

Nine Decades Ago...

The Troop Goes to Washington

Robert B. D. Hartman

Shortly after photographs of William McKinley's first Inaugural Parade hit the newsstand, Culver's Commandant of Cadets, Major Leigh R. Gignilliat, reflected that the procession of the new president's eighty horse honor guard from the First Cleveland Cavalry was the most impressive sight in the entire march.

When he read a copy McKinley's letter to W. E. Burdick, the 1st Cleveland captain, that, "*It commanded the admiration of the great throng assembled . . . [and] The value of such an organization as yours cannot be estimated [since] it affords a happy means of discipline and drill,*" Gignilliat's promotional juices began a fast flow.

Having showed off in their Brooks Brothers-designed uniforms at social functions around the City, celebrated the inaugural of a native son, and ridden in his parade, the troop returned to Cleveland and the entire 80-horse herd was put up for sale. Gignilliat's reaction was predictable. If only the Culver Military Academy had such an organization, it would provide the impetus for wide-reaching publicity!

On March 13, Colonel Alexander F. Fleet, the Culver superintendent, wrote to J. B. Perkins, the millionaire industrialist who had purchased the horses especially for the parade, explaining the Academy's interesting in acquiring the herd by saying: "*In teaching our boys to emulate every example of loyalty, patriotism, and manliness, we hope to instill in their minds high aspirations . . . [And] through the agency of the splendid animals that carried you to honor and distinction, give our boys a daily reminder of the fact that in taking the saddles of their illustrious predecessors they must also emulate their worthy example.*"

Perkins did not make his millions by succumbing



to flowery and patriotic praise. He was a horse trader and the asking price was \$10,000 – far more than the \$2,500 Henry Harrison Culver had budgeted. H. E. Cook, the Academy’s equestrian director, was sent to Cleveland to purchase as many horses as his funds would allow. With Perkins assistance, Cook evaluated the herd and subjected it to “*the most severe tests as to soundness, disposition, and training.*” When he returned from Cleveland on March 19, sixteen horses were off-loaded from the box car at the Academy spur north of the main campus.

The corps had been given a half-day off to greet the new arrivals, the band played, and the salute gun fired. True, the Academy did not have *all* the mounts it wanted, but the Black Horse Troop was born, and Cook reported to the superintendent that he had selected only the best. All were jet black, five to seven years old, and none were less than fifteen hands high. The Culver Black Horse Troop had been established.

Gignilliat, poised beyond his age and filled with unbounded enthusiasm, viewed the event as a major occurrence and was anxious to present his new organization to the public. Less than two months later the Black Horse Troop made its first formal appearance in Richmond, Indiana, at the annual encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic.



By Commencement Week in June, the Troop had become the school’s crown jewel and Henry Harrison Culver announced the construction of a mammoth Riding Hall overlooking the Oval. Sadly, in September he became ill and returned to St. Louis and died a week later. Gignilliat lost his

champion, but not the support of two of Culver's sons, Edwin and Bertram. They gave him free reign to promote the Academy and he made full use of the Black Horse Troop. Membership was competitive and anyone in the corps could qualify if he passed rigorous testing. They participated as cavalymen, yet remained part of the infantry.



Between 1896 and 1911, school enrollment increased from 122 to 400, much to Gignilliat's delight and was a clear vindication of his skills at promotion. His cadets and troopers marched in the Spanish-American

War Victory Parade in Chicago in 1898, provided the escort to Admiral Dewey in St. Louis in 1900, and were featured at the Louisiana Exposition in 1903. Culver would march at any event Gignilliat felt would enhance its position as a top flight school.

In 1910, Gignilliat, now a lieutenant colonel, succeeded Colonel Alexander Fleet as superintendent. It came as no surprise, therefore, when, at the dedication of the Academy Mess Hall on April 11, 1911, he introduced Indiana Governor Thomas Marshall and made an offer he could not refuse.



"Someday in the future [he hoped the Academy] would have the honor of escorting [Marshall] along Pennsylvania Avenue," an obvious reference to the presidential election some eighteen months away. Marshall accepted the offer and noted that, aside from Gignilliat, *"Only Mrs. Marshall contemplated such high honors for me."* While the governor did not capture the top spot on the Democratic ticket, he was elected as Woodrow Wilson's running mate.

The morning after Wilson's victory in November of 1912, Gignilliat wired the vice-president elect that Culver's offer still stood. Marshall responded forthwith and confirmed the invitation. The War Department, however, was in charge of the parade and Vice Presidents were not entitled to an escort!

Undeterred, Gignilliat initiated an end run by sending his brother-in-law, William Alexander Fleet, a former faculty member at Princeton

University, to meet with the president-elect at his New Jersey headquarters. He returned to Washington armed with a handwritten note, to wit: *“Mr. Marshall, by all means, must have an escort next March fourth. I would consider it a personal favor.”* Army chief-of-staff Major General Leonard Wood, not surprisingly, felt compelled to authorize Culver’s participation.

The redoubtable Captain Robert Rossow, head of the Black Horse Troop, departed on a special train for Washington early on February 28, 1913, with sixty-six horses, tack, and a supply of hay and grain. The entire



corps of cadets left after breakfast. They arrived in Pittsburgh in time for dinner and, ever conscious of public image and always the showman, Gignilliat detrained everyone and marched them to the Fort Pitt Hotel owned by Eugene C. Eppley, a member of the Class of 1901. After dinner the cadets arrived in Washington, took up residence at the Ebbitt House Hotel, and prepared for five days of tours and military reviews.

Rossow stabled his horses at nearby Fort Myer and groomed them for a rigorous schedule of activities.

If Gignilliat was identified as the leading light of the Academy, Rossow was surely the focus for the Black Horse Troop. Short in stature but barrel-chested and thick-necked, he was a veteran of American campaigns in the Philippines where he had earned a battlefield commission. He joined the Culver staff in 1906 and quickly won favor with his trooper as an expert horseman. Gignilliat reflected that his “fog-horn” voice was a real attention getter.

By the time the troop arrived in Washington, Rossow had become the face and spokesman for the Horsemanship Department. He seemed to be everywhere and moved through the military hierarchy with ease. Gignilliat, too, was in seventh heaven and appeared with his wife, Mamie, at social events across the capital. Like good commanders, he also attended to the welfare of his men. Cadets were entertained at the Chase Opera House at a concert directed by Band Master W. Glenn Johnston ’12, later the long-time counselor of Co. C. His program included such popular songs like “When the Midnight Choo-Choo Leaves for Alabam,” “The Dixie Rube,” and “Hash Brown.”

Tours of the government buildings were organized and transportation was provided by large hard rubber-tired busses. After cadets turned from side to side to follow the guides' description of the sites, the vehicles were, not surprisingly, nicknamed "rubber neck" busses.



The festivities on March 4 provided a fitting climax the Inaugural trip. Thomas Marshall held true to his invitation to the Black Horse Troop and it provided his escort for the formal ceremonies and enjoyed a most favored position. The Culver Corps of Cadets was positioned behind the midshipmen from the Naval Academy and the cadets from West Point who formed directly in front of the presidential stand.

Rossow, who would prove to be the Academy's greatest raconteur, wrote of that day: "*The General Staff of the Army [and] about a hundred mounted officers were formed at the east steps . . . Flush off the flank of the staff marched the resplendent midshipmen of Annapolis and the gray-clad cadets of West Point . . . [to fill] the hollow square . . . The Black Horse*



Troop, with the Essex Troop [West Orange , N.J.] was placed on the left flank of West Point 's corps [and] about ten yards to our front . . .” Little did Rossow and his cadets know that they were overlooking greatness. West

Point cadets Benjamin Hoge and Harold Bull [later a Lt. General] would become Professors of Military Science and Tactics at Culver. Omar Bradley, Dwight Eisenhower, and Carl Spaatz were among the plethora of future army general officers assembled with the Black Horse Troop that gray day in early March.

It was a difficult parade for the Culver cadets and horses alike. The boys were in the saddle for almost twelve hours and their horses found the pavement and steel street car tracks made for difficult footing. Several went down, but “*not a man lost his horse,*” according to Rossow. Rewards for a job well done followed.

After dinner at the Ebbitt House, the cadets attended an inaugural dance given by the new vice president. The next day they enjoyed more “rubber-necking” and departed for Pittsburgh on a special train on the evening of March 5. They returned to Gene Eppley’s Hotel Pitt in time for breakfast, then sat for several hours as the engine underwent repair. They finally arrived back at the Academy siding at 11 p.m. on the 6th. Gignilliat had ordered the Mess Hall to serve a midnight beefsteak supper and, in deference to the greatly fatigued cadets, scheduled reveille for the unheard hour of 8 a.m.

When Wilson won a second term in 1916, his running mate again was Thomas Marshall. For the most part, the former Indiana governor had proven to be a non-entity and may be best remembered for saying “*What this county needs is a good five-cent cigar.*” His presence on the Democratic ballot, however, ensured Culver another inaugural invitation.

The trip to Washington followed much the same schedule as four years earlier, but this time Eugene C. Eppley showed off his newest hotel in Pittsburgh, The William Penn. [His generosity was not perfunctory, but displayed a genuine love of the school. Five decades later he sold his twenty-two hotels to the Sheraton Corporation and launched a program of philanthropy, including major gifts to his alma mater. Between 1955 and 1958, he and his foundation presented Culver with two magnificent classroom buildings, an auditorium, and endowment for four academic chairs. For Gene Eppley, the corps of cadets was not just passing through the city; it was an integral part of his life.]

The cadets found the mood in Washington somber and security concerns high. March 4, 1917, was a Sunday and, hence, the inaugural was postponed until the following day. Security was intense. Memories of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the streets of Sarajevo three years earlier were ever-present in the minds of those charged with protecting Wilson and Marshall. Rossow was ordered to a security briefing at the Army's chief of staff's office. He was told that *"a squadron of the 3rd U.S. Cavalry will escort the president. Yours will follow immediately to the rear of the president and vice president. If any person desires to harm either of them, it will be initiated after [the] escort has passed, and from a direction within your observation. This fixes the general responsibility for the president's and vice president's safety on you."*



"You, being up on your horse, can see better over the heads of the crowd. Don't be hesitant to act if you see any person act suspiciously. You will be regularly commissioned for the day and any thing you do – even if it should afterward prove to be a mistake – will be excused. The safety of the president is paramount."

On Sunday, Rossow assembled the cadets and set their instructions for the following day. In an emergency, and only under command, *"the first platoon, in a column of twos, would break from the right and move forward at a trot to cover the entire right flank of the party, which rode in four carriages."* The second platoon would move in a similar manner to cover the left flank. The remaining three platoons would close at a trot, *"wheel about in fours and protect the rear."*

Rossow saw the duty of the Black Horse Troop to place itself between the chief executive and potential harm. Perhaps it was a melodramatic action, but he and Gignilliat viewed it as a national responsibility.

Fortunately there were no incidents and the parade proceeded without a hitch.



By 1917, Culver's enrollment had jumped from 464 to 551 and Gignilliat was determined to show off the entire student body. It was impossible for him to remain a passive figure and he elected to lead the infantry cadets who marched in the parade's second division. The uniform for the day included overcoats, garrison hats, and white cross belts. Officers and non-coms were authorized swords and sabers; the other ranks were under arms.

A near-gale created havoc along parts of the parade route. Many of the older buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue were being razed for new construction and debris and blowing sand frightened the horses and made it difficult for the infantry to maintain lines and intervals. Rossow's muted "*Steady, steady*" had the appropriate effect on the troopers and they emerged from the squall in perfect order. *The Vedette* noted that the conditions did not faze the marchers, but that "bedraggled feminines," a group of demonstrating suffragettes, created consternation when they elected to march side by side with the cadets near the end of the parade.



The President's Inaugural Ball was cancelled because of the impending war, [it was declared 32 days later], but Vice Presidential Marshall, undeterred, held his soiree on the 10th floor ballroom of the new Willard Hotel. Inadvertently, only troopers and cadet officers were included on the invitation list. The remainder of the corps grumbled, but went off in general good humor to the Keith Theater for a movie. By happenstance, many more girls assembled at the Willard Ballroom than there were boys and someone rushed to the theatre to recruit volunteers. Between changing reels, an announcement was made and more than 50 "volunteers" rushed to Marshall's party.

When the corps returned to the Academy late on the evening of March 9, no one knew it would be last inaugural for Culver for more than four decades. The Great Depression, two world wars, the Korean War, and five presidential administrations would intervene before the Black Horse Troop would make another trip to Washington. In 1957, it returned, but without the corps of cadets, to participate in President Eisenhower's second inauguration. Since then the BHT has maintained a presence at every inaugural parade except in 1993 when it was not invited by the Clinton

administration. In 1985, a highly select group of riders, the Equestriennes from the Culver Girls Academy, broke the all-male barrier to become an integral part of the parade contingent.

On January 20, 2005, 62 Troopers and 23 Equestriennes will participate in President George W. Bush's Inaugural Parade. A Culver tradition continues!