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## UNCLE SAM'S PENSION OFFICE.

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Washington, Feb. 1, 1898.—I spent two hours recently traveling through the pension office with the Hon. Henry Clay Evans, the United States commissioner of pension. I had asked Mr. Evans to give me some idea of Uncle Sam's pension business, and together we walked from bureau to bureau and office to office, asking questions of the officials in charge and gathering the material which I give you in this letter. The commissioner has the office in a better business condition than it has been for years. He not only ordered that everything be furnished me, but he personally aided in my investigations. The journey was no small one. The pension office at Washington fills the biggest brick building of the world. I doubt that there has ever been a building made of brick which surpassed it in size, although the baths of Diocletian, the ruins of which stand by the Via Nazionale, in Rome, were a mile in circumference. This building covers only two acres, but it is three stories high and there is a big attic up under its glass roof. It has a court in its center bigger than any barn yard you have ever seen, and the huge brick pillars which rise from floor to roof each contain enough brick to build three good-sized houses.

Both court and offices are filled with papers. There are hundreds of millions of pages of writing packed away here. There are enough files in the cases of the pension bureau court to carpet a county, and the old documents among its records, if they could be pasted together, in a single strip, would be long enough to cover a wagon road reaching clear around the world. The pension office deals in big figures. Take the mail, for instance. It was to this division the commissioner and I first went. The commissioner receives 20,000 pieces of mail a day, or more than 7,000,000 pieces every year. He gets more than 5,000,000 letters in a year. If you could paste the answers to his mail together in one single strip it would make a ribbon of white letter paper covered with typewriting reaching from New York to Chicago. If he had to pay his postage at the rate of 2 cents per letter his stamp bill would be over \$100,000 a year, and when you figure up the labor and brains you would have a number of life times embodied in that one item. It takes forty-three clerks to handle this mail. There is one corps of men who do nothing but open letters. Another stamps the date of receipt upon them, and a third reads the letters and sends them to the proper divisions for answer. From four to eight thousand letters are answered every day, and the correspondence increases from year to year.

Every one of these letters has a money end to it. The pension office is the Klondike of the old soldier and not a few men and women who are not old soldiers seek to pan gold out of the sands of its rivers. Last year the

amount of money distributed was more than \$140,000,000. This was an increase of more than \$1,500,000 over the sum paid out in 1896, and the commissioner tells me that there will be more paid out this year than last. The gold mines of the world are now producing more than ever before, and still the total output of them all is only about \$200,000,000 a year. If the gold mines of all the world were run to their full extent for the next ten years they could not get out as much gold as this office has paid out for pensions on account of the war of the rebellion. Up to last June the amount was more than \$2,000,000,000, showing a steady increase from the close of the war up until 1890, and an enormous increase since then. This sum is beyond conception, and, as I have stated, it is on the increase. It amounts to so much now each year that if every man, woman and child in the United States contributed \$2 the aggregate sum would just about pay the pension bills. This is equal to about \$10 for every family in our country. Of this, over \$500,000 goes abroad. Between 3,000 and 4,000 pensioners live in foreign countries and draw their money from us. The remainder are scattered over the United States from Florida to Maine and from Massachusetts to California, and the streams of money which flow here and are dammed up in the treasury are turned into the great pension irrigating ditches every year and carry this golden flood to all parts of the country.

During our walk through the pension office Commissioner Evans and myself spent some time in each of the divisions watching the hundred of clerks at work. There were old and young men among them, and there were plenty of old and young women. I asked a number of questions as to the efficiency of the employees, and was told that while the most of them were very efficient clerks, some were little good except to tie up papers. One man told me the poorest clerks he had were the old schoolmasters, and another said the girls in his bureau were of less value than the men. One chief of a division said some of his best employees were colored, and he pointed as a piece of cannon coal, who, he said, could take the heart out of a pension case quicker than any man he had. There are examiners and clerks scattered over the country, so that, all told, Commissioner Evans has about 7,000 men under him—an army more than half as large as that which Xenophon led on his famous march to the sea. In one division I found about 75 doctors. These men pass upon the medical testimony, and they can see a misstatement in the evidence if it is not very carefully covered. All of them have studied medicine and not a few of them have been active practitioners. Another division is largely made up of lawyers, who pass on the legal aspect of certain cases, and another might be said to be made up of detectives, for it is their business to ferret out frauds.

A great part of the work of our congressmen consists in pushing along

pension cases. There are now an average of about five hundred congressional calls every day, and during the last four days more than two thousand congressional applications for information have been received. Each of these necessitates the looking up of the papers in a certain case.

Since the close of the war more than two million claims for pensions have been filed, and of these more than a million and a half have been allowed. There are hundreds of thousands of additional claims filed for increase of pensions. After the pensioner dies his widow and children are kept on the rolls and single pension case means an enormous amount of work and money. Every one of the claims, both those granted and those pending, has to be kept by itself. And when it is remembered that a single claim comprises in some cases enough papers to fill a peck measure, you get some idea of the enormous work of the office. The claims are separated into different divisions, according to the part of the country in which the claimant lives. Each claim has a number, and the papers concerning it are so arranged that any one of them can be found in a moment. Each claim contains a biography of the man, who asks for the pension, and there is no biographical dictionary so full of interesting things as that comprised in the files of the pension office. If a man has ever done a mean thing in his life he had better not apply for a pension, for many a crime is on record here.

If Uncle Sam could speak to the young republics of South America, who are now and then on the verge of war, I am sure he would advise them just as Sam Weller's father advised him when he said, "beware of the widows." The widows of our old soldiers multiply like the sands of the seashore. Nearly one-fourth of the nine hundred odd thousand names on the pension rolls are those of widows. There are almost a quarter of a million widows receiving pensions, and the widows are increasing in number every year. I spent some time in the division which has to do with soldiers of the war of 1812. There are only seven survivors of that war on the pension roll, but there are 2,810 widows who are receiving pensions because they married old soldiers who fought during the war. There are today almost as many Mexican war widows as there are Mexican war veterans receiving pensions. The Mexican war was over fifty years ago, and today there are ten thousand men and eight thousand widows receiving pensions for the service which themselves or their deceased husbands gave Uncle Sam at that time. You would think that the revolutionary widows would have long since passed away. The last pension soldier of the revolution died April 5, 1869. His name was Daniel Frederick Bakeman, and he was one hundred and seven years of age before he asked for a pension. He then resided at Freedom, N. Y. Congress took up his case and gave him a pension of five hundred dollars