

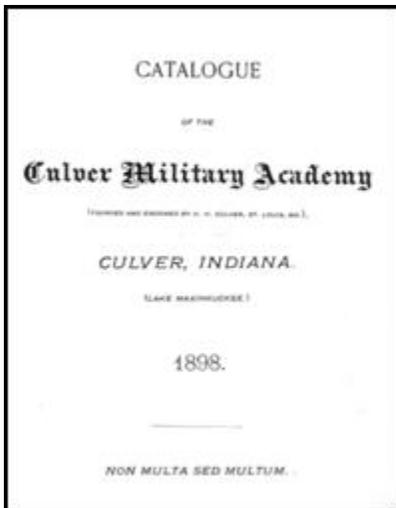
The Rails Hummed “SPIRIT OF CULVER”

Part Two

The Great Depression and the Changing Face of Culver Transportation

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Author’s note: *All that is left of the days when trains were the lifeblood of the Academy are fading memories. I have endeavored as much as possible, to keep to the facts and avoid “creative” writing. It is not easy since alumni memories tend to expand to a point where dividing “fiction from fact and fact from fiction” becomes nearly impossible. Readers must excuse me if their recollections are different from my observations. Hopefully, I’ve captured a major chapter in Culver’s history without disturbing too many memories.*



From its earliest years, Academy catalogs made it clear that the school administration refrained from sanctioning “generous” vacations – or even granting “leaves of absence.” Fair notice was given to manipulative parents that “[if] one boy has received a furlough [it] is always an incentive to others to secure the same . . . [and] has a disturbing effect upon discipline and studies. The Academy

therefore positively declines to grant leaves of absence . . . except the regular Christmas leave.”

Before November of 1959 there was no Thanksgiving leave and no breaks from September to Christmas. Hence it was not surprising that the December holiday was eagerly awaited. The Pennsylvania Railroad made up a special train, the so-called “Academy Special,” and delivered it to the siding north of the main campus. Reveille was early – usually at 6 a.m. – but on this day there was no need for bugles, bells, or call boys. Everyone was awake! As dawn broke on the day of departure, cadets ate a hurried breakfast and climbed aboard for the trip to connecting cities and the start of a well-earned vacation.

For some cadets, even with a railroad “at the back door,” the opportunity to go home for a vacation was a near impossibility. Students from foreign countries arrived behind the corn-silk curtain and were likely to stay the entire year without returning home. If a student lived in a foreign country or even some distance in the United States he was likely to become part of a faculty family during a holiday. Many cadets and faculty recall such Christmas celebrations as a bonding amongst bittersweet circumstances.

The central figure in facilitating most train travel was W.T. Parrish, the long-time stationmaster at the Culver depot. Weeks before Christmas leave or the summer vacation, Parrish would



arrive at the Great Hall at Message Center or the canteen area under the Mess Hall and set up his travel desk. Surrounded with rail schedules for virtually every railroad in the country, he would painstakingly arrange transportation. It was a laborious process since a ticket from one railroad to another, or for each leg of the trip, was required. It was not unusual for a cadet to have a strip of accordion-like tickets, measuring one or two feet in length. Since foreign-bound cadets would use railroads to reach their ports of embarkation, Parrish's services included booking steamer tickets for those leaving the country.

In October of 1947 the Pennsylvania Railroad, owner of the Vandalia Line, served notice that after Thanksgiving, it would no longer provide scheduled passenger service to the town of Culver . A transportation era was ending. However, the "Academy Special," a legend for more than 50 years, would continue to serve the Academy from its siding near the Power House. It survived for nine years before being discontinued following the

spring vacation of 1956. Thereafter, transportation to train terminals in Plymouth , Chicago , and points south would be by bus.

Too frequently, cadets of the train era forget that rails played a major part in the infrastructure of Academy operations. When Henry Harrison Culver opened Main Barrack in 1895, its co-called Engine Annex contained a power plant that produced heat and generated electricity for the campus. Since coal was required, a rail spur ran through the heart of the campus directly to the rear of Main Barrack. Not until 1911, when the Mess Hall opened, were the visually offending railroad tracks and the unsightly coal dump removed. A new power plant (now the Music and Arts Building) was constructed in 1912. The present Power House was built west of Academy Road in 1929, and was serviced by a rail siding that delivered coal directly to the site.

When the Pennsylvania Railroad announced its intention to abandon passenger service on the Vandalia Line, Academy officials began to face the reality that a total service cut might occur. How could the school survive without coal? After pondering and rejecting trucking in its coal requirements, negotiations were opened with the Northern Indiana Public Service Company to supply natural gas as the fuel of choice. Though it would require a major revamping of the school's generating capabilities, it

was the only solution. By the early 1960s, the Academy would no longer have a never-ending supply of cinders for the indoor and outdoor track, for sidewalks, or roadways. Another chapter of Culver life had ended.

In 1969 the local depot closed and stationmaster Emory Kinney ended 15 years of service to Culver when he transferred his operation to Logansport . Freight service continued to pass through Culver on an intermittent basis until 1979, when the Vandalia Line was finally abandoned.

The Sporting Life

The Great Depression struck the Academy like a pole-ax. In 1928, enrollment was 749. In 1934 it stood at 339. The Culver family business, the Wrought Iron Range Company, was struggling and the ability to finance school operations was declining. Trains continued to come and go but brought fewer students. The school's economic situation dictated that the days of off-campus extravaganzas had come to an end.



Football trips, however, remained sacrosanct throughout the difficult decade. On the morning of November 8, 1930, the corps boarded a Vandalia

“Academy Special” to Chicago for the greatest athletic story in Culver history. The Infantry and Artillery, followed by the mounted Troop, joined the cadets from St. John’s Military Academy and paraded down Michigan Avenue for an American Legion-sponsored military schools’ showdown at Soldier Field. Forty-two thousand people watched as Culver won 19-0.

For more than half of its first century, Culver spread its football net over much of the Midwest, as far south as Tennessee and east to Virginia . Cadets boarded Pullman cars on Friday afternoon for competition with schools like Shattuck in Minnesota, Western Reserve Academy in Hudson, Ohio, Kentucky Military in Louisville, St. John’s in Wisconsin, Greenbrier Military School in West Virginia, Staunton Military in Virginia, Baylor and McCallie in Tennessee, and Kemper in Missouri. Games were played on Saturday afternoon and the team would head home, usually scheduled for arrival in time for Sunday’s Garrison Parade.

By the mid-1950s, regularly scheduled rail transportation was fading and the once-reliable rail network which made it possible to



get here from there began to break down. The last corps-wide train trip took

place in 1961 when the cadets departed from the Hibbard whistle-stop to Fort Wayne for a night game with Bishop Luers High School. Thereafter, busses became the practical choice for ground travel and a great chapter of Culver's athletic heritage faded along with the rusting rails and decaying roadbeds.

Hollywood Comes to Culver

In November of 1931, the Universal Pictures Corporation in Hollywood sent a scenario writer, George Greene, to Culver to initiate a motion picture about Culver cadets. He arrived at the Vandalia depot, settled onto the Palmer House Hotel (later the Maxinkuckee/Culver Inn), and began to prepare a script, "Son of the Legion." By November 21 cameramen and technicians were shooting background material. During the Christmas holiday, studio moguls determined Greene's story and direction were unsatisfactory and notified General Gignilliat that a new script was being written and filming would resume under a new director – but not until May!

The vanguard of filmmakers arrived at the depot on May 2 and 3, 1932. Not only had the script been re-written but the title had been changed to "Tom Brown of Culver." The new director was a relative unknown named William Wyler who, in time, would be recognized as one of Hollywood's

most astute directors of great films like “Ben Hur,” “Wuthering Heights,” and “The Best years of Our Lives.” He also put his directorial touch on the careers of Henry Fonda, Humphrey Bogart, Lawrence Olivier, and Barbra Streisand.

He and the filmmakers traveled from California by Pullman , accompanied by a 70-foot baggage car containing a fully stocked costume wardrobe, make-up studio, cameras, Klieg lights, spots, and reflectors.

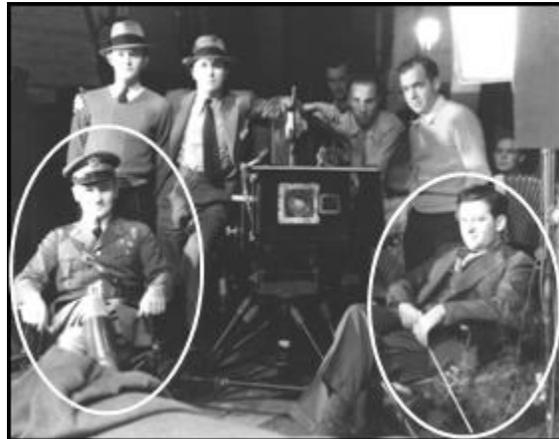


Wyler, with his actors including yet-to-be heartthrob Tyrone Power, Sidney Toler, years from playing detective Charlie Chan, string-beaned character actors Slim Summerville, and froggy-voiced Andy Devine, fresh from his role as Tuck McCall in the “Spirit of Notre Dame,” future Dragnet star Ben Alexander, and a rotund CMA graduate, Eugene Pallette ’08, moved into the Palmer House Hotel. The lead character was played by a real-life “Tom Brown,” (left) the son of a stage actor and a musical comedy star mother. The baggage car was shunted off the main line of the Vandalia to the Academy rail siding north of the Recreation Building and adjacent to the Open Air Barrack, where the film crew resided during the 10 days of filming.

For the cadets, “going Hollywood ” became a bit of hell. Much of the background filming – parades, football games, dances and many of the outdoor footage – had been shot the previous November when the uniform of the day was the winter issue! Now it was spring and the cadets were forced to don the heavy woolen shirts, pants, overcoats, and capes to maintain continuity for the filming.

When Wyler called his final “cut,” the corps heaved a sigh of relief. They donned their normal uniforms and waved good-bye to Hollywood as the cast and crew connected the baggage car and boarded their Pullman for Los Angeles . Colonel Robert Rossow, the commandant, complemented the corps for its fine effort and rewarded them by canceling a Friday drill and two days of inspections!

Gignilliat, perhaps, skeptical of Universal’s promise to portray Culver in a favorable light, put Rossow (left) on a westbound train with instructions to serve as Wyler’s (right) technical director. The commandant was a



remarkable raconteur and showman. He appeared on the set wearing boots and breeches; and displayed a chest covered with ribbons from his

campaigns in the Philippines and on the battlefields of Flanders . While he cut quite a figure on the Universal lot, he did not forget his responsibilities and saw to them to Gignilliat's satisfaction.

Troopers on Parade

Just as trains helped establish the success of the Black Horse Troop in the late 1890s and early 1900s, they played an important part in the history of the Black Horse Troop from 1957 to 1965. In January of 1957 after a hiatus of 40 years, Culver returned to Washington to ride in President



Eisenhower's second inaugural parade. It was the first of three successive trips the troopers would make by train. Boxcars were no longer available for the 100 mounts Culver was sending to Washington and the Horsemanship

Department contracted for racehorse vans to carry the mounts to the Rosecroft Raceway in Maryland .

The Troopers departed from Plymouth on the Pennsylvania 's "Liberty Limited" for the overnight trip to Washington . Four years later when Culver accepted an invitation to ride in John Kennedy's inaugural parade, the Horsemanship Department dusted off the previous plan and put it

into action. This time, however, travel was aboard the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and began from Lapaz north of Plymouth .

Reflecting the demise of passenger service, the final railroad trip for the Black Horse Troop came in January of 1965. The Academy accepted an invitation for the Troop to ride in Lyndon Johnson's inaugural parade.

Immediately after classes on the 18th, Troopers reported to the Recreation Building with their baggage and boarded busses to Lapaz.

They stood on the windswept platform, stomping their feet to ward off the cold and chatted with General and Mrs. Spivey, while waiting for the *Washington-Chicago Express*. As it slowed to a stop, the Spiveys climbed aboard and waved goodbye as the train disappeared into the darkness. The troopers, it seems, were scheduled for the second section of the Express and it was already 30 minutes late!

Colonel C.A. Whitney was officer-in-charge of the contingent while faculty members Bob Hartman and Ray Walmoth supervised two ancient passenger cars. As the train went slowly through Indiana and Ohio , outside temperatures began to drop and the cadets complained continually over a lack of heat. During the night, additional inauguration-bound cars packed with high school bands, cheerleaders, and general passengers from Michigan and Ohio were added.

By dawn, the journey had lost most of its excitement and adventure. Sleep had been difficult as new passengers passed continuously through the cadet cars searching for seats. After leaving Pittsburgh , passengers began to move forward to the Dining Car and waited for it to open. Soon a line snaked back into the first of the cadet cars. Everyone wanted to eat.

Before the Troop left Culver, the Academy's business office had contracted with the B & O for breakfast. The railroad, however, had no such agreement for the other passengers. When Colonel Whitney entered the dining car followed by a 100 cadets, the dining car manager, unprepared and overwhelmed by the awaiting crowd, decided not to feed anyone. If he could not serve every passenger, no one would eat.



He had just made a serious error of judgment. Obviously he had never met the “Jug.” Within moments, the two men were chin to chin and their “discussion” was heated. Culver had contracted and paid for meals, the cadets were hungry, and they *would* be fed!

Unable to take the pressure from the jut-jawed Colonel, the manager wilted and the troopers marched in, took seats, and were served a full breakfast. The few cadets who had heard the argument – or even part of it –

made a good tale even better. By the time the Washington-Chicago Express arrived at Union Station and three hours behind schedule, reports that Whitney had engaged in fisticuffs to ensure his troopers were properly fed were rampant. “Jug” had just added another star to his already legendary crown.

The following day, the troopers participated in Lyndon Johnson’s inaugural and, by nightfall, were back in Union Station waiting to return to Lapaz. Zombie-like they boarded and collapsed – again on a cold train. About 11 AM on January 21, they returned triumphant to the campus, had lunch, and attended their afternoon classes. Dean Benson would not be denied his academic day! This was the last time the Black Horse Troop would travel to a presidential inauguration by train. The era of rail travel for Culver had come to an end!

Taps for a Different Time

When B.B. and E.R. Culver Jr. incorporated the Culver Realty and Investment Company, they began to acquire property contiguous to the campus and by the late 1920s, controlled everything west to the town park. However, when the Pennsylvania Railroad ceased operation and abandoned its tracks in the 1970s, it retained the title to the right-of-way. Early in his tenure, Superintendent John Mars faced a problem of considerable

magnitude. Could the Academy obtain this property? What legal ramifications did it face? Was it part of the public domain?

James F. Dicke II, a graduate in the Class of 1964 and a trustee on the CEF board, led the Academy through this morass. He worked out an amicable and non-adversarial arrangement with the railroad to acquire the property. The railroad had already salvaged the rails and ties but left behind delinquent taxes. These were paid and the railroad was not held responsible for any necessary cleaning, grading, or improvements. The property was then transferred to the Foundation.

Today, the original railroad right-of-way extends from north of Indiana 10 through Academy property to the town park. There are no train whistles to announce the arrival of new cadets, no rumble of cars carrying the life-blood of the community, no stationmaster to greet parents and call out departing trains, no military processions from the depot to Academy Road. The steel rails no longer hum the “Spirit of Culver.” All that remains are rich chapters of memories of laughing cadets, bustling traffic, and proof that, indeed, you *could* get here from *anywhere!*

The traveling Culver student of the 21st century is remarkably sophisticated and moves through airline terminals with the aplomb of a well-traveled businessman. They know about foreign exchange rates, frequent flyer rewards, and security precautions. Where once the train carried them to Chicago , St. Louis , Los Angeles , New York and points within the United

States , their destinations today are unlimited and resemble a Heathrow International flight board. Culver, it seems, is always on the move.