

# MARK TWAIN



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## The Facts in the Case of the Great Beef Contract

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Sketch

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**I**n as few words as possible I wish to lay before the nation what's here, howsoever small, I have had in this matter – this matter which has so exercised the public mind, engendered so much ill-feeling, and so filled the newspapers of both continents with distorted statements and extravagant comments.

The origin of this distressful thing was this – and I assert here that every fact in the following resume can be amply proved by the official records of the General Government.

John Wilson Mackenzie, of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, to furnish to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef.

Very well.

He started after Sherman with the beef, but when he got to Washington Sherman had gone to Manassas; so he took the beef and followed him there, but arrived too late; he followed him to Nashville, and from Nashville to Chattanooga, and from Chattanooga to Atlanta – but he never could overtake him. At Atlanta he took a fresh start and followed him clear through his march to the sea. He arrived too late again by a few days; but hearing that Sherman was going out in the *Quaker City* excursion to the Holy Land, he took shipping for Beirut, calculating to head off the other vessel. When he arrived in Jerusalem with his beef, he learned that Sherman had not sailed in the *Quaker City*,

but had gone to the Plains to fight the Indians. He returned to America and started for the Rocky Mountains. After sixty-eight days of arduous travel on the Plains, and when he had got within four miles of Sherman's headquarters, he was tomahawked and scalped, and the Indians got the beef.

They got all of it but one barrel. Sherman's army captured that, and so, even in death, the bold navigator partly fulfilled his contract. In his will, which he had kept like a journal, he bequeathed the contract to his son Bartholomew W.

Bartholomew W. made out the following bill, and then died:

THE UNITED STATES

In *account with* JOHN WILSON MACKENZIE, of New Jersey, deceased,

To thirty barrels of beef for General Sherman, at \$100, . . . . .	\$ 3,000
To traveling expenses and transportation . . . . .	\$ 14,000
	Total \$ 17,000
	Rec'd Pay't.

He died then; but he left the contract to Wm. J. Martin, who tried to collect it, but died before he got through. *He* left it to Barker J. Allen, and he tried to collect it also. He did not survive. Barker J. Allen left it to Anson G. Rogers, who attempted to collect it, and got along as far as the Ninth Auditor's Office, when Death, the great Leveler, came all unsummoned, and foreclosed on *him* also. He left the bill to a relative of his in Connecticut, Vengeance Hopkins by name, who lasted four weeks and two days, and made the best time on record, coming within one of reaching the Twelfth Auditor. In his will he gave the contract bill to his uncle, by the name of O-be-joyful Johnson. It was too undermining for joyful. His last words were: »Weep not for me – I am willing to go.« And so he was, poor soul. Seven people

inherited the contract after that; but they all died. So it came into my hands at last. It fell to me through a relative by the name of, Hubbard – Bethlehem Hubbard, of Indiana. He had had a grudge against me for a long time; but in his last moments he sent for me, and forgave me everything, and, weeping, gave me the beef contract.

This ends the history of it up to the time that I succeeded to the property. I will now endeavor to set myself straight before the nation in everything that concerns my share in the matter. I took this beef contract, and the bill for mileage and transportation, to the President of the United States.

He said, »Well, sir, what can I do for you?«

I said, »Sire, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Mackenzie, of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government to furnish to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef –«

He stopped me there, and dismissed me from his presence – kindly, but firmly. The next day called on the Secretary of State.

He said, »Well, sir?«

I said, »Your Royal Highness: on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Mackenzie of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General Government to furnish to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef –«

»That will do, sir – that will do; this office has nothing to do with contracts for beef.«

I was bowed out. I thought the matter all over and finally, the following day, I visited the Secretary of the Navy, who said, »Speak quickly, sir; do not keep me waiting.«

I said, »Your Royal Highness, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Mackenzie of Rotterdam, Chemung County, New Jersey, deceased, contracted with the General

Government to General Sherman the sum total of thirty barrels of beef –«

Well, it was as far as I could get. *He* had nothing to do with beef contracts for General Sherman either. I began to think it was a curious kind of government. It looked somewhat as if they wanted to get out of paying for that beef. The following day I went to the Secretary of the Interior.

I said, »Your Imperial Highness, on or about the 10th day of October –«

»That is sufficient, sir. I have heard of you before. Go, take your infamous beef contract out of this establishment. The Interior Department has nothing whatever to do with subsistence for the army.«

I went away. But I was exasperated now. I said I would haunt them; I would infest every department of this iniquitous government till that contract business was settled. I would collect that bill, or fall, as fell my predecessors, trying. I assailed the Postmaster-General; I besieged the Agricultural Department; I waylaid the Speaker of the House of Representatives. *They* had nothing to do with army contracts for beef. I moved upon the Commissioner of the Patent Office.

I said, »Your August Excellency, on or about –«

»Perdition! have you got *here* with your incendiary beef contract, at last? We have *nothing* to do with beef contracts for the army, my dear sir.«

»Oh, that is all very well – but *somebody* has got to pay for that beef. It has got to be paid *now*, too, or I'll confiscate this old Patent Office and everything in it.«

»But, my dear sir –«

»It don't make any difference, sir. The Patent Office is liable for that beef, I reckon; and, liable or not liable, the Patent Office has got to pay for it.«

Never mind the details. It ended in a fight. The Patent Office won. But I found out something to my advantage. I was told that the Treasury Department was the proper place for me to go to. I went there. I waited two hours and a half, and then I was admitted to the First Lord of the Treasury.

I said, »Most noble, grave, and reverend Signor, on or about the 10th day of October, 1861, John Wilson Macken –«

»That is sufficient, sir. I have heard of you. Go to the First Auditor of the Treasury.«

I did so. He sent me to the Second Auditor. The Second Auditor sent me to the Third, and the Third sent me to the First Comptroller of the Corn-Beef Division. This began to look like business. He examined his books and all his loose papers, but found no minute of the beef contract. I went to the Second Comptroller of the Corn-Beef Division. He examined his books and his loose papers, but with no success. I was encouraged. During that week I got as far as the Sixth Comptroller in that division; the next week I got through the Claims Department; the third week I began and completed the Mislaid Contracts Department, and got a foothold in the Dead Reckoning Department. I finished that in three days. There was only one place left for it now. I laid siege to the Commissioner of Odds and Ends. To his clerk, rather – he was not there himself. There were sixteen beautiful young ladies in the room, writing in books, and there were seven well-favored young clerks showing them how. The young women smiled up over their shoulders, and the clerks smiled back at them, and all went merry as a marriage bell. Two or three clerks that were reading the newspapers looked at me rather hard, but went on reading, and nobody said anything. However, I had been used to this kind of alacrity from Fourth Assistant Junior Clerks all through my eventful career, from the very day I entered the first office of the Corn-Beef Bureau clear till I passed out of the last



one in the Dead Reckoning Division. I had got so accomplished by this time that I could stand on one foot from the moment I entered an office till a clerk spoke to me, without changing more than two, or maybe three, times.

So I stood there till I had changed four different times. Then I said to one of the clerks who was reading:

»Illustrious Vagrant, where is the Grand Turk?«

»What do you mean, sir? whom do you mean? If you mean the Chief of the Bureau, he is out.«

»Will he visit the harem to-day?«

The young man glared upon me awhile, and then went on reading his paper. But I knew the ways of those clerks. I knew I was safe if he got through before another New York mail arrived. He only had two more papers left. After a while he finished them, and then he yawned and asked me what I wanted.

»Renowned and honored Imbecile: on or about –«

»You are the beef-contract man. Give me your papers.«

He took them, and for a long time he ransacked his odds and ends. Finally he found the Northwest Passage, as I regarded it – he found the long lost record of that beef contract – he found the rock upon which so many of my ancestors had split before they ever got to it. I was deeply moved. And yet I rejoiced – for I had survived. I said with emotion, »Give it me. The government will settle now.« He waved me back, and said there was something yet to be done first.

»Where is this John Wilson Mackenzie?« said he.

»Dead.«

»When did he die?«

»He didn't die at all – he was killed.«

»How?«

»Tomahawked.«

»Who tomahawked him?«

»Why, an Indian, of course. You didn't suppose it was the superintendent of a Sunday-school, did you?«

»No. An Indian, was it?«

»The same.«

»Name of the Indian?«

»His name? I don't know his name.«

»*Must* have his name. Who saw the tomahawking done?«

»I don't know.«

»You were not present yourself, then?«

»Which you can see by my hair. I was absent.

»Then how do you know that Mackenzie is dead?«

»Because he certainly died at that time, and have every reason to believe that he has been dead ever since. I *know* he has, in fact.«

»We must have proofs. Have you got this Indian?«

»Of course not.«

»Well, you must get him. Have you got the tomahawk?«

»I never thought of such a thing.«

»You must get the tomahawk. You must produce the Indian and the tomahawk. If Mackenzie's death can be proven by these, you can then go before the commission appointed to audit claims with some show of getting your bill under such headway that your children may possibly live to receive the money and enjoy it. But that man's death *must* be proven. However, I may as well tell you that the government will never pay that transportation and those traveling expenses of the lamented Mackenzie. It *may* possibly pay for the barrel of beef that Sherman's soldiers captured, if you can get a relief bill through Congress making an appropriation for that purpose; but it will not pay for the twenty-nine barrels the Indians ate.«

»Then there is only a hundred dollars due me, and *that* isn't certain! After all Mackenzie's travels in Europe, Asia, and America

with that beef; after all his trials and tribulations and transportation; after the slaughter of all those innocents that tried to collect that bill! Young man, why didn't the First Comptroller of the Corn-Beef Division tell me this?«

»He didn't know anything about the genuineness of your claim.«

»Why didn't the Second tell me? why didn't the, Third? why didn't all those divisions and departments tell me?«

»None of them knew. We do things by routine here. You have followed the routine and found out what you wanted to know. It is the best way. It is the only way. It is very regular, and very slow, but it is very certain.«

»Yes, certain death. It has been, to the most of our tribe. I begin to feel that I, too, am called.«

»Young man, you love the bright creature yonder with the gentle blue eyes and the steel pens behind her ears – I see it in your soft glances; you wish to marry her – but you are poor. Here, hold out your hand – here is the beef contract; go, take her and be happy Heaven bless you, my children!«

This is all I know about the great beef contract that has created so much talk in the community. The clerk to whom I bequeathed it died. I know nothing further about the contract, or any one connected with it. I only know that if a man lives long enough he can trace a thing through the Circumlocution Office of Washington and find out, after much labor and trouble and delay, that which he could have found out on the first day if the business of the Circumlocution Office were as ingeniously systematized as it would be if it were a great private mercantile institution.