

## SOUTH MILWAUKEE'S WISCONSIN SPECTACLE OF MUSIC

On a weekend in August 1946, the first summer after World War II, the City of South Milwaukee began hosting a major community musical event, which was to become known far and wide as the Wisconsin Spectacle of Music. This first event featured 3 marching bands, 5 drum and bugle corps and 32 twirlers. It was a success and it grew and grew nearly every year for the next 30 years.



RACINE KILTIES - 1969

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### HOW IT BEGAN

The Spectacle of Music was inspired by a visit to the Chicagoland Festival of Music in 1945. Frank Caveney, business manager of the South Milwaukee Municipal band, along with Dean Potter, promotions manager of the band, and Art Drews, director of the South Milwaukee Municipal Band, thought that South Milwaukee could have a similar event. They began discussing it with other civic minded persons. Soon a committee was formed. They had to secure backing from the superintendent of schools, Reinhold Hein. Support was also needed from the board of education and the common council. Soon other citizen committees joined in.

The history of the Wisconsin Spectacle of Music is dramatic proof that it doesn't take a big city to hold a big event in a big way. It took courage and commitment to undertake this event.

The city contributed money towards financing the program. In a city with no hotels, it was necessary to provide food and shelter for participants. Local churches and community service groups stepped up to assist with housing and feeding up to 2,000 participants. Lions, Kiwanis and Jaycee members set up cots and litters in school gymnasiums and at the Bucyrus Erie Clubhouse Annex. Meals were prepared in church kitchens by volunteers for any units wanting them. Private homes offered spare rooms to parents of underage participants.

Finally in August 1946 the first Wisconsin Spectacle of Music came into being. Approximately 40,000 spectators watched the first parade, with 5,000 attending the evening show. The beat of drums, the thrill of the sound of marching feet and the blaring bugles filled the town. Nearly 1,800 participants from five states came to seek \$1,500 in prizes contributed by local merchants and industries. The name "Wisconsin Spectacle of Music" was registered and copyrighted. South Milwaukee had exclusive rights to this event which came to be held in July for the next 30 years.

The 1947 Spectacle was larger and cash prizes grew to \$2,500. The events consisted of barnstorming, performance competition, and a Grand Spectacle program on Saturday evening which attracted 10,000 viewers to the High School Athletic Field.

The Spectacles were financed by admissions to the evening Grand Spectacle Show, seating in parade bleachers, sale of advertising in program booklets, and by contributions by local industries, merchants, organizations, and the City of South Milwaukee.

### BARNSTORMING

Barnstorming took place on Friday evenings in the downtown area near 10th and Milwaukee Avenues. Many of the performing units would vie for "spot awards" they could win by performing at specific locations when an aerial bomb was fired. The streets were filled with local people at the same time that the corps and other performing units were marching up and down the street from one location to another. Other popular Barnstorming activities included games, booths and concessions. The result could best be described as "glorious bedlam" from late afternoon to either 11:00 pm or midnight. The festivities concluded with a final jackpot for participating units.



## COMPETITION

On Saturday mornings, individual units met at various locations throughout the city to strut their stuff in front of judges, vying for the Grand Prize. The winner was announced at the evening Grand Spectacle show.

Competition with cash prizes, trophies and the prestige of winning brought a serious side to the Spectacle. Over the years the contests developed with various classifications that the units could enter. Bands would be Class A or Class B depending on members. Drum and Bugle corps also had various classes ranging from Senior, Open, and Class A. Drill team competition was largely divided into men's and women's teams. The Spectacle was one of the biggest and toughest drill team contests in the country. There were other such contests, but none could boast of having so many units from so many states on the same field as did the Spectacle.

## PARADES

A roll of drums, unfurled flags, a blare of the bugles and marching feet. This was the Saturday afternoon parade with city officials, dignitaries, sheriff's department, firetrucks, floats, clowns, massed colors and so much more. As the Spectacle grew, so did the parade. By 1952 all 48 states and the District of Columbia were represented in the parade. In 1964 the lineup had over 100 entries, with up to 200,000 people viewing the 3 1/2 to 4 hour parade. The 1964 spectacle drew 24 drum & Bugle corps, 25 drill teams, 29 twirler corps and 50 other entries that came only to march in the 4 hour parade.

Units performed sharply for the special parade prizes to be won. For example, as each drum and bugle corps passed the reviewing stand, the directors anxiously waited to see if the corps would receive a paddle, which meant they were in the group who would perform at the evening show for top honors. There were trophies for best appearing and best performing band, drum and bugle corps, drill team and baton corps in the parade.

There were trophies for civic service and fraternal floats. The "spit and polish" uniforms and the flawless precision of the marchers were absolutely stunning to watch. A Voice Journal opinion page declared that the Spectacle was the, "most important thing that ever happened in South Milwaukee's history".



## SPECTACLE QUEENS

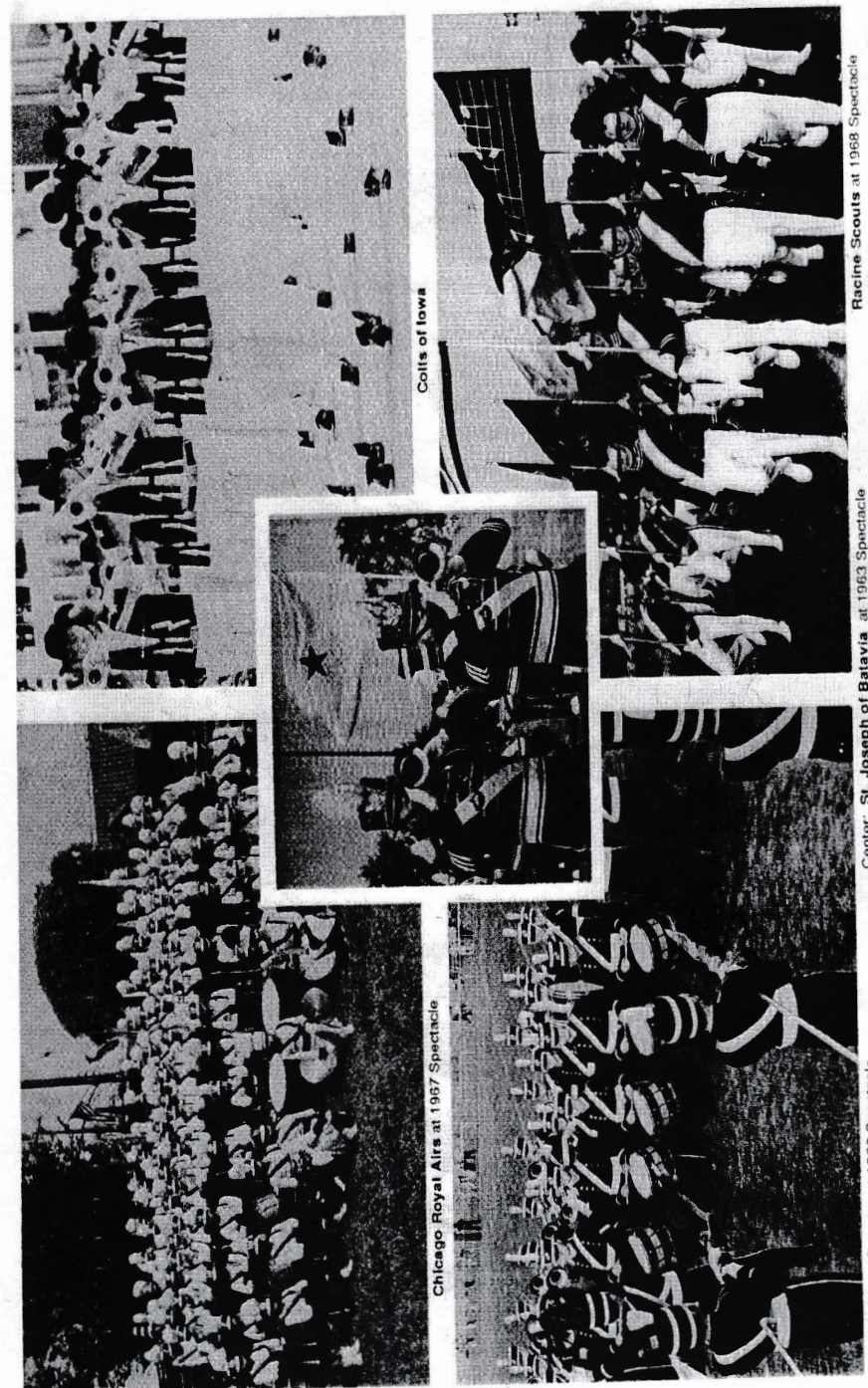
Not to be forgotten was the beauty/talent pageant with the Queen and her Court being an important part of the parade and evening show. For many years there were two queens—the Spectacle Queen, always a charming and talented high school girl, and Little Miss South Milwaukee, a most poised and talented 4, 5 or 6-year old. For many years the queens and court were chosen at the Fourth of July celebration and represented the city of South Milwaukee at many local events. They presented the trophies and awards to the winning units at the Grand Spectacle evening show.

## GRAND SPECTACLE EVENING SHOW

The evening show was held at the football stadium on Pine Street to sellout audiences. Thousands of music lovers and fans of the units attended this event. A twilight concert, followed by opening ceremonies, started the extravaganza. A final competition was held for the top units. At many evening shows there was entertainment from top performers at the time—such as the Chordettes, the Crew Cuts, Bob Crosby—and the list goes on. A thrilling Grand Finale brought all units back onto the field in a myriad of color, music and marching. Trophies and awards were presented, followed by helium balloons and fireworks. A Voice Journal opinion page declared that the Spectacle was the, “most important thing that ever happened in South Milwaukee’s history”.

## WEATHER

Weather was sometimes a problem. Rain or shine, the show went on. In the summer heat of 1972, temperatures ranged from 90 to 100 degrees. According to the South Milwaukee News Graphic, between 250 and 350 marchers collapsed from heat exhaustion at the end of the parade route. Twenty five people, mostly marchers were taken to the hospital and 1200 spectators passed out from heat exhaustion along the parade route.



Colts of Iowa

Racine Scouts at 1968 Spectacle

Center: St. Joseph of Batavia at 1963 Spectacle

Chicago Royal Airs at 1967 Spectacle

Madison Scouts at 1966 Spectacle

The Wisconsin Spectacle of music was a marvelous event and grew nearly every year for 30 years. It was canceled in 1976 because of construction at the stadium. It was re-started in 1978, but costs of transportation and lodging and reduced attendance resulted in financial loss.

In 2001—2007 The South Milwaukee Lions Club and M&I South Shore Bank sponsored the Spectacle City DCI Drum and Bugle Corps competition. A few of the old groups showed up, but costs had become prohibitive for the competitors as well as the sponsors. The Spectacle of Music eventually was replaced by today's South Milwaukee Heritage Days.

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*The material in this article has been abstracted by Donald Bulley from Gertrude Endthoff's book "SOUTH MILWAUKEE THEN TO NOW", the 1964—1979 VOICE JOURNALS, and the 2004 Spectacle program. Gertrude's book and Spectacle Programs are available at the South Milwaukee Historical Society Museum. The Voice Journals are available at the South Milwaukee Library.*