# The Man Who Shot the Man Who Shot Lincoln

*The hatter Boston Corbett was celebrated as a hero for killing John Wilkes Booth. Fame and fortune did not follow, but madness did.*

ERNEST B. FURGURSON

> *For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.*
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> —MATTHEW 19:12

One morning in September 1878, a tired traveler, five feet four inches tall, with a wispy beard, arrived at the office of the daily *Pittsburgh Leader*. His vest and coat were a faded purple, and his previously black pants were gray with age and wear. As he stepped inside, he lifted a once fashionable silk hat to disclose brown hair parted down the middle like a woman's. Despite the mileage that showed in his face and clothes, he was well kept, and spoke with clarity. He handed the editor a note from an agent at the Pittsburgh rail depot, which said: "This will introduce to you Mr. Boston Corbett, of Camden, N.J., the avenger of Abraham Lincoln. Mr. Corbett is rather bashful, but at my solicitation he concluded to call on the *Leader* editor as an old soldier."

The newspaperman realized that this was no joke. He remembered the photographs of this man, spread across the North after he shot the assassin John Wilkes Booth 13 years earlier, in April 1865. He invited him to sit and talk. Corbett told him that he was homeless, almost penniless, and headed to Kansas to stake a claim. The railroad agent had suggested that he come to the newspaper to tell his story, on the chance that someone would help him on his way.

Asked what had happened since he entered history by shooting Booth that early morning in Virginia, Corbett said that despite his fame, he had

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Another measure could limit access to certain databanks to those who are trained to understand the limitations of these databanks. For instance, several states allow only police authorities and educational institutions to access databases on sex offenders.

One other major concern is that lawbreakers who have paid their debt to society will face discrimination in hiring and housing. Protections against such discrimination are already in place, but others might be added. For instance, employers cannot, as a general rule, legally maintain a policy of refusing to hire people merely because they are ex-cons, whether the employer gets this information from a police blotter or a computer.

Internet databases should be held accountable for the information they provide. If they rely on public records, then they should be required to keep up with the changes in these records. They should also provide mechanisms for filing complaints if the online data are erroneous, and they should make proper corrections in a timely fashion, the way those who keep tabs on credit records are expected to do.

*INTERNET DATABASES should be required to keep up with the changes in public records.*

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These are a few examples of measures that provide obscurity equivalents in the digital age. Still, let's remember the importance of gossip fueled by public records. As a rule, we care deeply about the approval of others. In most communities, being arrested is a source of major humiliation, and people will go to great pains to avoid ending up in jail. In such cases, the social system does not work if the information is not publicly available. This holds true for the digitized world, where the need for a much wider-ranging "informal social communication," as sociologists call gossip, applies not merely to criminals, sexual predators, and disgraced physicians. It holds for people who trade on eBay, sell used books on Amazon, or distribute loans from e-banks. These people are also eager to maintain their reputation—not just locally but globally. If we cannot find ways to deal in cyberspace with those who deceive and cheat, then our ability to use the internet for travel, trade, investment, and much else will be severely set back.

This need is served in part by user-generated feedback and ratings, which inform others who may do business via the Internet—much like traditional community gossip would. The ability of people to obscure their past in pre-Internet days made it all too easy for charlatans, quacks, and criminal offenders to hurt more people by simply switching locations. The new, digitized transparency is one major means of facilitating deals between people who do not know each other. With enough effort, its undesirable side effects can be curbed, and people can still gain a second chance. ❖

nothing. The photographer Mathew Brady had taken his portrait, and published it by the thousands, but all the hero got in return was a few copies. He had worked at his trade of hat finisher in New York, then lived in Camden while employed in Philadelphia. He showed the editor his credentials as a guard at the great Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. Now his luck had run out. He lost his job in Philadelphia and could not find work, so decided to head for wide-open Kansas, determined to get there if he had to walk. So far he had paid $4.21 for rail fare, but had come on foot much of the way to Pittsburgh. That morning he had sought out the local manager of the Pennsylvania Railroad, without success. He was going back that afternoon.

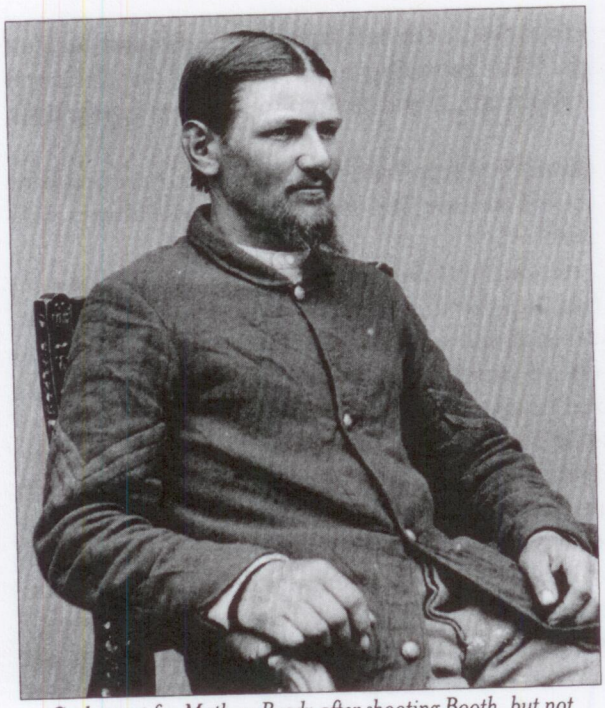
The editor of the *Leader* did not say how long they talked, or record how much Corbett told him about his earlier life. But Corbett was always willing to tell how he got his name:

Born in London in 1832, he came to America with his family when he was seven. They settled in Troy, New York, where he learned the hat trade, soon becoming a journeyman and taking his skills to other cities around the East. The beaver hats then so much in style were made of animal furs matted and repeatedly washed in a solution containing mercury nitrate, a process called carroting because it turned the fur a distinct shade of orange. Hat finishers like Corbett labored in close quarters, inhaling vapors laden with mercury. A year after he married, his young wife died with their stillborn daughter. He was despondent, and began wandering, working by day and drinking by night. Adrift in Boston, he underwent a born-again experience inspired by a Salvation Army evangelist. He felt a calling. It shook his life so profoundly that he decided to change his name to honor the place where he first saw the light, as Christ had changed the names of Saul and Simon when he called them. Since then Corbett's first name had been not Thomas, but Boston.

There was much more to his story: In Boston, he let his hair grow long in imitation of Jesus, became a street-corner preacher, and harangued his fellow workers for cursing and wenching. But the streets were still full of sin, and he was young, only 26, and lonesome. One night in July, two women mocked him and beckoned him down from his soapbox. He was tempted. Fearful that he could not resist such strumpets, he went to his room, took a pair of scissors, and carefully castrated himself. Then he proceeded to a prayer meeting, had dinner, and took a walk before seeking emergency aid at Massachusetts General Hospital.

In his own mind, he had done as the Bible said: he had made himself a eunuch "for the kingdom of heaven's sake." He said years later that he felt divinely instructed; he wanted to "preach the gospel without being tormented by animal passions." The grisly experience may have removed him from sexual temptation, but the rest of his life proves that it did not remove his manhood.

After weeks recovering, he moved to New York and became a loud and constant presence at the Fulton Street Meeting, a lunchtime prayer gathering in lower Manhattan organized by the Young Men's Christian Association. He was too fervent for his co-worshipers, who called him a fanatic. When he testified or led prayers, he added an emphatic "er" to his words, saying "Lord-er hear-er our prayer-er." In his loud shrill voice, he shouted "Amen" and "Glory to God!" to approve anything he liked. Those around him tried to shush him, but failed.



*Corbett sat for Mathew Brady after shooting Booth, but not everyone in Washington considered him a hero.*

Corbett was living in this emotional fever when war came in 1861, and he enlisted in the 12th New York Volunteers two days before the regiment sailed for Washington. He was eager to get at the Rebels: "I will say to them, 'God have mercy on your souls' —then pop them off." Morning and night, he prayed in the corner of his tent, despite the jeers of rough fellow soldiers. His resistance to military authority, to any authority below that of Christ, got him into the guardhouse, and sometimes had him marching back and forth with a knapsack full of bricks. Even then he kept his Bible in hand, ranting at his comrades for their sins.

He was not afraid of the highest brass; in parade formation in Washington's Franklin Square, when colonel and future general Daniel Butterfield cursed the regiment for misbehavior, Corbett stepped forth and defied him to his face. He was punished, but not repressed. He announced that he would quit the army when his first hitch was up, no matter what. When the hour came, he was on picket duty, but laid down his weapon and marched off. A court martial fined him two months' pay, yet he kept reenlisting. The 12th New York Volunteers were among the 12,500 Union troops captured, then paroled by Stonewall Jackson's Confederates at Harper's Ferry just before the battle of Antietam in September 1862. The following year, Corbett switched to Company L of the 16th New York Cavalry, a regiment that spent much of its time chasing John Mosby's Con-

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federate raiders on the outskirts of Washington.

By mid-1864, U. S. Grant had marched the great Federal army from its winter camps along the Rapidan River to the suburbs of Richmond, a hundred miles south of the Union capital. But behind the lines, Mosby's partisan horsemen still harassed Federal outposts and communications, striking and then disappearing into the northern Virginia countryside, tying down many times their own numbers and keeping Washington on edge.

That June, Mosby's riders surprised Corbett and a detachment from Company L who were looking for them near Centreville. Official records say the Union troopers were loafing about after a meal and unprepared when the Rebels struck; Corbett's version was: "I faced and fought against a whole column of them, all alone, none but God being with me, to help me, my being in a large field and they being in the road." *Harper's Weekly* would make him a hero, reporting that the Yankee cavalrymen "were hemmed in . . . and nearly all compelled to surrender except Corbett, who stood out manfully, and fired his revolver and 12 shots from his breech-loading rifle before surrendering, which he did after firing his last round of ammunition. Mosby, in admiration of the bravery displayed by Corbett, ordered his men not to shoot him, and received his surrender with other expressions of admiration."

*"JOHN MOSBY, in admiration of Corbett's bravery, ordered his men not to shoot him."*

. . . .

But when Corbett was out of Mosby's hands, he got what turned into a death sentence to thousands of other captives—he was sent first to Lynchburg, then to the pine woods of Georgia, into the hellhole of Andersonville prison. Soldiers of both sides suffered in prison camps North and South, but Andersonville was the worst of the horrible lot. Although it existed for barely a year, about 45,000 captured Union troops were sent there, and of these nearly 13,000 died of disease, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements. Corbett endured, preaching, praying, and comforting his fellow inmates. "Bless the Lord," he said later, "a score of souls were converted, right on the spot where I lay for three months without any shelter."

After the war, he would testify for the prosecution in the long-running trial of Captain Henry Wirz, commandant of the camp, the only Confederate soldier executed for war crimes. Corbett told of seeing prisoners dragging ball and chain in the sun; he said the place "was in a horrible condition of filth"; the swamp around the stream that flowed through the stockade "was so offensive and the stench so great that he wondered that every man there did not die; the maggots were a foot deep"; prisoners dug roots and dried them to eat; men who carried the dead out to be buried were allowed to bring back firewood, only to hear taunts of "That's

right; sell off a dead man for wood!" from fellow sufferers. When Corbett himself was sent out to gather firewood, he managed to slip away, but within hours was tracked down by hounds and brought back.

Then, after Corbett had been held for five months, General Grant allowed the resumption of prisoner exchanges. Because Corbett was suffering with scurvy, diarrhea, and fever, he was among the emaciated but lucky hundreds sent back north, a skeleton on crutches. Of 13 other Yankees captured with him, only one survived.

Corbett stayed in an Annapolis hospital three weeks, until he was strong enough to take 30 days' leave. He had reason to be deeply vengeful as he rejoined his regiment at Vienna, Virginia, 10 miles west of Washington. Writing to a woman who had tended soldiers returning from Andersonville, he said the thousands of their comrades lying under Georgia soil were "monuments of the cruelty and wickedness of this Rebellion—the head of all the rebellions of earth for blackness and horror. Those only can feel the extent of it who have seen their comrades, as I have, lying in the broiling sun, without shelter, with swollen feet and parched skin, in filth and dirt, suffering as I believe no people ever suffered before in the world."

*"WHEN I BECAME impressed that it was time that I shot him, I took steady aim on my arm, and shot him through a large crack in the barn."*

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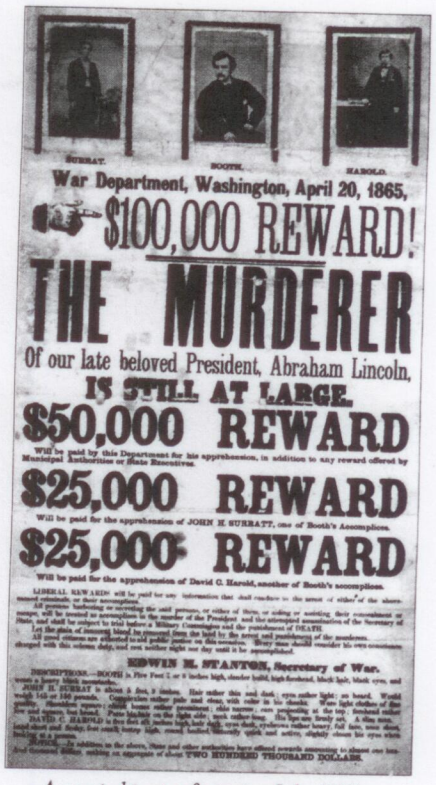
On April 15, the morning after John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, the 16th New York deployed into a cordon thrown about Washington in hopes of snaring the attacker before he could escape to the South. The troopers did not realize the president had died until they approached the capital and saw flags at half-mast. The regiment split into detachments that rode out to follow every rumor of Booth's whereabouts. Between these sorties, Corbett was asked to lead prayer one night at Washington's Wesley Chapel. "O Lord," he intoned, "lay not innocent blood to our charge; but bring the guilty speedily to punishment." The regiment had the honor of riding in the president's funeral procession on April 19, a solemn procession along Pennsylvania Avenue between thousands of mourning citizens and buildings draped in black.

For another five days, Corbett and his detachment continued their vigil until a bugle sounded "Boots and Saddles" and brought them running to their stable. They mounted up, and with Lieutenant Edward Doherty leading, they clattered to the office of Lafayette C. Baker, chief of War Department detectives, across from Willard's Hotel at 14th and Pennsylvania. Doherty went in, emerged with two other detectives, and rushed with 26 cavalrymen to the Sixth Street wharf to board the steamer *John S. Ide.* They set

out down the Potomac toward Fredericksburg in pursuit of the assassin.

Booth and David Herold, one of his accomplices, had escaped into southern Maryland, where they hid at Dr. Samuel Mudd's house, then in swamps and barns until they borrowed a rowboat and slipped across the wide Potomac into Virginia. Following a tip, Doherty's troopers came ashore at Belle Plain on Aquia Creek at about 10 o'clock that Monday evening and spread across the country, rapping farmers out of bed for questioning. The next day they tracked Booth to the Rappahannock River, and they shuttled over it on a rude scow that carried eight men and horses at a time. That night they traced him to the Garrett farm, just west of Port Royal. After a detective threatened the reluctant Garrett with hanging, the farmer's son pointed to the barn where the fugitives were hiding. That is where Corbett picked up the story three weeks later, when he testified before the military court trying the remaining conspirators.




*A wanted poster featuring John Wilkes Booth in the center photo*

He told how the soldiers surrounded the barn, and Lieutenant Doherty and the detectives carried on a long back-and-forth conversation with Booth, trying to persuade him to give up. "He positively declared he would not surrender, saying, 'Well, my brave boys, you can prepare a stretcher for me. . . . Make quick work of it; shoot me through the heart.'" But Booth said his accomplice wanted to come out, so Herold emerged and was quickly searched and tied up. Immediately after that, detective Everton J. Conger set fire to hay in the barn.

Corbett said, "The position in which I stood left me in front of a large crack—you might put your hand through it, and I knew that Booth could distinguish me and others through these cracks in the barn, and could pick us off if he chose to do so." He could have shot Booth easily, but "as long as he was there, making no demonstration to hurt any one, I did not shoot him, but kept my eye on him steadily." Then he saw Booth "taking aim with the carbine, but at whom I could not say. My mind was upon him attentively to see that he did no harm, and when I became impressed that it was time that I shot him, I took steady aim on my arm, and shot him through a large crack in the barn."

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When Booth's body arrived at the Washington Navy Yard, Corbett was immediately proclaimed a hero by the public. He sat for photographer Brady, in several poses alone and in one standing with Doherty. The newly promoted captain towers over him, but Corbett stands at ease with his forage cap tilted over his eyes, his pistol holster huge on one hip, his other hand grasping his saber, his boots tall and polished. His cavalry brothers found him, this strange little sergeant, "cheerful and heroic under circumstances of intense suffering and great provocation."

*Sgt. Boston Corbett with the newly promoted Captain Doherty in a Mathew Brady photograph*

But Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, detective chief Baker, and others were not interested in Corbett as hero; they were furious that he had shot Booth before he could be captured. They wanted the assassin alive, to question him and to conduct a show trial, trying to prove that the conspiracy involved Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who had not yet been caught. Some charged that Corbett had acted against orders, others that he fired without orders. He insisted that he pulled the trigger only when he saw the assassin raise his carbine.

On the scene, Corbett had explained simply that "Providence directed my hand." Days later, he wrote a letter, published by *The New York Times*, refuting "many false reports in the papers charging me with violation of order, &c." Lieutenant Doherty had cleared him of blame, he said, and commended him to General Grant for his action. Corbett wrote that "when I saw where the ball had struck him—in the neck, near the ear—it seemed to me that God had directed it, for apparently it was just where he had shot the President."

Corbett was offered one of Booth's pistols as a keepsake, but declined it. When someone offered him $100 for the pistol with which he had shot

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Booth, he also declined, saying it belonged to the government. But if the government wished to reward him, he said, it might let him keep his little horse. It was not worth much, but he had become attached to it after riding it through so much history.

The Committee on Claims conducted more than a year of hearings before deciding to award Lafayette Baker and the detective, ex-colonel Conger, $17,500 each from the $75,000 reward posted by the Federal government. That generated so much public protest that the committee's report was disapproved. But after it was revised, the biggest single share still went to Conger, while the enlisted cavalrymen who chased Booth down, including the sergeant who shot him, got precisely $1,653.85 each.

That did not sustain Corbett long; by some accounts, he was robbed of his share soon after he got it. He returned to New York, back at the downtown prayer meetings where he had spoken before the war. He preached temperance to shipyard workers, and ventured onto the lecture circuit. But that career fizzled because his advertised lectures invariably turned out to be raging sermons instead. In 1869 he found work as a hatter in Philadelphia and became pastor of a Methodist mission across the Delaware River in Camden. Stacked in one corner of his kitchen there, he kept half-a-dozen rough benches for use by the worshipers who came to hear his nightly sermons. When a reporter asked him about John Wilkes Booth, he said: "I felt I was doing my duty to my God and my country. To this day I feel justified in my course. Were the ghosts of 20 assassins to arise against me, they could not disturb a calm Christian spirit."

Corbett was Christian, but not calm. Losing his job was not the only reason he left Philadelphia and headed west. He was not pursued by the ghosts of 20 assassins, but he had received threatening letters; he suspected that he was targeted by Confederate sympathizers bent on revenge. He stayed briefly with an ex-comrade in Company L, who wrote that Corbett had "been driven from pillar to post," that "he preaches with a pistol in his pocket," that "after he says his prayers he lies down at night with a loaded revolver under his pillow," that "he moans pitifully" in his sleep. "It almost seems my house was haunted while he was there."

Although Corbett was "a good man, a pure and devout Christian of spotless life," his friend went on, "I declare I was glad when he was gone, he was so unhappy, so uneasy, so strange. He is no lunatic. He is no fool. He is a good man in every way. But wherever he goes he says Nemesis pursues him, and the troubled spirits of revenge will not let him rest. He is in constant fear of assassins."

Corbett made it to Cloud County, Kansas, and homesteaded 80 acres on seemingly worthless land 18 miles southeast of Concordia. He was convinced that admirers of Booth had created a secret order sworn to avenge him. He built himself a sod and stone dugout, with holes in the walls so he could fire out at interlopers. He lived as a recluse, wandering the coun-

tryside on his cherished little black horse Billy. A friend said he always had a "watchful, wary countenance . . . he always seemed to be on the lookout for something."

Often when he saw someone approaching, he dismounted, drew his pistol and lay waiting in the grass until he saw who it was. He was a deadly marksman—one Kansan alleged that he had seen him bring down a barn swallow with his pistol. Neighbors said he fired warning shots if they happened to ride across the borders of his claim. Such behavior brought him before a hearing in Concordia, where he whipped out his gun and shouted "Lie, lie, lie!" But because it was Corbett, the authorities sent him back to his shanty with just a warning. He was active with the local Salvation Army, and a friendly judge tried to help him by arranging lectures, but as before he drove audiences away with his "shouting, ranting, street preacher religion—'Repent and ye shall be saved!'" A Presbyterian minister invited him to talk about his war experiences, and Corbett took the occasion seriously, even buying a new coat and shirt. But what he delivered was another shouted "disconnected exhortation."

*A REPORTER SAID that the "bloody deed, which so effectually blighted his life . . . has finally followed him into a straight-jacket."*

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Other war veterans sympathized with Corbett; an old cavalryman and legislator arranged a job for him as a doorkeeper in the Kansas House of Representatives at Topeka. This worked out for a few months, but each day his piety was offended by the doings of the prairie politicians around him. Eventually, on February 15, 1887, he could stand it no more. Just after the morning prayer, he drew his pistol and threatened the speaker of the House, abruptly adjourning the legislature. He kept the floor, waving his weapon and threatening legislators, reporters, and staff. There are many versions of exactly what provoked him; one says he was disrespected by the House staff, another that he exploded when he heard pages mocking the opening prayer. As he raged, lawmakers hid under desks and spectators scattered; he held the floor until police crept up behind him, grabbed his pistol, and took him away.

After long testimony, a probation judge in Topeka declared Corbett "hopelessly insane" and committed him to the state asylum. A reporter recalled his shooting of Booth, and said sadly that the "bloody deed, which so effectually blighted his life . . . has finally followed him into a straight-jacket."

Sadly, but not finally: Occasionally Corbett threw fits of anger at the asylum, but at other times he was a model patient and was allowed to join his fellow inmates in outdoor exercises. But on May 26, 1888, when a friend of

the superintendent's son came visiting and tied his "smart Indian pony" near the gate, the old cavalryman saw his chance. Dawdling behind his group, pretending to admire the spring blossoms, he leaped into the saddle and galloped away. The patients he left behind shouted excitedly, but this was not unusual at the asylum, so at first attendants did not realize what had happened. They spotted Corbett when he was half a mile down the road, "whipping that pony at every jump" with the rawhide whip the boy had left hanging on the saddle. "To all appearance the only reason that pony was running was because he couldn't fly," said a witness. "At a turn in the road, Corbett looked back and swung his straw hat around his head, and thus waved farewell to the hospital and his late companions." A few days later, a letter came saying the horse could be reclaimed at Neodesha, Kansas, 75 miles south. Corbett had spent two nights there with an old soldier who had suffered with him at Andersonville. He borrowed train fare, covering it with a draft on the $15 he had left in a Concordia bank. Then he departed, saying he was headed for Mexico.

What happened to him after that is not known, but widely rumored. Every few months some newspaper out west reported that he had appeared in a neighboring county, or was working in the gold fields of Nevada, or had died in a Minnesota forest fire. In 1900, a Topeka patent medicine magnate said a certain John Corbett had been peddling his products up and down Texas and Oklahoma for several years, always being careful not to step over the Kansas line. He was convinced that this Corbett was really Boston. But among other discrepancies, this Corbett stood six feet and weighed 188 pounds; after extensive interviews and depositions, he was convicted of perjury in trying to collect Boston's abandoned property and $1,300 in accumulated government pension. In 1913, after chasing rumors for a quarter century, state officials concluded that "it is safe to say that no one in Kansas knows the whereabouts of Boston Corbett." In 1958, Boy Scouts erected a stone monument on Corbett's homestead, decorated with a plaque and a pair of big pistols.

The phrase "mad as a hatter" was already familiar more than 150 years ago; it had appeared in Edinburgh's *Blackwood Magazine* in 1829, and Thackeray used it in *Pendennis* in 1850, when Corbett was learning the hat trade at which he worked for two decades or more. Through the years, doctors began to recognize the poisonous side effects of the mercury used in many medical treatments and in industrial procedures. Among the victims' symptoms they listed irritability, nervousness, fits of anger, anxiety, insomnia, low self-control, exaggerated response to stimulation, fearfulness, and violent behavior. The worst damage to humans came from mercury made airborne into tiny droplets and breathed into the lungs—exactly what had happened to Boston Corbett.

On December 1, 1941, the U.S. Public Health Service banned the mercury process in hat making. ❖