

James C. Leaman's Life (1873-1960), As Revealed By His Pension File

Leaman
family
OCCGS REFERENCE ONLY

By Harold E. Hinds, Jr.

In my regular column for the *National Genealogical Society Magazine*, "Writing Family History," (July-September 2010 issue), I explored the life of James C. Leaman as recalled by family and revealed in a variety of documents. "Perils and Unexpected Joys of Memory" particularly focused on the potential value of oral history. This article focuses on documentary sources.



James C. Leaman and his cousin, Mae Dice Wiltse Hinds
ca. 1921 Portland, Oregon

James C. Leaman served in the Spanish-American War and in the Philippine Insurrection, and might have earned a pension. A search in the "General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934," available on microfilm at the Family History Library, confirmed that he had filed for and received a pension. The key information from the index was his pension file numbers: Application #1,479,173; Certificate #A-2-28-27; and under remarks #C2,344,389. He had filed for a pension 29 January 1923 from Oregon. The "General Index" also summarized the units in which he had served, allowing me to clearly identify him in the *U.S. Army Registers of Enlistments, 1798-1914* (available

on Ancestry.com), and to follow his military career in greater detail in Returns from Regular Infantry Regiments, 1821-1916 (available on microfilm at the National Archives). When these records are combined with the diary Leaman kept during his Philippine service (now at the Oregon Historical Society), the pension file adds little to our knowledge of his years of military service. Rather, it was my search for information on his post-military years that led me to seek out his pension file.

The pension file was not at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Eventually, it will be, since the Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection pensions are scheduled to be transferred from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington Region Office, or more precisely, from the Lee Summit Records Management Center to the Archives in Washington.

The staff at the National Archives provided essential assistance in the proper way to request Leaman's file. I addressed the letter to FOIA/Privacy Act Office, Veterans Benefits Administration (20M33), Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Ave NW, Washington, DC 20420. It opened with "I am requesting access to the pension file of James C. Leaman under the Freedom of Information Act. In particular, I am requesting a BIRLS search for the file and that it be retrieved for my use." The request closed with "Please provide me with a Xerox copy of the *entire* file. I am willing to pay any applicable fees." The file was requested in July 2008 and received in December 2009.

The file contained a wealth of post-service information. Leaman received a pension under the Act of June 5, 1920, War with Spain, Philippine Insurrection and China Relief Expedition. After an initial rejection in 1923, his claim was approved in 1926. The approval stated, "Claimant is partially unable to earn a support by manual labor." Leaman was awarded a pension of \$40 per month. This payment was increased to \$50 per month under the Act of 2 June 1930. Then it was reduced to \$15 per month under Public Law No. 2, 73d Congress, passed 20 March 1933, effective 1 November 1933. This reduction was included in "An Act to maintain the credit of the United States Government," and undoubtedly was due to the Great Depression. Leaman still qualified for a reduced pension, instead of none, "on account of being past 55 years of age and 50% disabled (Act June 16, 1933)." In October 1935, under the Act of August 13, 1935, his pension was restored to the earlier amount of \$50. A letter dated 5 September 1935 from the Veterans Administration found in Leaman's pension file stated that "In accordance with the provisions of an Act of Congress approved August 13, 1935, a vast majority of Spanish-American War veterans are being restored to the pension rolls in the amount provided by the Acts in force on March 19, 1933." Finally, in November 1938, the amount was "increased again to \$60 per month on account of age," Leaman having passed his 65th birthday.

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Form approved. Budget Bureau No. 76-R049-A

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION		APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES FLAG FOR BURIAL PURPOSES		IMPORTANT: Complete Original and Duplicate	
SECTION I—APPLICATION (A flag will not be furnished under any circumstances unless all information requested in this portion is given in full.)					
LAST NAME—FIRST NAME—MIDDLE NAME OF DECEASED (Print or type) Leaman, James Charles		BRANCH OF SERVICE (Check) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARMY <input type="checkbox"/> NAVY <input type="checkbox"/> AIR FORCE <input type="checkbox"/> MARINE CORPS <input type="checkbox"/> COAST GUARD NAME OF WAR (Check) <input type="checkbox"/> WWI <input type="checkbox"/> WWII <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SPANISH AMERICAN <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (Specify) <i>XC 2344389</i>			
CHECK THE CONDITION UNDER WHICH DECEASED WAS SEPARATED FROM SERVICE <input type="checkbox"/> 1. VETERAN OF A WAR OR THE KOREAN CONFLICT DISCHARGED OR RELEASED FROM ACTIVE DUTY UNDER CONDITIONS OTHER THAN DISHONORABLE. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2. DISCHARGED FROM, OR RELEASED FROM ACTIVE DUTY IN U. S. ARMED FORCES UNDER CONDITIONS OTHER THAN DISHONORABLE, AFTER SERVING AT LEAST ONE YEAR OF ENLISTMENT, OR DISCHARGED FOR DISABILITY INCURRED IN LINE OF DUTY. <input type="checkbox"/> 3. BY DEATH IN ACTIVE SERVICE AFTER MAY 27, 1941, AND FLAG NOT FURNISHED BY THE SERVICE DEPARTMENT. <input type="checkbox"/> 4. SEPARATED FROM PHILIPPINE MILITARY FORCES, UNDER CONDITIONS OTHER THAN DISHONORABLE, AFTER SERVING UNITED STATES IN SUCH FORCES UNDER PRESIDENT'S ORDER OF JULY 26, 1941, AND DIED ON OR AFTER APRIL 25, 1951.					
NAME, ADDRESS, AND RELATIONSHIP OF PERSON ENTITLED TO RECEIVE FLAG (If deceased, give name, address, and relationship of person entitled to receive flag) Mrs. Oliver Huff, 2522 West St., Bellingham, Wash. Sister					
SECTION II—PERSONAL DATA OF DECEASED (To be filled in if possible)					
CLAIM NO. <i>C</i>	SERVICE SERIAL NO.	DATE OF ENLISTMENT <i>9-7-18</i>	DATE OF DISCHARGE <i>12-6-01</i>	DATE OF BIRTH <i>11-11-73</i>	
DATE OF DEATH <i>7-2-60</i>	PLACE OF DEATH (Address) <i>Portland, Oregon</i>	PLACE OF BURIAL (Address) <i>Willamette National</i>	DATE OF BURIAL <i>7-7-60</i>		
CERTIFICATION: I CERTIFY THAT, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the statements made above are correct and true, the deceased is eligible, in accordance with attached Instructions, for issue of a United States flag for burial purposes, and such flag has not previously been applied for or furnished.					
SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT <i>A. J. Rose and Son</i>		ADDRESS <i>537 S. E. Alder St.</i>	RELATIONSHIP TO DECEASED <i>Mortician</i>	DATE <i>7-5-60</i>	
PENALTY.—The law provides that whoever makes any statement of a material fact knowing it to be false shall be punished by a fine or by imprisonment or both.					

VA FORM 2000 EXISTING STOCKS OF VA FORM 2000, JUL 1953, WILL BE USED. 10-50963-9 ORIGINAL

The pension file's medical records reveal a Jim Leaman who was never particularly physically fit. When he first applied for a pension in 1923, an Affidavit of Physician by James Sproat, M.D. concluded that he was "very much below par physically." Late in life, he was diagnosed with "arteriosclerotic heart disease" and two atrioventricular blockages, one complete, the other incomplete. His death certificate, included in his VA file, gave the cause of death as "cardiac standstill."

Several documents in the file contain significant genealogical information: for example, the dates and place of his birth and death. He had a niece, Ruth Schroeder of Portland, Oregon, and a sister, Nellie Huff, in Bellingham, Washington. He was buried at Willamette National Cemetery in Portland, and his mortician was A. J. Rose and Son, also of Portland. To select a single example of a useful document, which perhaps many genealogists may overlook, I reproduce here an "Application for United States Flag for Burial Purposes."

The pension file helped to solve one particular research problem that had resisted multiple lines of investigation. According to Portland, Oregon city directories, Jim resided in Portland from 1911 to 1929, but then was not listed from 1931 to 1935 or in 1937. (There was no city directory for 1936.) He was included in the 1930 census in Portland, but where was he in the early and mid-1930s? My father recalled that Jim had worked for Railroad Express on a run to the coast from Portland, and his obituary stated that he had worked for the Southern Pacific. In fact, the Southern Pacific Railroad had

a line that ran from Hillsboro, near Portland, to the coast, according to Tom Dill, *The Southern Pacific in Oregon* [1987], p. 186. I went through newspapers, such as the *Astorian Budget*, of Astoria, Oregon, and *The Oregonian and Oregon Journal* of Portland; looked at U.S. Railroad Retirement Board records (his file had been discarded); searched the National Railway Historical Society's files; combed through surviving seniority lists of the Southern Pacific at the Pacific NW Chapter of the National Railways Society at Union Station in Portland; searched court records; and used city directories for Portland and Hillsboro. All drew blanks.

It turned out that although Portland's city directories had missed him repeatedly, correspondence in his pension file provided Portland addresses for him most years from 1923 until his death in 1960, despite the fact that he moved frequently. Jim was twice divorced prior to receiving a pension, and therefore, he generally resided in hotels. For example, in 1930-1933 he roomed at the Mayflower Hotel in downtown Portland, and during 1935-1938, he was at 516 SW 13th in Portland, undoubtedly another hotel. For certain, from 1927 on he resided at one time or another at the Mayflower Hotel, the Rainer Hotel, the Nortonia Hotel, and the Roseland Hotel, all in Portland, and all mentioned in his pension file.

Indeed, pension and VA files for veterans of wars other than the Revolutionary War and the Civil War – which are often consulted by genealogists and personal family historians – can be rich sources of biographical information and are well worth taking the trouble to obtain.