BLACK HISTORY MONTH FEATURE:

First West Point Cadet

A court martial and the public disgrace of being expelled from the United States Army would have broken many men, but Henry O. Flipper, the first black man to graduate from West Point, apparently was not.

Instead, he went on to "become a notable figure on the American frontier — as a mining engineer and later as a translator of Spanish land grants."

Flipper's autobiography, "The Colored Cadet at West Point," gives an account of his brief, but eventful Army career:

Six months after his graduation from West Point, 50th in a class of 77, he was assigned to frontier duty at Fort Sill, Indian Territory. From there, he was transferred to Fort Elliot, TX, back to Fort Sill and later to duty at Forts Concho, Davis and Ouitman TX

During this period, Flipper was assigned to the Tenth Calvary, one of two black regiments formed after the Civil War. These black soldiers, called "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Indians and the "Brunettes" by their white officers, were considered to be among the best troops in the area.

Lt. Flipper was the first black officer assigned to the Tenth Calvary.

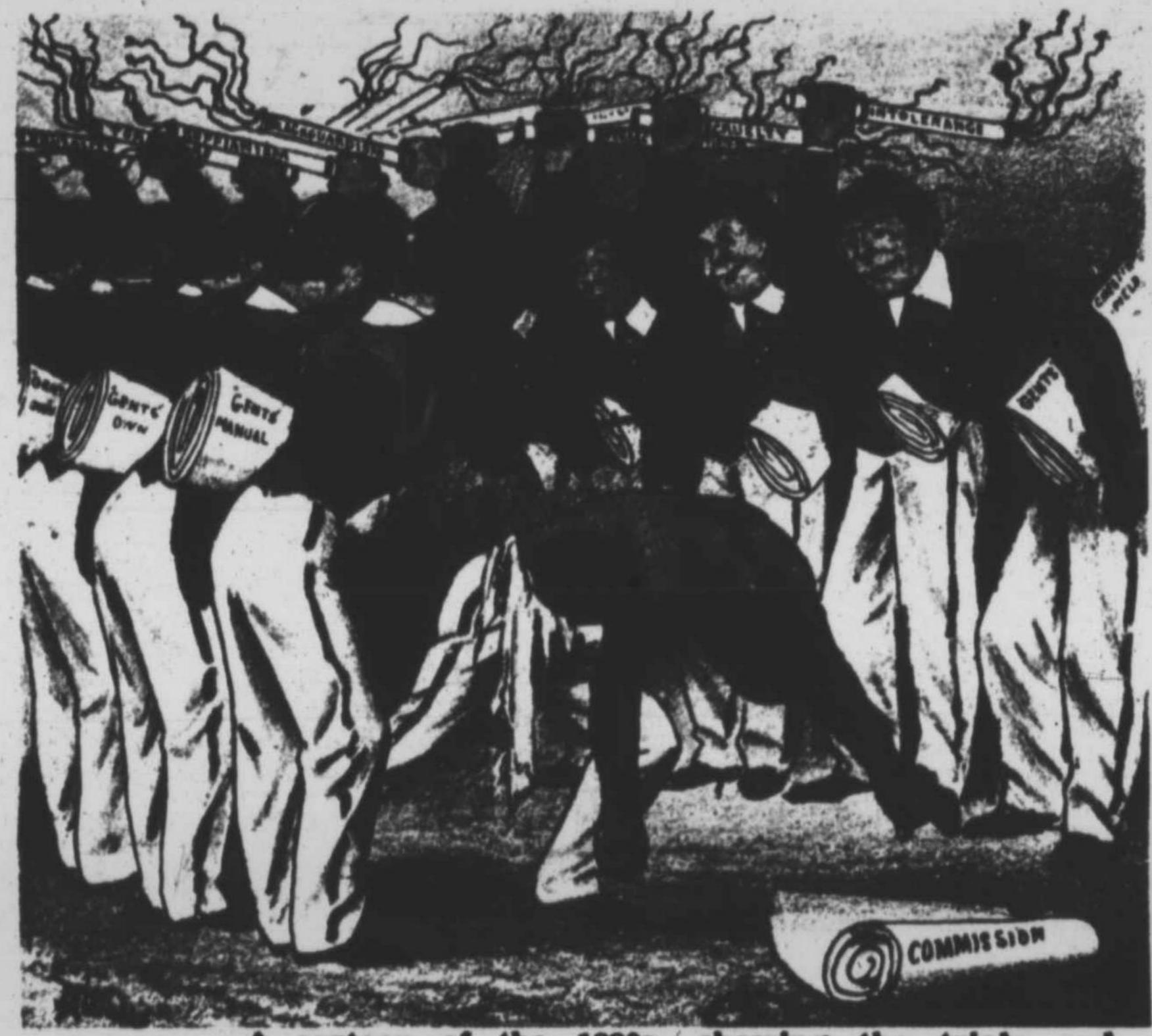
As an officer at Fort Sill, Flipper was responsible for surveying and draining ponds. He also supervised the building of a road from the fort to Gainsville, TX.

He was responsible for the installation of a telegraph line from Fort Elliot to Fort Supply,



John H. Alexander Second graduate

Henry O. Flipper was the not the first black to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, that distinction goes to James W. Smith in 1870. Flipper, however, was the first black to graduate in 1877.



A cartoon of the 1880s, showing the trials and tribulations of black West Pointers trying to reach graduation and commissioning.

Indian Territory and he participated in the campaign against Victorio and the Apache Indians.

During Flipper's five year Army career, he also served as Post Adjutant, Acting Assistant and Post Quartermaster, Acting

Housing, water, fuel, transportation, clothing, equipment been mailed by Flipper had not been received.

Shafter examined the books and claimed Flipper failed to mail \$3,791.07 to the Chief Commissary. He said he saw Flipper in town mounted with saddle bags and believed Flipper was leaving the area.

Lt. Flipper was arrested. His

By Ann Williams-Roblow

and food supplies for the troops were among his duties.

The events which eventually lead to Flipper's ouster from the military probably began with a letter.

The letter, dated Aug. 13, 1881, was addressed to the Adjutant General Department of Texas. It was written by William R. Shafter, Fort Davis' commanding officer.

In the letter, Shafter said he had been informed by the Chief Commissary of the Department funds that were reported to have

quarters were searched. Shafter claimed the funds were missing and that the black officer had stolen them.

However, Shafter wrote the Adjutant General two weeks later to inform him, Flipper had made good all monies he had been responsible for.

In spite of this, the charges against Flipper stood and a court martial occurred. On Nov. 4, 1881, Flipper was tried before a general court martial at Fort

The charges against him were

"embezzling public funds and conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman."

According to Flipper's autobiography, he apparently had not sent his reports and checks to the Chief Commissary when he indicated he had. Several checks were said to have been found in his trunk.

At this point, the autobiography is unclear as to in whose trunks the checks were found, Flipper's or the fort's Chief Commissary's. In any event, Flipper was found not guilty of the embezzlement charge. The charge of conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman stood and he was convicted on that count.

The court sentenced Flipper to be dismissed from the service of the United States. President Chester A. Arthur confirmed the sentence and Lt. Flipper was dismissed June 30, 1882.

"Years later, he wondered if the fact that he had been friendly and gone riding with a young white woman at Fort Concho had influenced his case," the autobiography said.

This must have been a frustrating and discouraging time for the young Georgian, particularly since his four - year stint at West Point was marred by social ostracism by his fellow.

"In spite of his loneliness, isolation and numerous little hostile acts against him, Flipper survived and was graduated" the autobiography said. Henry Ossian Flipper was born

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to slave parents, Isabella and



Col. Charles Young Third graduate

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