The Glory of Black History

by John E. Jacob

Black History Month is here again, and this year it's received a big boost by the widespread attention given the film, Glory.

Glory is the heroic story of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, an allblack unit in the Union Army that fought its way into history.

But that history has been too long neglected. Few Americans know that blacks fought in the Civil War. The conventional. and mistaken, view has always been that the North went to war to free the slaves.

In fact, the North went to war to preserve the Union. It was willing to tolerate slavery but not to accept the right of states to secede. Only after the war was well under way, did President Lincoln incorporate abolition as a war aim.

That's why African Americans were excluded from the armed forces when the war began - because, as historian James M. McPherson wrote: "it would have sent a signal that this was to be an abolition war."

It became an abolition war because of the actions of African Americans, who marched across southern lines at the approach of the Union armies in the south, and who clamored for the opportunity to fight for freedom in the north.

Great African American leaders such as Frederick Douglass correctly saw black participation in fighting as a route to freedom, and it wasn't until late 1862 that the first black fighting units were formed.

The 54th Massachusetts wasn't among them; it was organized at the direction of the governor of Massachusetts. The first units were organized by the Union armies from among the ranks of escaped slaves.

Those units fought bravely and convinced the top brass not only that African Americans could fight, but that they could be an important weapon in the war.

The 54th Massachusetts, like other black units in American wars up to the 1940's, had white commanders. And the African American troops were paid at lower rates than white soldiers, leading to a "pay strike"

in which black fighting men refused to accept their second-class pay checks and demanded equal pay, something Congress didn't get around to doing until 1864.

Ironically, the 54th Massachusett's greatest ordeal came in the crucial battle of Fort Wagner, just days after whites in New York rioted in protest against the draft.

It'suffered terrible casualties, but achieved the goal of its brave volunteers - to win respect for black people and to play a leading role in the fight to overthrow slavery. The military authorities at first thought African American units would be useful as behind-the-scenes labor battalions, but they proved themselves in battle and helped preserve

Lincoln said as much, as Professor McPherson points out, when the President wrote that when the war would end in a rebirth of freedom in a re-united nation:

"there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it."

Whatever minor historical truth that all Americans should know about

We've come a long way in the 127 years since the 54th Massachusetts was formed, and every forward step along that way was made by strong people determined to be respected as equals and willing to put up with slurs and indignities to make their way and achieve their goal.

This is the month to celebrate their achievements, and to note that while the black troops who helped preserve the Union in the 1860's were at first deemed incapable, the armed forces of today's United States are led by an African American commander, General Colin Powell.

> A man must make his opportunity as oft as find it.

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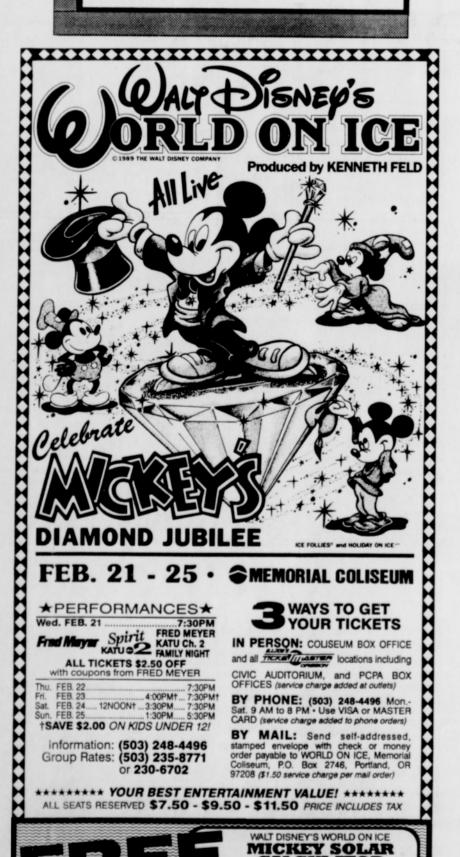
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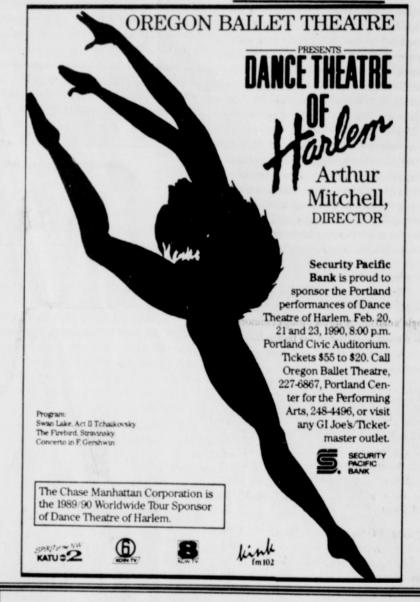




Ron Silver gives a subtle, flercely contained performance... Anjelica Huston is wry, stirring and powerful...Stein is both touching and funny, and Lena Olin is astonishing here... It's not like any other movie." -David Ansen, NEWSWEEK

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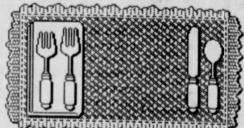


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