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Yankee Dutchmen marching band to roam at Riverfest

**By Diane Graff
of the Daily Times staff**

The zany antics and stunts of a group of musicians will return to the 25th annual Riverfest celebration next month.

The Yankee Dutchmen Solar Powered Precision Marching Band will be one of the many roving acts that will be found around Riverside Park during the 25th celebration of Riverfest Aug. 11-14.

The band, formerly based out of Lebanon and now Watertown, started performing in the early 1950s, according to Marilyn Eske, the wife of the late Wilbur Eske, who concocted the band. "They have been going a long time," Marilyn said about the band that has been performing for audiences for almost 60 years.

The band is well-known in this area for its crazy uniforms, banged up instruments and, of course, its rendition of "Jingle Bells" during the Fourth of July parade.

During the past six decades, there has always been an Eske in the group, Marilyn said.

"My husband always had zany ideas," Marilyn said. "He was known for them. He was a fun person. He was a nice man and liked to make people laugh. He was a born entertainer and a comedian for sure."

Wilbur, who passed away Sept. 22, 2007, was a musician and played in many area bands. He was affiliated with the Oconomowoc Legion Band. "He played trombone and was always out in front with the trombone," she recalled. Although Marilyn cannot recall the first time the band performed, she remembered her son Bob was a baby at the time.

Now Bob heads up the crazy group and plays the trumpet.

Kory, who is the son of John Eske, another of her children, is

also a member of the band. Kory, who is 16, plays bass drum in the group.

The group's signature performance is always the city's Fourth of July parade. The group includes about 10 members who play a variety of instruments that include trombone, trumpet, saxophone, horn, drums and tuba. If needed, some of the members will switch instruments to fill out the musical selections.

"They have a lot of fun and are a great group of guys," Marilyn said. Despite the name solar powered, Marilyn said the group will also play on cloudy days.

Seldom do the musicians use music as they have the songs memorized, Marilyn said. "They do it mostly by memory."

Many of the songs, which are familiar tunes, are repeated along the parade route. "The crowd likes things that are familiar," the mother of the band leader said. "They are the ones you have to please."

Some of the members perform twice in one parade, Marilyn said. Some perform with a local Legion or municipal band and then repeat the route as a Yankee Dutchmen member.

"A lot of people who know us say they don't have to see us, they can hear us coming," Marilyn said.

But sometimes the members march backwards. Seldom does the band march in a straight line, but members roam the streets from side to side, playing their instruments. Occasionally, they will stop completely and reorganize. "There is a little show they put on for that," Marilyn said.

"The crowd just loves them," Marilyn said. "And they like what they are doing and are always smiling. They never gripe about anything. They are a happy-go-lucky group."

"And they are good musicians," Marilyn added. Many of them belong to the musicians local in Watertown, a group her husband headed up for several years.

Performing at the park will not be new for the group as they usually stop there following the Fourth of July parade. "It draws people to the beer stand," Marilyn said.

The band is familiar entertainment at many of the area firemen's picnics and carnivals. They perform within a 25-mile radius of Watertown and have repeat performances from year to year. In fact, the group did perform at Riverfest in the past.

Between Marilyn and Bob, the two have the band booked for most of the summer. "We all know what Sundays we are committed to for being on the road," Marilyn said. If someone cannot perform, another member may be called to fill in. In the past, the Eske grandchildren have performed with the band.

"We have picked up quite a few trophies over the years," Marilyn said.

Marilyn tries not to miss a performance. "I am the No. 1 fan, I think you could say. I have been going to parades for a long time."

Other roving acts that will appear at the park throughout the four-day festival include a chalk artist, buzzing bee, a wise cracking trout and a juggler, fire-eater and stilt walker.

