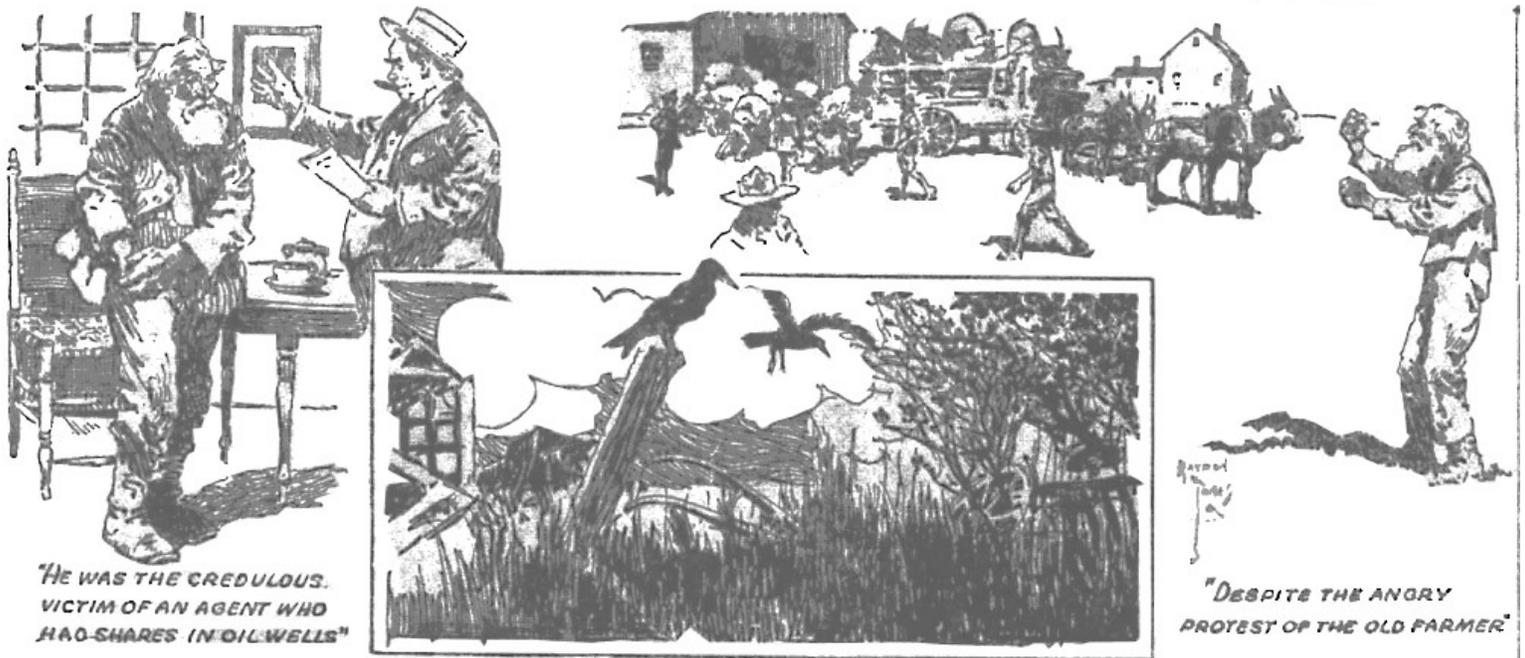


Will Contest Reveals Amazing Life of Eccentricity

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New England Farmer Amassed Fortune yet Lived in Poverty – Hoarded Wool for 50 Years Until Seized by Government – Colts Grew to Old Age on Farm without being Broken - Sued Dentist for fillings from teeth – Left \$150,000 Estate to Dartmouth – Heirs Now seek to break Will



By John E. Pember

One of the strangest tales that ever came out of the Vermont hills, that prolific breeding ground of odd personalities and the scene of so many queer stories, is told for the first time here today in all its details.

A Sunday Herald reporter has followed, step by step, the history and career of Orson C. Clement, the farmer of West Corinth, who for half a century hoarded a vast accumulation of wool, only to have it seized by the government during the national exigency of the world war.

He has learned the reasons which impelled the eccentric old man, in a fit of rage, to slash in two the will he had drawn, in the attempt to nullify the bequest he had made to the woman who for 40 years had kept house for him and wound his watch for him every morning, all that time without omitting the daily rite.

He has traced his way through the intricate maze of events, which has led to the contest of the will by distant relatives and precipitated a legal struggle to decide whether Dartmouth

College or the other litigants shall inherit a fortune that may reach a total of \$150,000.

He has visualized a man who for more than 80 years has been a legendary figure in eastern Vermont, a character so peculiar that a writer of fiction who should attempt to portray it in his pages would be accused of absurd exaggeration. A man so miserly and "near" that he threatened to sue a dentist for the return of the discarded gold fillings from his teeth.

Man of Mystery Who Has Become a Legend

A man who so credulous that he paid out thousands of dollars for worthless oil and mining stocks and yet so indifferent that when, by a stroke of fortune, a well in which he was interested did reach oil, he did not take the trouble to send instructions when asked to by the men on the ground.

A man so penurious that he lived on a few scraps of food and never bought a newspaper and yet so strangely constituted that he allowed

his colts to run wild and unbroken in the pastures, until they had to be killed on account of extreme old age.

A man who had a passion for lawsuits, but who refused to pay his taxes and resorted to every possible device to evade assessment, holding out stubbornly right up to the moment when the constable drove up with his team to the door to take him to court.

A misanthrope who for weeks together refused to see or speak to his neighbors and who lived alone with his aged housekeeper in a decrepit farmhouse bursting with stored wool, but who, in sentimental memory of a long-dead brother, devised the greater part of his wealth to a college.

He apparently disliked to let anyone have anything that belonged to him and, while he knew that sometime he must die, he could not bear the thought of anyone else possessing any of his property. He is reputed to have said that when he died "he wished it would all sink into the ground with him."

He is a mystery, a legend, one of the most puzzling human oddities that racial inbreeding and lonely environment of a hill farm ever produced.

Hermit and housekeeper have passed away. They sleep side by side in the prim little burying ground in Corinth. But it will be many a day before the story ceases to pass from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation in the Green Mountain State.

Stored Wool 50 Years

For more than 50 years Orson Clement steadily refused to sell the wool that accumulated, year after year, in his farm buildings at West Corinth. Unable to obtain what he considered to be a satisfactory price for his product, he stored his fleeces in sheds, in barns, in corn cribs, and finally, in lieu of other space, in his house. Lofts, attics and upper chambers were packed full to bursting with wool. Sometimes hemlock boughs were spread between the bales in an attempt to preserve them. More often the wool was stuffed into the sheds and barns, just as it came from the shearers, with no apparent concern for its welfare.

Moths and weather destroyed much of the

wool. Squirrels nested in its soft recesses. After a while Clement ceased to keep sheep and no more was added to the store. But he steadfastly declined to part with a single pound.

Then the war broke out. The groundswell of the conflict was felt in the remotest recesses of the Vermont hills. The existence of Clement's hoarded wool was disclosed to the government and the war department on June 23, 1918, commandeered it.

Despite the angry protests of the old farmer, gangs of men sent by the war department went to West Corinth, broke open the boarded-up storehouses and even the locked and barred rooms in the dwelling house, loaded the wool on great army transport trucks and took it away. The quantity of wool seized by the government was about 6000 cubic feet, estimated at nearly 180,000 pounds. Weather, moths, damp, and squirrels had made sad inroads. A very large proportion of the hoard was completely ruined.

Left Large Estate

The amount of money that Clement received from the government by way of compensation is in dispute. The estimate runs all the way from \$20,000 to \$78,000. The true figure probably lies somewhere between these amounts. It may have been \$30,000.

It was a large sum to come in a lump to a farmer in the remote interior of Orange County. But Orson Clement was a rich man, rich by almost any standard. The \$30,000 or more, which he reluctantly accepted from Uncle Sam merely went to swell the total of a fortune which has now become the object of dispute between Dartmouth College and two cousins.

For Orson Clement died on March 19 last, aged 84 years. He left an estate so weirdly jumbled in its values that it will be months before the appraisers can arrive at even an approximate idea of its value. It may be \$75,000. It may be \$10,000. It may be \$150,000. It may be more. It may be less. But it makes a tempting target for the lawyers and for remote relatives to shoot at.

The contest arises over Clement's will. This instrument, found among his papers after his death, devises \$1000 to his housekeeper, Mrs. Alice Bradbury, who ministered to his wants for 40 years (Clement was a bachelor); \$500 to her

daughter, Mrs. Emma McAllister of Chelsea, VT, and the residue to Dartmouth College. It was drawn some years ago.

In the mean time a quarrel arose with regard to certain real estate transactions between Clement, the housekeeper and her daughter. No one knows exactly what happened or how it happened, but when the will was disclosed, the document had been cut squarely in two, as if by a pair of scissors.

The draft of another will was found, revoking the individual bequests, but being unwitnessed, it had no legal standing. Dr. E.H. Bailey of Graniteville, who was appointed the administrator of the estate, filed the fragments of the original will for probate and the document was approved by Judge H.T. Baldwin of Wells River.

Now an appeal has been filed in the probate court asking for its disallowance on the ground of revocation by the testator.

The only heirs that are within the degree of kinship which would entitle them to inherit from the deceased are two old ladies, one of whom is more than 80 years old and the other of nearly the same age. They are Mrs. Julia N. Converse of 81 Hammond Street, Bridgewater, a widow who lives with her daughter, a public school teacher; and Mrs. Lucy J. Dearborn of Santa Monica California. Both are cousins of Orson Clement. They will receive the estate if the will is disallowed.

A Sunday Herald reporter visited West Corinth one day last week. The name of the town is pronounced, locally, with the accent on the second syllable and not like that of the Greek city. You reach it from Bradford, VT and you have to undertake a wild trip of some 18 miles into the heart of a rural country unvisited by the motorist and unknown to the summer visitor. It is a country where barefooted children swarm out of the farmhouses to see the unwonted spectacle of a passing automobile, and the men in the hayfields drop their forks to gape openmouthed at the same apparition.

For half a dozen miles the car followed the state road to Montpelier, which presented no unusual features. Then the driver spun the wheel, piloted the machine across an iron bridge that spanned the Waits River and

plunged into the uncharted wilderness that lay beyond. The road became little better than a trail. It skirted wooded hills and plunged into lonely valleys where brooks swollen by the freshets, rippled over the rocks. Houses were few and far between.

It was a solid hour's travel to the district vaguely designated as West Corinth, although there is no reasonable centre of population, where the first stop was made at the solidly built farmhouse of Charles Speare, constable, and the official representative of official law and order in these parts.

Mr Speare was engaged in a painting job and his red rubber boots and overalls were bespattered with paint, but he received the Herald reporter with the utmost cordiality and gave the fundamental facts of the Clement case as they have been recited. He was Clement's nearest neighbor and knew him intimately for years.

"He was an oddity and no mistake" was Mr. Speare's comment as he narrated incident after incident that illustrated the curious mentality of this strange, crochety old man. Other neighbors supplied additional details, which worked up into the fabric of this strange history.

Orson Clement was born in Corinth. His father was a well-to-do farmer who died about 35 years ago and left his sons very well off indeed. The younger boy, Martin, was ambitious and went to Dartmouth College, but died somewhere about 1863, before graduation. The elder son stayed on the farm, never marrying and outliving father, mother, and all other relatives except one or two distant cousins in whose behalf an attempt is now being made to break the will.

For 40 years, Clement lived on the paternal farm, which is on a side road, nearly a mile from the nearest other human habitation. The only other person in the house was his housekeeper, Mrs. Alice Bradbury.

Mrs. Bradbury had had worked for the elder Clements and, when they died, she stayed on with the son. They were a queer pair. "Spats" were frequent between them, followed by immediate reconciliations. The old housekeeper wound up the old farmer's ancient gold watch every morning for the whole

40 years without once missing the ceremonial, except when away on infrequent visits. They might not be on speaking terms, but the rite of winding the watch was never omitted.

Mrs. Bradbury outlived Clement but a month. When he died her grip on life seemed to be broken. There was nothing else to go on for and she soon passed away.

During the passage of years, Clement's eccentricities became more and more manifest. He developed into a curious mixture of miser and spendthrift. He hoarded his wool because he could not get his price, but he took no pains to protect it,

He threatened the village dentist at Bradford, who 'fixed' his teeth, with prosecution unless he returned the old gold fillings he had removed. He was the credulous victim of every agent and canvasser who had shares in oil wells and mines to sell and paid over literally thousands of dollars for worthless stock.

Clement kept every paper, letter, and document that he ever received. The administrators found boxes stuffed full of such papers, many of them eaten by mice and so defaced and injured by time and damp as to be unrecognizable. There was a diary, kept for many years, detailing his every act.

There were deeds for town lots in "boom towns" in Texas and Montana. Inquiry on the spot alone will disclose whether this property is worthless or of value. Some of them are doubtless nothing more than waste paper. On the other hand, a farm in Iowa, which he had acquired in this way, is estimated to be worth \$40,000.

Oil Stocks by the Ream

Clement bought it for a few dollars an acre, lured by the glib tongue of an agent and a gay prospectus. By all the laws of probability this investment should have proved a dead loss. But a railroad was run right past it and a town site laid out in the near neighborhood. Land that was dear at 50 cents an acre suddenly became worth \$250 an acre, and the strange old man in distant Vermont reaped the benefit.

He appears to have bought oil stock by the ream. Most of it was good for nothing. But again, by a freak of fortune, one, at least of these

haphazard ventures proved so profitable as to make amends for most if not all the other losses.

Mr. Speare tells the story of how a telegram came one night from somewhere in Oklahoma informing Clement that a well in which he was heavily invested had 'struck oil,' that the flow was gushing over the derrick and that thousands of gallons of oil were running to waste. The telegram was relayed by phone to the Speare homestead and hurried down the valley to the Clement Place.

The old man received it with perfect equanimity. He read the message, carefully folded it and restored it to its envelope, placed it on the mantle and apparently ceased to interest himself in the matter. A week later he sent a postcard to the well managers in the west, presumably conveying his instructions.

The original Clement farm was a property of some 600 acres. It was a good one, as far as Vermont farms go, and in its day sustained a considerable number of sheep. Half a century ago sheep raising was an important item in agricultural industry in that part of the country. When the great western sheep ranches were established it became unprofitable to raise wool in Vermont and the flocks were given up.

Owned Four Farms

There is nothing to remind the traveler of their existence except the characteristic terraced runs on the hillside pastures and these, in many places, are disappearing under the brush and trees.

Clement appears to have kept his flocks as long as any of his neighbors and to have given up keeping sheep some years ago. As has been said, he religiously stored every pound that he sheared, adding it to a stock which he inherited from his father in 1870. The elder Clement had also bought a large quantity of wool, as a speculation, paying \$1 a pound for it. That price was never reached again.

In the fall of 1918 the existence of the hoard came to the knowledge of Joseph G. Brown of Montpelier, Chairman of the Vermont Committee of Public Safety, and the government offered to buy it at the market price, even agreeing that it should be sold without

deducting any commission. When Clement refused, the war department seized it and took such as was fit for use. Some of the fleeces were so long that it was plain that the sheep had not been sheared for three years. The wool was full of burrs and dirt and cocoons. Much of it was worthless. But what was eventually salvaged was paid for by one of Uncle Sam's good checks. The total was \$30,000 or \$40,000 and it went right into the bank.

The war department didn't get all the wool at that. After the old man's death, in a locked granary, which had been overlooked by the government's agents, several thousand pounds more were discovered. Its value is added to the estate.

Clement owned three other farms in the neighborhood, which he rented out, and on the home place there was a large and valuable stand of lumber which had not been cut over for years. These are all included in the assets of the estate whose ownership must be determined by the Orange County supreme court at its next sitting.

But with all this property and with many thousands dollars in the bank, Clement exhibited a strange streak of miserliness which made the expenditure of an unnecessary cent a source of agony to him.

He never repaired a fence or a roof. The farm buildings, in the course of years, became more forlorn and decrepit. Some of them fell down altogether. Clement never made any attempt to re-erect them. He did not appear to care, even if farm machinery, thus exposed to the elements, rusted away and were ruined.

After his death the commissioners who took over the property found two horses both of which seemed to be more than 30 years old, which had never been broken. Blind and feeble, they staggered about the pasture and had to



be shot to put them out of their misery.

Milked as Needed

For years the Clement household had one cow, reputed to be old enough to vote. They never milked her in any regulation way. When they wanted milk for domestic purposes, either Clement or the housekeeper would sally forth with a pitcher or a cup and procure what was needed for the occasion.

After Clement's death an investigation showed only a few beans and a little salt pork by way of provisions in the meagerly furnished house. There was not a potato in the cellar and

it looked as though the two old people had subsisted on the barest necessities only.

He hated to pay taxes and delayed and evaded the disagreeable necessity by every conceivable method. He transferred his farm and other property to his housekeeper and she conveyed it back time and again. These transactions were endless. He seemed to have a veritable mania for juggling his property in this manner and the Orange county registry of deeds is encumbered with the records of these transfers and retransfers.

When authority sought to collect tax obligations he did everything possible to evade service of the papers. He locked himself in the house when the constable came and sometimes hid in the barn or the woods.

On one occasion Mr. Speare had his team in the yard and was on the point of starting with the recalcitrant old man to Chelsea, the county seat, to arraign him in court, before he reluctantly produced a checkbook and settled.

Clement was engaged in constant lawsuits over boundary lines and other unimportant matters and almost invariably lost his cases. Once he sued C.S. Page of Hyde Park, alleging that a bundle of pelts had been stolen, losing as usual.

At The Clement Farm

The matter that led to the alleged mutilation of the will and the consequent legal proceedings was the outcome of one of the everlasting property jugglings in which his soul delighted. This time Mrs. Bradbury and her daughter, Mrs. McAllister were concerned.

It was a complicated business whose sinuous details are traced with but indifferent success. Apparently, in the course of one of his numerous disputes with the assessors (they call them 'listers' in Vermont), he transferred his farm to Mrs. Bradbury. She, in turn, sold the property to her daughter, taking a mortgage as part payment. Soon afterward, Mrs. Bradbury sold the mortgage back to Clement, who proceeded to foreclose. It is not certain whether the farm stands in the name of Mrs. Bradbury or passed back into the Clement estate.

"They had an awful jamboree over it" said Mr. Speare to the Herald reporter, "and they all came pelting up here to me to get me to decide what were the rights of it. I told them to settle it for themselves."

It is believed that it was right after this exciting episode that Clement, in a rage, mutilated his will. But whether he did or not, he kept the fragments, and they were admitted to probate as his lawful last testament.

On his way back to civilization, the Herald reporter visited the Clement farm. Reaching it was an experience to be remembered. The bypath which gives access to the place hardly deserves the designation 'road'. It is narrow and grass grown. Bushes and overhanging boughs slapped the cover, and one involuntarily speculated on the chances of ever getting out again.

Then the bushes thinned out and grassy meadows appeared on either hand. Around the next turn there came into view a white painted house. It proved to be a story-and-a-half affair, with the usual string of ell and woodshed connecting it with the barn. Several huge willow trees overhung it and a brook rippled past in the rear.

The place looked desolate and forlorn. It was inhabited however and a woman who came to the door said that she was taking care of the place until its final disposition had been decided on.

Several smaller structures, in the very last stages of decrepitude, appeared here and there. One had evidently been a corn-crib. The story goes that this was one year filled with corn and neglected in characteristic Clement fashion until what with stray cattle who pillaged it from below, rats, mice and squirrels who helped themselves from above, and rain and damp, the contents were completely ruined.

The wreck of a great barn, which had evidently collapsed long ago, appeared on the hillside. Beside the road were the ruins of a smaller building. Amid the rotted timbers were to be seen the rusty remains of mowing machines, hay rakes, and other farming implements, with weeds and shrubs growing up through the wreck and showing that the collapse had occurred long ago.

Against a background of lowering clouds and dark woods, it was a melancholy spectacle, a fitting monument to Orson Clement, whose uneasy ghost one could well imagine to be even then wandering about the dreary spot.