

When black men were Victoria's only militia

by Brooke Forbes

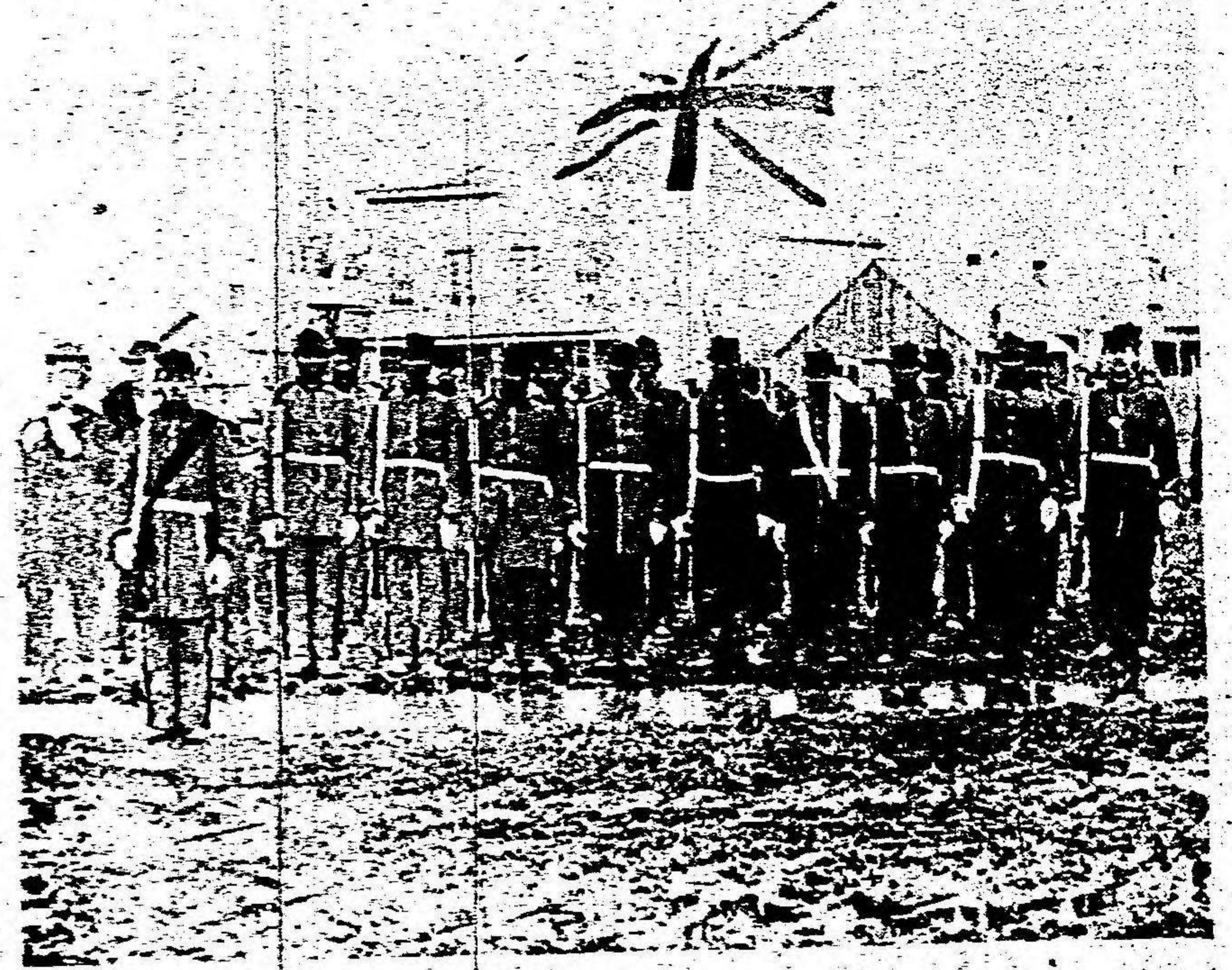
On any sunny Sunday afternoon in 1860, most of the inhabitants of Victoria, B.C. could be found watching the lively military drilling of the colourful black regiment known as the African Rifles. They had the distinction of being the first military unit in the province and the rifle corps was justifiably proud both of their 8 piece brass band and their beautifully embroidered blue and white dress uniforms. Their weekly display in the flower trimmed clearing of Beacon Hill Park had quickly become a favourite Sunday pastime for the people of Victoria.

The 44 black men practised precision drilling, their band playing the solemn Men of Harlech, while children played at being soldiers alongside them. Their parents, in billowing Sunday dresses, parasols, and black bowler hats shared picnic hampers and pitchers of cold beer in this relaxed ritual of Victorian British Columbia.

The African Rifles had been popular with a large segment of the populace of Victoria from its inception, though it also had some very strong opponents ... primarily those who had objected to the presence of the blacks in B.C. from the very beginning, and who tried hard to prevent their

participation in all of the community's affairs.

Blacks began arriving in B.C. from California in 1858, as a result of legislation instituted by that newly formed state which would restrict the activities of the thousands of free blacks who had gone west as a refuge from slavery. When in January of that year, Archy Lee, a fugitive slave, was arrested in California, the blacks there organized an emigration society to investigate possible locations to resettle. The decision to choose British Columbia was made after a personal invitation was extended to them by the governor of the colony, James Douglas, whose



VICTORIAN PIONEER RIFLE CORPS, popularly known as the African Rifles, are shown in full dress uniform in this photo from the Archives of British Columbia.

own mother was West Indian.

In April of 1858 the first blacks arrived in Victoria, a settlement

whose population had recently swollen, with the discovery of gold, from a Hudson's Bay trading post of 800, to a community of over 17,000 all in a matter of just a few months. The blacks, totalling about 400 families, settled mainly in and around Victoria, with a large group pre-empting land on Saltspring Island, the largest of the Gulf Islands.

Overt hostility

The newly arrived settlers were greeted with a certain amount of hostility. Many of those who had come to B.C. in the gold rush were Americans from slave holding states who rejected the idea of integration. The blacks were refused membership in almost every organization that existed in Victoria, with the exception of the Anglican church, whose minister, Reverend Cridge, fought the disapproval of most of his white parishioners and became a champion of the black pioneers.

There were no military regiments at the time, but the hastily constructed city was a firetrap, and there were in existence two fire brigades. Unable to join either of these, the blacks formed a rifle corps ... the first in British Columbia. It was called the Pioneer Rifles, excluded whites, and was given the full support of Governor Douglas.

The Pioneer Rifles consisted of 40 privates, 1 captain, 2 lieutenants, 1 sergeant, and an 8 piece band. Their uniforms, made in England, consisted of a dress uniform of blue with white facing and pipe clayed webbing, and a drill uniform that was green with orange facing. On their heads, the corps wore flat peaked caps with white tufts at the front.

The African Rifles, as they were popularly known, built a drill hall almost at once, located on Yates Street in Victoria, but when the weather permitted, Beacon Hill was their favourite place to drill and hold skirmishes. The public display became a popular Victoria outing, and the corps itself became so popular that when, in 1861, a group of whites decided to form their own brigade, there was a great deal of opposition from Victoria's white residents.

Militia ignored

In 1864 Governor Douglas retired. He was replaced by James Kennedy in whose honour inauguration celebrations were planned throughout the colony, including a parade in Victoria.

(Continued on page 16)

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Three Hills Capital
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Vulcan Advocate
Westlock News (Including Shopper)
Wetaskiwin Times

Victoria's forgotten African Rifles

[Continued from page 12]

use. When the Pioneer Rifles approached the organizing committee with the suggestion that they participate in the parade they were refused permission, setting off a controversy in the press about the legitimacy of the refusal, and the state of race relations in the province. The committee claimed that they had refused the request because as the only military unit, custom decreed that the African Rifles would have to lead the parade, and they felt the other participants would have withdrawn in protest.

The Pioneer Rifles continued to drill publicly, hoping to work up public support and change the minds of the members of the committee who had opposed their inclusion in the parade. They paraded their band through the streets every evening, and the day before the parade held a special ceremony at which they were presented with a silk Union Jack by the 'Ladies of Victoria'. At the presentation a speech was made by one of the ladies saying: "Men, as long as this flag shall wave over you, you may rest assured that no man, or set of men, or nations can successfully grind you down under the iron heel of oppression!"

In spite of these fervent words, and the sympathy and urging of many prominent residents of Victoria, the Rifles were not permitted to join the parade. The Daily Chronicle of March 15th, 1864, lists the order of the procession:

- Grand Marshall Band
- Dupiation from the Hebrew Benevolent Society;
- Pioneer Firemen;
- His Excellency's carriage;
- City Council;
- Hebrew Benevolent Society with banner;
- Societe Francaise de Bien-faisance with banner;
- Tricolor and Gold;
- Assistant Marshall, Pilots, Assistant Marshall;
- Police;
- Band;
- Deluge Fire company with apparatus;
- Tiger Fire Company with apparatus;
- Union Hook and Ladder Company;
- Citizens.

During the parade the outcast Rifles held a party for their supporters at a restaurant owned by one of their members, where generous portions of chicken and beer were consumed.



Dramatic gesture
A week later, in a dramatic gesture, the Pioneer Rifles,

preceded by its brass band, dressed in its fine embroidered dress uniforms, marched with dignity across the old wooden bridge, and up to the Legislative buildings where they demanded to see the new governor. When Kennedy came out to greet the corps, their captain delivered an impassioned speech welcoming the governor and explaining: "... we were precluded on account of an anti British prejudice against our colour, of doing ourselves the honour, as well as the pleasure, of taking part in the procession as a military company whose highest aims is to be of service to her Majesty's most loyal subjects."

At the conclusion of the speech, Governor Kennedy made a rather vague and feeble speech himself, thanking the African Rifles for their loyalty, and mentioning that he was used to 'coloured people' having spent a great deal of time on the Ivory Coast. Then he added that this race consciousness had been imported from the United States, and that he hoped in time it would disappear. Discouraged by the governor's lack of forthright support, and mystified by Kennedy's reference to the blacks of Ivory Coast ... with whom these Canadians felt no affinity ... the African Rifles marched back to their drill hall.

The occasion of Governor Kennedy's inauguration marked the height of activity and interest for the Pioneer Rifles. Gradually the unit lost its appeal, and started to fall off in attendance and spirit. Finances became a problem, and

without the enthusiasm of the public, fund raising events were ineffectual. Finally in 1866, the

corps disbanded and Victoria lost a lively, colourful, and unique institution.

Holland in a hurry

(Continued from page 3)

but demolished by vengeful enemy troops.

Saved from the sea

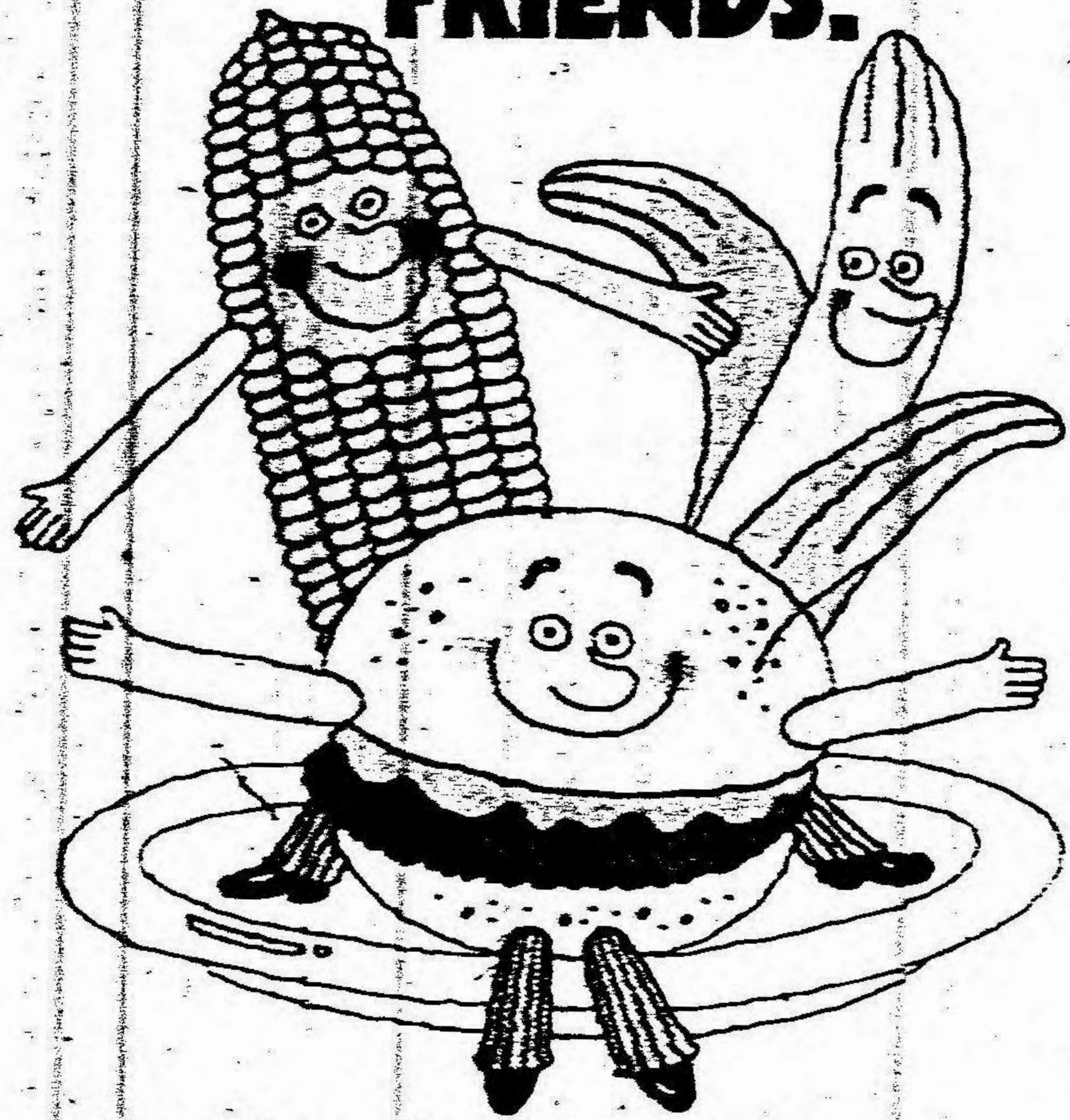
To Harderwijk I went, some 70 miles, to be met by Miss Clara den Bandt, Information Officer of Nieuwland — reclaimed farmlands from the former Zuyder Zee. All day we drove through Flevoland-east, the latest of four 'polders' which, together, have added more than 400,000 acres to Holland's agricultural economy. With the Zuyder Zee blocked off from the North Sea, rivers provided fresh water to desalinate, and purify the present Lake IJsselmeer. Then dikes enclosed large areas, and from the 'polders' thus created, water was pumped. Suitable seeding was done by plane, and now, on this former seabed grain and vegetables are grown, and fruit, and flowers, on farms leased to families to whom agriculture is a traditional pursuit. Time was also spent at Flevohof, an entertaining agricultural centre where city people come to see and participate in aspects of farm life. And new cities will rise there, too, thus Nieuwland proving the truth of the old saying: "God made the world, but the Dutch, themselves, made Holland!"

Den Haag, (The Hague) city of government, deserves more mention than space permits. A gracious city, with many old, interesting buildings; a 'newer' one — the Peace Palace — completed in 1913 — housing the International Court of Justice.

We arrived on the opening day of the annual summertime Thursday Antique Fair. On that day each week, may be bought antiques and "antiques" — many of the latter being like the intriguing "thunder mug" I tried to persuade my wife to buy. Unique in design, it seemed hand-painted, and would, I thought, make an excellent flower pot. It is, so far as I know, still there.

Across the square from this open-air, tree-shadowed market is Hotel des Indes, where we stayed amid treasured, real antiques, both furnishings and furniture. Members of Royalty, wealthy Dutch expatriots from the former East Indies, diplomats, celebrities, have stayed there. Pavlova, arriving ill from Paris, died there — a salon is named in her honor. And, each year when the Queen leaves from the palace nearby, the orange shades of Hotel des Indes are lowered in salute, a tribute to Her Majesty's family, the House of Orange.

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SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Note: Classes are subject to change without notice.

CLASS	LOCATION	DAYS	TIME
001	CAMBRIDGE HALL 2135 17th Avenue	WED	7:00 p.m.
004	ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION 3675 West Broadway	THURS	7:00 p.m.
005	JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTRE 358 West 41st Avenue	THURS	7:00 p.m.
006	ST. PETER'S & PAUL HALL 1457 W. 38th Avenue	MON	7:00 p.m.
007	WILSON MEMORIAL CENTRE 2195 W. 45th Avenue	THURS	7:00 p.m.
008	RENEW UNITED CHURCH 2885 E. 1st Avenue	WED	7:00 p.m.
009	SCOTTISH AUDITORIUM 1885 W. 12th Ave. at Fr	TUES	7:00 p.m.
010	SOUTH HILL UNITED CHURCH 1415 E. 47th at Fraser	MON	7:00 p.m.
011	COLLINGWOOD COMM. HALL 6295 Kerr Street	THURS	7:00 p.m.
012	CENTENNIAL MOTOR HOTEL 898 W. Broadway	MON	7:00 p.m.
013	WEST END DENYMAN PLACE INN 1731 Cass Street	THURS	9:30 a.m.
014	DEVONSHIRE HOTEL 849 W. Georgia	WED	7:00 p.m.
015	ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION 7811 Westminster Hwy.	WED	7:00 p.m.
016	ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION 119-43-225 Street	WED	7:00 p.m.
017	DELTA PARK UNITED CHURCH 8048 No. 1 Road	MON	7:00 p.m.
018	DELTA LAGNER I.D.F. HALL 5425 Trunk Road	MON	7:00 p.m.
019	DELTA REC CENTRE 1728-54th Street	THURS	7:00 p.m.
020	ELKS HALL 373 & Fraser Hwy	WED	7:00 p.m.
021	TRINITY UNITED CHURCH 2648 Cedar at Hazel	TUES	7:00 p.m.
022	ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION 123 W. 15th Avenue	TUES	7:00 p.m.
023	QUEEN'S AVE. UNITED CHURCH 529 Queen's Ave.	TUES	7:00 p.m.
024	CAPITOL HILL COMM. HALL E. Hastings at Howard St. 3496 BR.	MON	7:00 p.m.
025	WILLINGDOON HEIGHTS CHURCH 4384 Parker R. Burnaby	TUES	7:00 p.m.
026	MAIN CENTRE 7999 KINGSTWAY	MON	7:00 p.m.
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