

Fern Hobbs (1883-1964)

By Gary Dielman

In January 1914, thirty-year-old Fern Hobbs achieved international celebrity when Oregon Governor Oswald West sent her, along with several National Guardsmen, to tame the reputed “lawless” town of Copperfield on Snake River in eastern Oregon. While best known for her role in what became known as the Copperfield Affair, in 1914, Hobbs considered her participation in that event far less important than her subsequent civic efforts on behalf of Oregon and the nation.

Hobbs was born on May 8, 1883, on a sheep ranch near Bloomington, Nebraska. At age six, the family moved to Salt Lake City, where Fern graduated from high school in 1904. That year the family moved to Portland, where Hobbs found employment as governess in the family of banker J. Wesley Ladd.

Fern Hobbs studied stenography at night and by 1906 was working as private secretary to J. Thorburn Ross, president of Title Guarantee and Trust Company. The bank soon failed, but Fern stayed on to help settle the bank's affairs and impressed attorney Ben W. Olcott, later governor of Oregon (1919-1923), with her abilities. In 1910, Olcott introduced Hobbs to Governor-elect Oswald West, and he hired her as his chief clerk. While working for the governor, she attended law school at Willamette University, graduating in May 1913.

At about the same time that Fern became a lawyer, Governor West promoted her to be his private secretary—a post traditionally held by men—at an annual salary of \$3,000. The salary, reputed to be the highest of any woman in public office in the nation (according to the March 20, 1913, *Oregonian*), catapulted Hobbs into newspaper headlines for the first time and made her a symbol of what women could accomplish just a year after Oregon women achieved suffrage. Although an ardent feminist in her beliefs, Hobbs did not actively participate in the women's suffrage movement.

Hobbs again made headlines in November 1913, when Governor West sent her to Washington, D.C., where she successfully negotiated with federal officials to settle land swaps and other matters delayed in Congress involving lands worth millions of dollars.

A few months later, in January 1914, West sent Hobbs to the Baker County community of Copperfield to deliver the governor's declaration of martial law. Hobbs' role in quelling unrest in the area earned mention in newspapers throughout the U.S. and even in Europe.

Before leaving office at the end of 1914, West named Hobbs to Oregon's Industrial Accident Commission. She was soon an authority on workmen's compensation, and the *Oregon Journal* reported that she advocated for those who “have become victims to industry, who have fallen under the wheels of progress.”

In 1918, Hobbs was secretary of the Oregon Thrift Campaign, collecting money to aid those fighting in World War I. Later that year, she volunteered with the Red Cross in Paris, France, helping residents of destroyed towns and villages and working to locate missing American soldiers. Witnessing peace celebrations in Paris in November 1918, she later wrote, was “the biggest event in my life.”

After returning home in 1919, Fern volunteered in 1921 with the U.S. Army of occupation in Coblenz, Germany, where she operated a YMCA facility. The following year, she returned to Oregon to work in Oswald West's Portland law office. From 1925 until her retirement in 1948, Hobbs was secretary to S.R. Winch, business manager of the *Oregon Journal*.

Hobbs continued living in her cottage in Portland. In 1959, forty-five years after she “tamed” Copperfield, she visited the former town site, where she found nothing to remind her that a town had existed there. Fern Hobbs died in Portland on April 10, 1964.

Sources

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