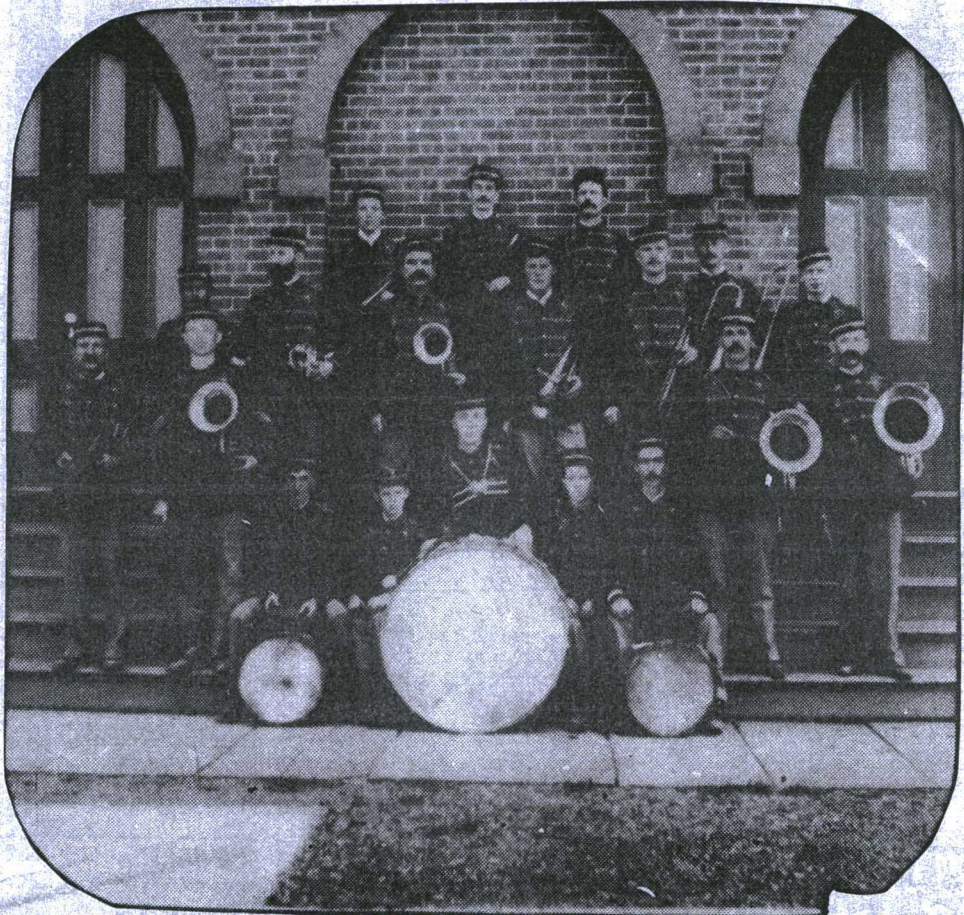


Photo courtesy of the Stony Creek Drum Corps

EARLIEST UNIFORMS: when founded in 1886, the Stony Creek Drum Corps wore black uniforms with braid similar to those worn by the Stony Creek Band, pictured here in the early 1880s.

Stony Creek Drum Corps

The corps regroups as junior, distaff groups emerge

By BILL AHERN
Special to the Review

(Last week the Stony Creek Drum Corps polishes its satorial presentation during the 1930's.)

Discussing the shambles that World War II had made of his cherished Stony Creek Drum Corps, President Louis Lavassa recalls, "At first I was heartsick and then I became angry. Then my ire fired the determination that we would rebuild and rekindle the flame of our heritage."

"Many of our pre-war corpsmen had moved from the area dictated by the fortunes of fate, but enough remained to respond to our plea to get into line. They were to become the nuclei of our reconstruction, the most concentrated effort in our history."

"Of the handful who returned from our crack junior corps, we were able to count on their experience. Eager newcomers, fleshed out our ranks but it took time, drummers about a year and fifers about eight months, to appear in the line of march. Depending on aptitude and practice-time, three to four years were needed to attain medal quality."

Thus did the Kelly-Lavassa "School of Music, Ancient Style" resume again. Teen-aged aspirants proved as enthusiastic as those of yore. The instructors responded in kind. The senior ranks soon returned to competition and in subsequent years twice ruled the state's senior corps until 1961 when Stony Creek became a founding member of "The Company of Connecticut Fifers and Drummers," dedicated to preserving the art of Ancient Fifeing and Drumming and creating good fellowship between the member corps.



JUNIOR CORPS: *The Stony Creek Junior Ancient Fife and Drum Corps in May 1955. First row, from left: Dennis McGowan, John Miller, Carl Fritz, Bob Galdenzi, George Noble, Jack Barclay. Second row, from left: Gordon Hunt, Ray Walston, Alex Cinquanta, Clyde Augur, Anthony Cinquanta, Lee*

Mavroleon. Third row, from left: James Kelly, Drill Master James Laird, Bob McCutcheon, Arnold Noble, Dix Galdenzi, Bob McLean, George Atkinson, James Pavaglioni, Fife Instructor Lou Lavassa. Dress Major Dave Cinquanta stands at center.

Photo courtesy of the Stony Creek Drum Corps

The juniors drew from Branford and Guilford. Some quickly gained proficiency, chaps like young Bob Fisher followed his father, James, who first played with the Short Beach modern corps, organized and taught by Augustus Pfeiff in the late 1920's. Jim's father, Tom, fided with the Branford TABs. Some like Tom McCabe, Bill Hitchcock and Bill Ahern were naturals, and glowed with the realization that they were emulating history.

Field Days have become fewer because of the costs of outfitting and maintaining. Techniques handed down from father to son disappeared as instructors faded. Eventually a handful of teachers zealously chasing championships diluted the identifying beats of each town until sameness created monotony, according to Lavassa, who was a member of the selected judges of fifeing.

To preserve the identities of historic corps, The Company of Connecticut Fifers and Drummers was created.

Competition was banished but two musters a year were fostered for exhibitions of style and skills. Appearances at Deep River are freely sought. At Westbrook, only the finest of 25 Ancients are invited to display their skills after parading.

Capable of keeping the fires of enthusiasm burning among the younger element, Stony Creek's projection of ancient "rhythm and rolls" focus on envied vitality. The three McGowan brothers, Arnold Noble, Richard Galdenzi, George Atkinson, James Paviglioniti, Dave Cinquanta, John Miller, Carl Fritz, Bob Galdenzi, Jack Barclay, Ray Walston, Alex Cinquanta, Clyde Auger, Anthony Cinquanta, Lee Mavrolean, the father-sons trio of Fergus, John and Joe Mooney, George Ehlert, among scores of others, have been and are skilled contributors to the preservation of Stony Creek's storied cadence.

When James Kelly gave up playing the drums and turned to fifeing, Stony Creek found a superb teacher in the late Earl Sturtz, a crack performer with Yalesville. Prior to his death, Sturtz turned over the collection of priceless drum corps mementoes to the Chapter's museum headquarters, once the Polish Falcons' Hall in Ivoryton. Kelly, although addicted to tourism, remains active, his image enhanced by an ability to build fifes as well as drums.

Only once has the age of members

disrupted the ranks. A fun-loving segment defected to play with the Ancient Mariners of Guilford who often present tableaux on the street while parading with their color guard fronting a colorfully arrayed main body in historically correct colonial uniforms, complete even to the straw hats.

So incensed was Kelly, that he refused to speak to any of his former proteges for a year. The breach was healed later when Dave Hooghkirk, an ardent worker and most admired drum sergeant, led many strays back into the fold.

Proud as is Stony Creek of its own editions, its membership elates over the Totoket Ancients, a girls' corps founded in Branford, about 20 years ago. They, too, were taught by their "brothers", so to speak. Hooghkirk on the drums and Lavassa on the fife. "I never thought that they'd stick to it," the fife master opines with a reflective grin. They proved to be as assiduous as the boys with whom they grew up and tolerated no nonsense in the ranks. The turnover is frequent as they grow older though."

Twice in recent history, Stony Creek enlisted girls as majorettes, a practice not in keeping with Colonial times. Dawn Morley, a baton twirler in college, wanted to keep nimble during a summer spent in Madison. Her skills mostly reflected those of the late Elmer Reff, the prize winning twirler who followed Charles Seastrand as the initial major, after the Corps' resurgence in 1928.

From the Bradford Manor's drum and bugle corps Joan Horton now Mrs. Charles Spiegel of Pine Orchard Road, lent her skills with the more familiar parade baton.

Even the Corps' Hall, purchased from the Odd Fellows Lodge in 1935, has a significance to Stony Creek's villagers. Originally, it was built by the late philanthropist Willoughby Wallace's family in 1880 in one weekend with volunteer labor not unlike the Quakers employ among the Amish population. The lavish Willoughby Wallace Library in the village is rich in Stony Creek's lore. Money for the library was bequeathed by the late benefactor.

In due time, the Parish Players were to present their first plays there and even today square dances give the second voting district a "joie de vie" not unlike the corps itself.

Even summer residents, many of whom reside on the Thimble Islands offshore,

share in the Creek's pride. The corps has been called upon to play at wedding receptions, family reunions, picnics, etc. by the islanders. Each Fourth of July, the coptsmen climb aboard Matt Infantino's boat and go from island to island playing requests to the delight of the summer inhabitants and their guests.

Matt's launch is followed by a smaller launch peopled by various of the Creek's comlier set who unabashedly extend baskets attached to long poles in which they accept tithes.

Stony Creek's corps has been a fixture at Yale's Alumni Reunion each June for years. The Reunion Parade is a memory but traditionalists count on the corps to stir both spirits and memories. Old Home Week celebrations, like those sponsored

by the Town of East Hampton annually, welcome Stony Creek as a symbol of its heritage. The corps has appeared in presidential inaugural parades and has played in historic Virginia on occasion. Its drums and pipes have sounded in California, Chicago and Texas. Twice, members have played in Dublin, Ireland, on St. Patrick's Day and Branford's Fire Department marching units have stepped off to Stony Creek's beat annually for scores of years.

Lavassa looks upon the corps as a symbol of the village's pride in its own clan. Kelly, an octogenarian whose age has been lightly touched by the years, ruminates, "Imagine 100 years old." Then he allows a puckish grin to light his face. "Golly, it's been fun," he concludes.