**“Rings On Their Fingers. . .”**

Long after diplomas have been put aside or hang unnoticed on an office wall, the Culver Ring remains a talisman and one of the strongest links in the chain that has connected Academy graduates as far back as 1916.

To many alumni, the *ring* is more treasured than one from their collegiate or university and its distinctive design and the carved initials make it unique according to Monte Reed, L.G. Balfour's Indiana representative.

Following his appointment as superintendent in 1910, Lt. Col. Gignilliat immediately organized The Culver Military Academy Alumni Association. Its name was about as long as the list of graduates was short. Only 470 men between 1895 and 1910 had been awarded diplomas, but Gignilliat was determined to create an organization that would tie them to future alumni.

He commissioned the C.D. Peacock Jewelers of Chicago to design an official Academy ring in 1915 and what emerged months later was indeed unique. Gignilliat’s interests in all things military was so great that he insisted that each branch of service then at Culver be incorporated in the design and not until the end of World War II did the ring undergo and changes.

Burdened with an unmanageable name, the CMAAA was abandoned in favor of the Culver Legion in 1916 and acquired title to the new ring and established the rules for its distribution and use. It was marketed at $20 for a 10k ring and $24 for one in 14-karat.

It appeared in promotions for the first time in the 1917 *Roll Call* in a full- page advertisement by C.D. Peacock. The ad was heavy on extolling the company lineage as “the largest jewelry story in the West,” but displayed only a small line drawing of the ring showing its top, called the “table,” and the two sides or “shanks.” The initials were those of William Raoul Brown, a one-year

First Classman who was already a graduate from a Joliet, Ill., high school.

The shanks of the ring were cast in gold and contained elements of Culver traditions, military insigne, and the state seal of Indiana. Gold was poured to form an oval at the top or table, after which the graduate’s monogram was hand-carved and the year of graduation stamped beneath. A

twisted rope surrounding the monogram contained stars representing America’s four wars.\* The castle of the Corps of Engineers and the Infantry’s crossed rifles appeared on one shank while the crest of the Signal Corps and crossed- cannon of the Artillery was on the other. Superimposed across a globe of the world was the Culver logo held in the grasp of an eagle's talons.

In the mid-1920s, C.D. Peacock either fell from grace or failed to be competitive and the L.G. Balfour Company of North Attleboro, Mass., won the contract. The agreement stipulated that the Legion was the sole owner of the ring, that direct sales were not permitted, and the Academy could, at any time, randomly select any ring and submit it to the U.S. Mint for assay at the manufacturer's expense.

1. G. Balfour became a great friend and supporter of Culver and in 1961 received its Distinguished Service Award. He insisted that the CMA ring have the same "no charge" lifetime guarantee accorded those on the collegiate level and the company service remains exemplary. Even today, only postage and insurance costs are required for resizing, refinishing, re-engraving or replacement due to faulty materials or inadequate workmanship.

By 1929, a sweetheart miniature had been added. It was identical to cadet rings, only smaller, and sealed many a Culver romance with a favorite girlfriend. Legion rules noted, however, that only the cadet’s initials could appear on the miniature. In recent decades, the miniature has fallen out of fashion and less than 30 have been purchased in the last three decades.

A year after World War II ended, modifications in the original design replaced the Signal Corps seal with that of the U.S. Marine Corps, and the castle of the Army Engineers with the Navy emblem. On one shank is a globe with a spread eagle on top, signifying the position of the United States and Culver in the world. The state seal of Indiana on the other shank demonstrates the school’s cooperation with the state and a fifth star, supposedly representing World War II, was added to the rope surrounding the signet.

Daughters of faculty were granted permission to attend classes in 1957 and graduate from the Culver Military Academy. At the request of the administration, the Culver Legion authorized senior girls the use of sweetheart miniatures for their class ring. In 1972, the newly established Culver Academy for Girls adopted a ring of its own design and the CMA miniature was withdrawn by the Legion and returned to its previous status. If one doubts the impact of the free market on gold prices and inflation during the past 87 years, a 10k CMA ring in 2002 is $449, a 14k $567.

In 1925, the Alumni Office began to maintain a record of all rings ordered, including finger size, gold content and type of finish. In 1935, a Depression low 91 rings were purchased and in 1968, 242 were sold, the most in Culver history. Since 1925, more than 10,000 rings, including re-orders, have been authorized.

For many years the Legion presented honorary membership in the alumni organization and awarded a Culver ring to faculty members upon their retirement. In 1986, however, the Legion directors ratified a constitutional change that recognized faculty and staff after twenty-five years of service. No longer would a teacher have to wait until his tenure concluded before receiving a ring. At the *Reunion* '86 festivities, fifteen active duty instructors representing over 350 years of combined service were honored. Today veterans of the faculty and staff share rings of special distinction with their former students and graduating seniors.

The ring has, over the years, almost taken on a mythological aura and amazing stories abound. One ring was buried by its owner on Corregidor in 1942 rather than have the Japanese confiscate it. Another was lost by a ’42 graduate on a Pacific island and found months later by a ’43 alumnus. The ring has sparked conversations in airports, bars, on battlefields, and just about any venue where Culver alumni have gathered. Some are so worn that the designs have all but disappeared, but not the memories which it brings.

In 1993, then-Culver Historian Bob Hartman proposed that alumni who no longer wore their rings might wish to donate them to a collection he was assembling. The project ended with his retirement, but not before he received six rings. The small collection was inventoried, boxed, and placed in safekeeping for some future historian. In 2000, Hartman returned to Culver service and reprised the original project. The collection has two unusual rings that predate the official ring of 1916, and one from 1931 that definitely tampered with history.

The first was worn by John H.G. Reilly ’13, a trooper and one of Vice President Marshall’s four-man guard-of- honor in Woodrow Wilson’s 1913 Inaugural Parade. The donors of his ring are sons John G. Reilly Jr. ’43 and Philip

1. Reilly ’48. The Reilly ring from Spies Brothers Jewelers in Chicago is unique because it contains the Culver logo

embedded in an amethyst-colored stone. Regrettably, much of the stone is shorn off so the full beauty of the ring is missing.

The second oldest ring in the collection is the gift of William A. Donovan ’43, and was worn by his uncle, Richard Cushman Priddie, a member of the class of 1915. The design appears to set the stage for the C.D. Peacock

effort a year later.

The uniqueness of the ring of the late Robert D. Gruen ’31, is remarkable because it crossed the line of the Legion-sanctioned design. As Gruen related his story to B.G. O’Reilly ’62, he (and possibly two or three classmates) wanted a ring with a stone like those worn at West Point and the Naval Academy.

Gruen’s father was the manufacturer of the popular Gruen wristwatch and employed some of the country’s finest jewelers. He had the center of his ring cut out and replaced with a garnet. The initials “RDG” and the class year 1931 were then encrusted into the stone in gold.

In more recent years, this most treasured of Culver traditions was updated. As of Aug. 1, 2014, all CMA rings began to feature a sixth star, representing alumni service in the Global War on Terrorism, adding to representation of service in the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, the five previous military conflicts represented by a star.

According to Monte Reed, the Academies’ Balfour representative, Culver is its oldest high school class ring account and is considered its most prestigious. It should come as no surprise that Culver’s per capita purchase rate is higher than any other high school in America.

The Alumni Office, acting as the Legion’s agent, maintains records for all rings purchased, including size, gold content, and type of finish, as well as the inscription each customer uses on the inside of the ring. Since the ring debuted, orders for an estimated 20,000 rings, including re-orders, have been placed.

In 1916, a 10-karat ring sold for $20; a 14-karat ring for $24. Today, those rings sell for $739.95 and $889.95, respectively. If you are interested in a replacement ring, contact the Alumni Office.

Today the Culver ring collection, which is exhibited in the Culver Academies Museum, includes a number of additional rings from virtually all eras of Culver’s history.