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The Wilbur Fisk Sanders Story

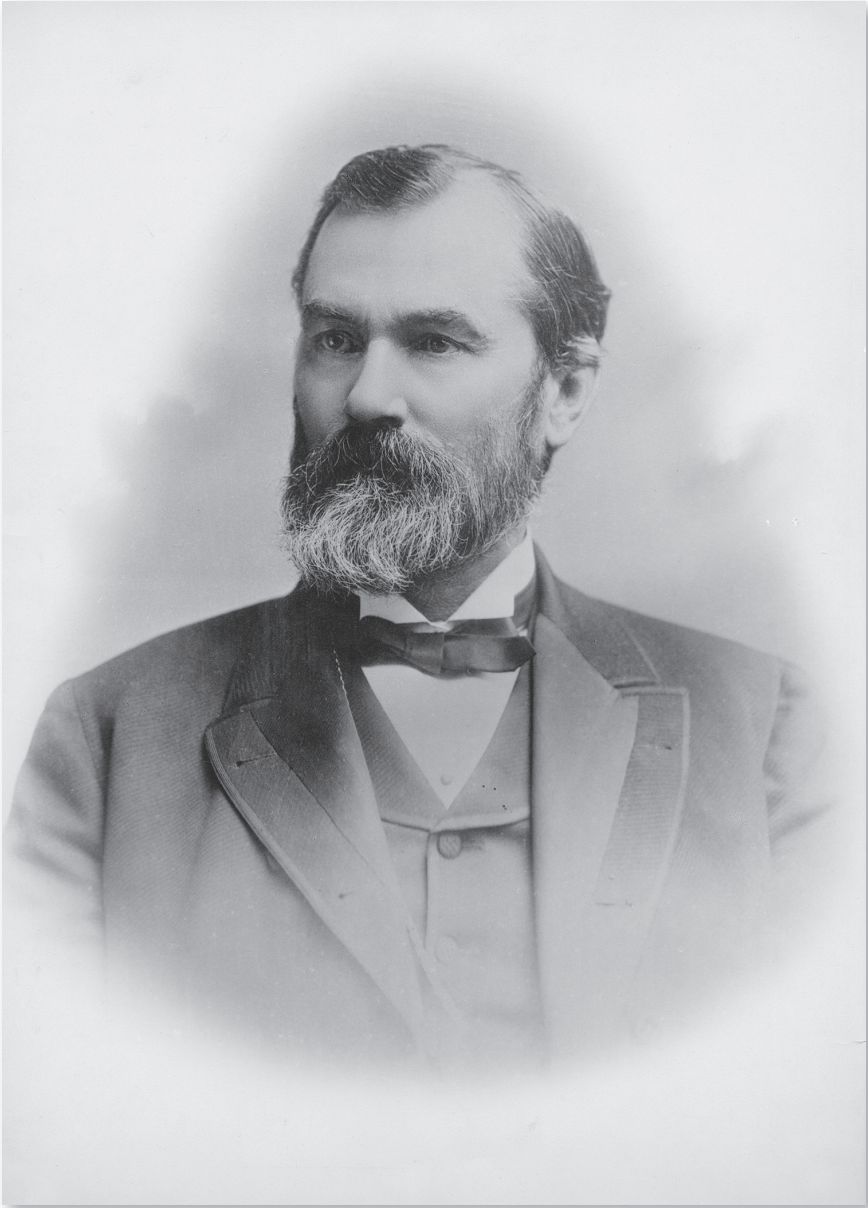
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CHAPTER 1



Wilbur Fisk Sanders



Wilbur Fisk Sanders

Sanders is best remembered as an early pioneer of the territory of Montana and the state's first United States Senator. He was an organizing member and the prosecuting attorney for the Vigilantes of Montana.

He was a jurist, a politician, a social reformist, and a member of the early Republican Party who abhorred slavery – a Radical Republican.

During the first year of the Civil War, he recruited a company of Infantry and a battery of artillery for the Union Army. He served as Adjutant to James W. Forsyth and then James A. Garfield, who consecutively commanded the 64th Ohio Infantry during his time with the unit. He sacrificed his military career for the freedom of black slaves and helped them evade their masters and find passage north to freedom.

Sanders served in the territorial legislatures and engaged heavily in territorial politics at the national level helping to separate the Montana territory from Idaho. He was the attorney for the Northern Pacific Railroad from its building through the Territory to the end of his life. He was a member of the code commission and worked on the codification of Montana law. He was a founding member and the first president of the Montana Historical Society.

He fought for sound money and against the use of free silver as coinage valued below the global market, which ultimately divided the Republican Party and gave him the title in the press of “Gold Bug.” He defended the rights of Chinese immigrants against violence and boycotts in Butte, Montana. He defended and achieved the acquittal of falsely imprisoned Northern Cheyenne.

Early in his career he took the title Colonel Sanders when appointed to a command in Montana’s first territorial militia in the face of Indian uprising in the young territory. His political rivals nicknamed him “The War Horse.”

Sanders was a self-declared agnostic, much like his lifelong friend James Fergus. In Sanders’ own terms, “No man can know the nature of God.” His motto was “Strength Through Magnanimity,” taking a reverse on Aquinas’ view by identifying magnanimity as the means to achieving fortitude and defying Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as the Christian Judaic position, by believing that anyone in a position of advantage owes a duty to the less advantaged by way of service and providing an environment for them to prosper. This was his chief disgust with the treatment of the African slaves, Native Americans and Chinese immigrants.

Given Sanders' general notoriety history remembers the Colonel by a specific characterization. There are however a considerable number of less well known facets to his character. He was of Irish, English and Scandinavian descent, from a line Sanders by way of Sanders Court near Wexford, Ireland. Over the centuries, these people migrated to both Cornwall and Southern Wales and settled in Charlwood south of London, England. This is chiefly supported by DNA and the descriptions of Irish Celtic migrations as the Roman province of Albion decayed.¹ Sanders' family tradition has it that when the Normans invaded Cornwall, the Sanders there helped to fought them off with clubs and rocks and drove them back into the sea.²

The origins of this particular Sanders line are further supported by the use of the Elephant in the line's Coat of Arms, rather than the Bull. The use of the Elephant is consistent with the Irish line from Sanders Court. Louis Peck Sanders used the Elephant in his own Coat of Arms, although this was not registered with the College of Heraldry.

The family eventually moved to the northwest of London to Amersham, England, before emigrating to the United States at Boston.



Lois Peck Sanders Coat of Arms*

* From the Sanders's family collection. The family motto in Louis Sanders' COA reads: "Nil Conscire Sibi Nulla Pallescere Culpa" in Latin meaning "To be conscious of no guilt, and to turn pale at no charge."

Sanders' ancestors emigrated to the United States for opportunity. While the historical background of Tobias Saunders' life in England is subject to some conjecture, family oral tradition suggest that he was put on a ship headed for Boston, Massachusetts, by his widowed mother, the destitute Isabella, in 1636, when he was just 13. One account says that knowing she would likely never see her son again, she hoped that he might find opportunity and prosperity in the New World.³

Toby, as he was called, was among the founders of the Seventh Day Baptist Church in Westerly, Rhode Island. He was among those who used the spelling of his name as Saunders. It is unclear as to why the spelling has come and gone from this surname although it is clearly a regular occurrence in the line. Including Toby, three generations had remained in Westerly when George Saunders departed, perhaps along with his ties to the church, and moved to Rensselaer County, roughly Albany, New York.

There, George and his wife had a son, Ira, who eventually moved to Leon, New York, and married Freedom Edgerton, the much younger sister of Sidney Edgerton. Ira and Freedom had six children, and their second eldest was Wilbur. It is around this time that Ira permanently dropped the "u" on an 1850 census, and no Sanders of this line has looked back on alternative spelling.

The place of Wilbur Sanders' birth, Leon, is situated in northwestern Cattaraugus County, New York. In 1833 Ira Sanders settled on a portion of the level and marshy Lot 45, in northwestern Leon. Sometime later that year, Ira and several others are listed as owners of parcels of land on Lot 45. Each is listed as owning improved properties of value. The town had no railway of its own but was an easy commute to the adjoining town to the west which had the Buffalo and Southwestern Railroad.

Wilbur Fisk Sanders was born on the 2nd of May 1834 Leon, Cattaraugus, New York. In the 1850 Census, Wilbur is listed as the second eldest child aged 15 to his sister Sophia aged 17, followed by brothers Beverly aged 13, Philorus "Philo," aged 10, Junius aged 7 and their baby sister Serepta who was 4 at the time. Like most people in rural America in the middle of the 19th Century, Wilbur Sanders and his

siblings worked the family farm and studied their lessons. Their father, Ira, was a strict disciplinarian whose preferred form of punishment was the reading and memorization of the Bible – a form of punishment that Wilbur apparently enjoyed.

Wilbur proved to be a voracious reader and demonstrated a talent at an early age for retention of language and for words and their meanings, and possessed a diverse vocabulary. He is described by the family as having been placed on a table as a small boy by his uncle Junius Edgerton to recite Bible verses from memory.

As he got older and began to earn money working for neighbors, he grew more and more resentful of his pious father, who took Wilbur's meager earnings. He loved his mother Freedom dearly. Her desire was that he study law, which was done despite his father's opposition.

He was a diligent student in the public schools and became a teacher by the age of twenty.⁴ He made the meaning of words, and the rules of English grammar and rhetoric, his "means to an end." Even his everyday writing had formal tone and structure.

In conversation or in argument, he was exact in his use of terms and stated his propositions with precision. Never satisfied with his knowledge of language, he made himself a keen student of all manner of diction and syntax.⁵

It was clear, at a very young age, that Wilbur's path would be independent from his father's. His younger brothers, Beverly, Junius, and Philo, were also destined to leave the farm. Wilbur must have certainly been provided the opportunity to further his education by the generous influence of his uncle, Sidney Edgerton, then an aspiring lawyer in Akron, Ohio.

Sanders attended the Phelps Union and Classical School in upstate New York, around 1850. The incorporation of the Phelps Academy in 1846, and its management by a board of education, placed it on a level with the best academic institutions in the country.⁶

Based on his choice of careers and demonstrated strengths, it is likely that he enrolled in the three-year modern classical program. Omitting the foreign languages, it emphasized English, science, economics,

bookkeeping, ethics and psychology – a program of study that would have been requisite for a continued education in the law.⁷

It is at the academy dances that Wilbur likely first met his future wife, Harriet Peck Fenn, as Phelps held frequent engagements with the ladies' schools in the region and the elite academic societies. The population then was small and Fisks, Pecks, and Fenns dominated many learned institutions.