

## Gignilliat...as in Giant!

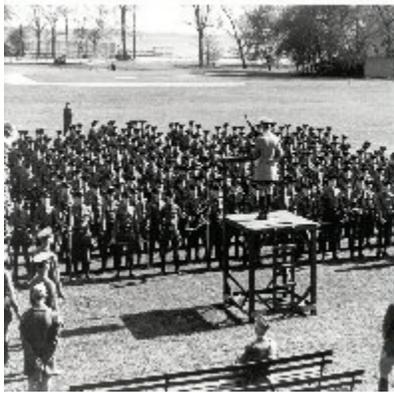
By Robert B.D. Hartman



Disassociating the history of Culver Military Academy from Leigh Robinson Gignilliat is a virtual impossibility. Even as the school moves toward a new millennium, Culver's longest serving superintendent manages to provide a personal exclamation point to many of the greatest traditions—and interestingly to some of its most odd ball endeavors. He was a visionary and a promotional genius, an innovator, war hero, a leader in the early Reserve Officers Training Corps movement, and the giant among giants at Culver.

Gignilliat became commandant of cadets at the age of 22 and quickly determined the Academy needed a publicity coup to stimulate name recognition and promote enrollment increases. Less than six weeks after taking up his new post in 1897, he persuaded the school's founder Henry Harrison Culver to buy the best available 16 horses from the First Cleveland Cavalry and establish the nucleus for what was to become the Black Horse Troop. Gignilliat rode at the head of the new unit at the Grand Army of the Republic encampment in Richmond, Indiana.

In 1898, Gignilliat entrained the cadets on the Nickel Plate Railroad at Hibbard for Chicago, where they marched in a Spanish American War victory parade. Their first out-of-state appearance, this successful endeavor only strengthened Gignilliat's belief that the Corps of Cadets and the new Troop were the Academy's best public relations tools. In 1900, they provided the honor guard for Admiral George Dewey in St. Louis and, four years later, both the winter and summer schools were featured at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Expanding his horizons in 1907, Gignilliat began a two-week excursion with the entire Naval School and the newly formed Summer Cavalry School (The Woodcraft Camp was not formed until 1912) to the tri-centennial Jamestown Exposition in Virginia.



He broadsided the eastern press with news that Culver was coming to the grand celebration, then cashed in with parade stops in downtown Cincinnati and Richmond, Va., on the outbound trip. At Jamestown, the cadets (the term "midshipman" was not used until about 1920) performed cavalry and artillery drills and entertained hundreds of spectators with a military review. One evening, the Culver family hosted dignitaries at a gala dinner and staged a Culver cotillion led by Admiral Harrington, chairman of the Naval Board, and Mrs. Emily Jane Culver, widow of the founder.

The Summer School contingent continued its excursion up the Potomac River aboard the steamship Newport News to Washington. Press coverage followed its every move and Gignilliat was jubilant. In the nation's capital, Gignilliat made full use of an enthusiastic late summer audience by holding cavalry drills at Fort Myer, Va., and marching the Naval School through the streets of Annapolis and parading on the drill field at the Naval Academy. For the Culver family, who financed the trip, it was money well spent. For Gignilliat, it was a triumphal procession.

In 1913 and again in 1917, Gignilliat staged his two great national coups when the Corps of Cadets marched in the inaugural parades for President Woodrow Wilson. The Culver spotlight shown even brighter when, on both occasions, the Black Horse Troop was selected as Guard of Honor for Hoosier native Vice President Thomas Marshall at each of Wilson's presidential inaugurations.

In 1910, at the retirement of Colonel Alexander Frederick Fleet as superintendent, Gignilliat's accession to that position was forgone. There was no need for a search committee—he had been a highly effective commandant of cadets for 13 years, enjoyed the complete confidence of the Culver family in St. Louis, and had married Fleet's daughter!

Lest it appear that Gignilliat was a "on the road" gad-about, he was clearly concerned about the health and welfare of his cadets at home. He insisted on a strong physical education program and, though frail in appearance, he frequently led massed exercises and rifle manual drills from a 6-foot high platform at the edge of the Oval.

His creative juices flowed continuously and, along with Edwin and Bertram Culver, the sons of the founder, he brought a number of innovative ideas to the Academy.

The first gymnasium, built in 1902 and known to cadets as "The Little Gym," contained a unique Gignilliat-devised shower system that enabled an entire battalion to "receive a scientifically regulated shower, warm on entrance and . . . at the end in an invigorating coolness." The device was patented and offered for sale, but found no buyers. It also proved to be unpopular with cadets and was abandoned after a few years.

More lasting, however, was Gignilliat's fascination in proving that the Academy programs impacted favorably on the youthful bodies of his cadets. He insisted that the best anthropometric apparatus--those used to measure lung capacity, head size, chest expansion, and height and weight--be installed and careful records be maintained on the physical growth of every boy. In September, each cadet, clad only in his skivvies, was photographed from the front against a gridded background, which revealed height and posture; a side view determined posture and straightness of the spine.

At the end of the year, the process was repeated and the data sent to parents as evidence of their son's growth during the school year. While some of Gignilliat's follies faded quickly, the measurement scheme remained in use until the early years of World War II.



In 1909, Gignilliat convinced the Culver brothers to build an Open Air Barrack just north of the gymnasium. Its unusual design added a cubicle on the exterior wall of each cadet room. The cubicle was separated from the room by large windows that remained closed during the day and evening. At Taps, the resident cadets raised the window, climbed into the cubicle and pulled the sash cord, closing the window behind them. They slept protected from the elements by awnings but benefited from plenty of fresh air. Like the shower system, the Academy patented the design but, alas, found no buyers.



The building was moved to the present site of the Henderson Ice Arena in 1924 to make way for the construction of the Recreation Building. Once the novelty wore off, it was used as a traditional barrack and, for its last few years, was headquarters for the Academy Band. In 1932, its final occupants were the crewmembers from Universal Studios during the filming of "Tom Brown of Culver." That summer, the building was razed to make room for the expansion of the Woodcraft Camp.

During his first year as superintendent, two of Culver's greatest traditions began. The first was a decision to form the Culver Military Academy Alumni Association. The school had more than 400 graduates and Gignilliat wanted to ensure their continuing participation in the affairs of the school.

Secondly, to give a measure of character to what hitherto had been a bland graduation ceremony, Gignilliat created what is arguably the Academy's greatest tradition—the Iron Gate ceremony. In the spring of 1910, he found a wrought iron gate the Culver family had purchased in Europe and then discarded because it was too large for a new building. Quick to catch symbolism in the simplest of things, Gignilliat decided to incorporate the Iron Gate as the symbol of graduation. With it, he envisioned the passing of cadets through its portals from a Culver life into a new and exciting adult world.

Gignilliat was always attuned to things that promoted recognition of the school and developed camaraderie. As early as 1913 he contemplated an Academy ring and even considered several prototypes. It was not until 1915, however, that Gignilliat commissioned Chicago jeweler C.D. Peacock to design an official ring. Its unique design won quick approval from the student body and was worn for the first time by the Class of 1916 (prices ranged from \$20 to \$24, depending on the gold content). Thereafter, with only minor design changes after World War II, it has remained one of the most recognized and worn school or collegiate rings in the nation.

With Europe embroiled in war, Gignilliat's ongoing efforts to train Academy cadets as citizen-soldiers and the Culver family's sponsorship of three annual two-week, student-directed encampments for high school-age boys in 1915-17, caught the attention of the War Department. By the time the U.S. entered the war, Gignilliat's programs were considered at the cutting edge of civilian training.

Gignilliat himself was called to active duty shortly after the U.S. entered the First World War. He returned from France in 1919 a colonel and with a distinguished military record that included service as the assistant chief of staff for the 37th Division and a post-war assignment as office in charge of the Allied Food Commission. His military experience also heightened his interest in the development of the Reserve Officers Training Corps and he became a post-war leader of that organization. He insisted that Culver cadets were fully capable of standing side by side as equals with men from colleges and universities, and he won the day for the Academy's inclusion as a senior ROTC unit.

Likewise, the superintendent's concern for the health of the cadets never faltered and he made every effort to ensure "his boys" were well cared for. In 1931, Academy physician Dr. Paul Campbell reported that a study of winter school illness indicated that 10 percent of the cadets comprised 75 percent of the colds or flu cases. If Campbell could find a way to isolate what he called "the susceptibles," he thought he could prevent the epidemics that were almost a common occurrence.

Given the go-ahead by Gignilliat, Campbell set up procedures to monitor those in his risk category. At the end of the school year, he reported that his efforts had prevented a major flu outbreak and lost-man days had been cut in half. With such glowing figures, Gignilliat authorized Campbell to undertake another medical adventure. He installed eight ultra-violet lamps in a room near the pool where twice a week during the winter the "susceptibles" stripped to the waist, donned dark glasses, and, as Gignilliat said, "got the lights." And like the shower system and Open Air Barrack before it, Gignilliat's dream of a medical breakthrough came to naught and the experiment was soon abandoned.

In 1939, Gignilliat reached the mandatory retirement age of 65 and passed the reins of power to Col. William E. Gregory. The trustees, however, invited him to assume the presidency of the board and remain in the superintendent's home overlooking Lake Maxinkuckee. In 1942, Gignilliat retired from the school he had served for more than four decades. He and Mamie moved to Fort Worth,

Texas, and lived comfortably in an apartment in the Blackstone Hotel, holding court with alumni and friends.

Even though a thousand miles from Culver, Gignilliat's concern for the Academy and its alumni remained strong. When support among alumni and friends of the Academy for a Memorial Chapel began to develop in 1944, he became a leader in the campaign to raise the necessary funds. His constituency net swept across the nation and his contacts were important in garnering financial support for the project. One of his close contacts in Fort Worth was Amon Carter, his former cadet aide and a member of the Class of 1938. When pledges were being made for two of the chapel's most important gifts, the carillon and the organ, Carter pledged the magnificent 51-bell carillon. Alumnus Reuben H. Fleet '06 gave the latter.

In 1948, General Gignilliat's health began to fail and he entered Hines General Hospital outside Chicago, where he was to remain hospitalized until his death four years later. In the meantime, Mamie Gignilliat moved to Chicago to be closer to her husband, living with her son, Leigh, and his wife. But it was Mamie Gignilliat who was to die first, on March 20, 1952. For 54 years she had been an integral part of her husband's endeavors and was, in her own way, as influential as her husband in establishing traditions at the Academy. The gala cotillions which became part of the spirit of Culver were largely her creation, and her place as the arbiter of social graces and the expectation of gentlemanly behavior for all cadets at the Academy was unquestioned. She was the perfect wife for the head of the school and her loss was keenly felt by hundreds of winter and summer students.

General Gignilliat died seven months later on Oct. 30. His funeral service was conducted in the Memorial Chapel. Following the sermon, cadet pallbearers carried the coffin to the chapel plaza where the band played ruffles and flourishes and "The General's March." The funeral cortege then moved across the campus to Logansport Gate, led by the Infantry Honor Guard and Band as an 11-gun salute was fired in his honor. This Culver giant among giants was laid to rest at the local Masonic Cemetery beside his beloved Mamie.