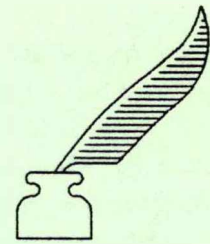


RAYFLECTION



Stray thoughts from the entertainment capital of the world

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Semper Libris

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Ye Olde Summertime

That was one hot summer. July 1966 in central Wisconsin was very hot and humid thanks to the mighty Mississippi that bordered my hometown of LaCrosse. During those wilting months I instructed the color guard of a drum and bugle corp called The Blackhawks. It consisted of about two dozen horns, half that many in the color guard and maybe six drummers. If everyone showed up, that is.

That summer we were scheduled to be in parades around the midwest. I think that kids twelve to sixteen thrive in the hot weather. As I think back, it didn't, really, seem that hot. The bus was not air conditioned, but we didn't seem to notice. We were having fun. Those were the days. <sigh>

The parade was in Horicon Marsh, Wisconsin. (More humidity.) The Corn Festival or whatever, was being held and the fest committee had invited us because some members had seen us in other parades and were impressed. It was a competition parade. Which meant that we were going to be judged against some of the best parade corps in the state. This was scary but fun. We did things back then just because it was fun. The fest paid for our transportation cost (drivers pay and fifty dollars for gas) plus a couple hundred in honorarium, more if we won. We planned on winning. We were the Blackhawks.

We left early Saturday morning from the parking lot of the American Legion hall. Early was

four-thirty in the morning. People started to stumble in around four. The Legion was nice enough to open the kitchen so the adults could get to the coffee pot. We stood under the parking lot lights and drank coffee to get our hearts started. The kids just hung around being kids. All of the equipment had been stored in the corps bus the night before when we were wide awake and knew what we were doing. This was fun, remember.

Four-fifteen came, and the kids and chaperons boarded the big blue bus. The staff made one more review of the checklist to make sure everything was ready for the trip. When we boarded, the kids were already singing "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall." I turned to the corp director and said over my coffee cup, "This is fun, remember."

At four-thirty the bus coughed, hissed and rolled out of the parking lot. I took my normal place, facing the rear of the bus perched on the cooler and my sleeping bag, and looked out the back window. The equipment truck and two station wagons, belonging to some diehard parents, followed us into the dark.

The hours flowed by accompanied by all the camp songs that everyone had ever heard or partially remembered. By mid-morning almost everyone was asleep.

We made the scheduled stop for breakfast and the necessary activities that many cups of coffee precipitated. I don't remember the name

of the place, but I will never forget the expression on the face of the lone waitress as she watched half a hundred sleepy kids and adults stagger through her cafe door. Upon our departure, the relieved waitress commented on the orderly manner in which the teens had conducted themselves. Of course. They were Blackhawks.

We made it to Horicon Marsh around eleven. The parade was scheduled for two that afternoon. Since kids are always hungry, we stopped for lunch. Our server gaped at the partially uniformed mob that descended on her restaurant. Nothing greasy, that was the rule for food ingested before a parade. I'm not sure what we ate, but it wasn't hamburgers and fries.

Near the parade route, the equipment truck, recuperating in a high school parking lot, yawned empty as the corp circled for warmups. The horns, the drummers and the drum major were lost in their collective thoughts of music and rhythm. The color guard went through some basic moves to loosen cramped muscles and shake cobwebs out of sleepy minds.

"Four for nothing!" the tall, thin sixteen year old drum major called. Boom, boom, boom, boom thundered the base drum, and the route march of the drum line rolled across the parking lot and bounced off the school walls. All Blackhawks fell into step. Knees rose to horizontal, chins were raised a little higher than normal. That was the Blackhawk image; high stepping professionals.

"Blue skies, roll off," commanded the drum major. "Horns up!" With a snap, all the shiny silver plated horns flashed into playing position. "One, two, three four!" The walls reverberated with the powerful resonance of drums and bugles at full bore. "Blue Skies, nothing but blue skies." The Blackhawk theme song roared through the sleepy Wisconsin town. The crowds of people on the sidewalk stopped and listened.

It was time to step off. The color guard formed a line from curb to curb. Behind them stood the "magnificent seven", as the red bereted rifle team called themselves. Then came the drum major, the horns and finally the drums. Their black satin shirts with red cummerbunds gleamed with reflected pride.

The Blackhawks were ready.

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