

Fern Hobbs
by
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In January 1914, 28-year-old Fern Hobbs achieved international celebrity, when her boss, Oregon Governor Oswald West, sent her and several National Guardsmen to the “wilds” of Eastern Oregon’s Snake River as his personal representative to tame the reputed “lawless” town of Copperfield, population 80. Fern, however, considered her role in what became known as the Copperfield Affair, as an insignificant part of her professional life.



Fern Data Hobbs, ca. 1913.

Fern Hobbs was born May 8, 1885, 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. Financial problems prompted the family to move to Portland, Oregon, where Fern found employment as governess in the family of Portland banker J. Wesley Ladd. At night she studied stenography.

In about 1905, Fern worked as a stenographer in an abstract and trust company in Baker City, Oregon. In 1906 she was back in Portland working as private secretary to J. Thorburn Ross, president of Title Guarantee and Trust Company. The bank soon folded, but Fern stayed on to help settle the bank's affairs. Her abilities and fierce loyalty to the bank impressed attorney Benjamin W. Olcott,

later governor of Oregon (1919-1923). The encounter with Olcott would change Fern's life.

In 1910, Olcott was Oswald West's campaign manager in the latter's successful bid to be elected governor of Oregon. Olcott introduced Governor-elect West to Fern, who at the time was working at Ladd and Tilton Bank. West immediately hired Fern as his chief clerk. While working for the governor, Fern attended law school at Willamette University graduating in May 1913.



Fern Hobbs, ca. 1925

Almost simultaneously with Fern's becoming a lawyer, Governor West promoted her to be his private secretary--a post traditionally held by men--at an annual salary of \$3000. The salary, reputed to be the highest of any woman in public office in the nation, catapulted Fern into newspaper headlines for the first time, and made her a symbol for what women could accomplish just a year after Oregon women achieved suffrage.

Fern again made headlines, when in November 1913 Governor West sent her to Washington, D.C., where she negotiated land grant matters with federal officials involving millions of dollars. That success and Fern's prominent role in the Copperfield Affair in January 1904, led to her name being mentioned as potential successor to Governor West, who had decided not to run for a second term.

Other highlights of Fern's career:

1915: Member of Oregon Industrial Accident Commission.

1916: In Washington, D.C., she worked to recover 3 million acres of land for Oregon.

1918: Secretary of Oregon Thrift Campaign collecting money in aid of the war effort.

1918-1919: Volunteer for Red Cross in Paris, France, providing assistance to residents of destroyed towns and villages and locating missing American soldiers.



Fern Hobbs in Salvation Army Uniform, ca. 1918.

1921-1922: Volunteer with the U.S. Army of occupation in Coblenz, Germany, where she operated a Y.M.C.A. facility.

1922-1925: Employed again in Oswald West's law office.

1925-1948: Secretary to S.R. Winch, business manager of the *Oregon Journal*, until mandatory retirement age.



Fern Hobbs at her Portland Residence, ca. 1960.

Fern Hobbs died April 10, 1964, in Portland.

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