

A Pension Gone Astray

It was, in early days, customary for the United States government to give land warrants for military service, but the Civil War left too many veterans for such rewards. It became necessary, or at least popular, to give pensions to such veterans, their widows, and certain minor children. This pension system created many an odd problem for those to whom the work was entrusted. One of the strangest incidents of the pension program concerned a veteran in Mills County, Iowa, who refused his pension because he believed such largesse should go only to the needy.

This veteran, H. C. Robbins, had served nearly three years (1862-1865) in Company A, 92nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. After he returned from the war he purchased land in the fertile valley of the West Nishnabotna River near the town of Hastings, Iowa. As he looked over his productive acres he could see no reason why the government should pay him a pension and so for many years, while his comrades received their allotments from the government, he applied for no such checks.

Finally, as he approached the sunset years, a

relative convinced him that since the government was paying out the money to other veterans of that conflict, whether needy or not, he would not be accepting charity if he applied for the pension. He made out an application and sent it to Washington, but was quite chagrined to have the government question his eligibility on the ground that he had been receiving a pension for the past twenty years. When he, in turn, wrote that he had never before applied for a pension, the government sent an investigator from Washington to look into the matter.

Before the investigator was convinced that Mr. Robbins had received no pension and was eligible for one, he had made three trips out from the capital. When he came the third time, Mr. Robbins was thoroughly irritated with the business. "If it takes so much trouble to get a pension", he told the investigator, rather testily, "you can just keep the damn thing." Mrs. Robbins brought out some checks which had been issued over a period of several years and Mr. Robbins' signatures showed with such exceptional regularity that they looked as if they might have been made with a rubber stamp. The investigator was convinced that the signatures on the pension checks were not those of Mr. Robbins.

The investigator later found that the pension

checks which had supposedly been going to Mr. Robbins were being received and cashed by a man in a small town in Colorado. From the investigator's description, Mr. Robbins identified him as a man named Harrison who had lived on a neighboring farm more than two decades earlier. This former neighbor, having learned of Mr. Robbins' attitude toward pensions, had collected sufficient data to make an acceptable application, moved to Colorado, applied for the pension, and had drawn it for a full twenty years.

After discovering the fraud and settling with Harrison, the investigator returned and told Mr. Robbins about it. Harrison, he said, had carried his deception to an exceptional degree. He ran a hotel in Colorado, had joined the local G. A. R. post there, and shortly before the investigator arrived had been elected post commander. His hotel was headquarters for the post.

Harrison met the trains to get business for his hostelry and so met the investigator when he arrived. They went to the hotel together and when the investigator told him that he wished to see him privately they went upstairs to a bedroom. There the investigator confronted him with evidence of the fraud and Harrison confessed. Meanwhile Harrison's wife heard the men talking in the room, joined them, and was informed of

her husband's deceit. She was evidently a woman of direct action, for she at once accused her husband of "two-timing" her and then assaulted him with her fists with such violence that the man was well battered before the investigator could separate them. Then the investigator took Harrison down to the lobby of the hotel and introduced him to a group of old soldiers there, his former comrades in the G. A. R. post, as a fraud and a scoundrel.

The government, oddly enough, preferred no criminal charges against Harrison and when Mr. Robbins asked the investigator about this he replied: "After what the old lady did to him and what the old soldiers said to him, I thought he had about punishment enough."

So Harrison was turned loose and lost no time getting out of that town. The incident and its strange ending amused the investigator and he laughed heartily as he told of the affair. Mr. Robbins received his pension from then on until his death without further difficulty.

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