



Season 6, Episode 5: Bonus Army Stamp

Wes Cowan: Our next story revisits the day American soldiers were ordered to expel their brothers in arms from the nation's capital. World War I... "the war to end all wars". When it's over, the European continent is devastated, and more than 320,000 Americans have been killed, wounded, or gassed. To further compensate U.S. veterans, Congress passes a bill giving them bonus pay for every day they served. But there's a catch... a big catch: they have to wait 21 years to collect. When the Depression hits, tens of thousands of impoverished veterans and their families – the so-called Bonus Army – march on Washington. They want their bonus immediately. Instead, they're met with tanks and tear gas. Now, Martin Leduc of Hawaii has an artifact that may shed new light on these men and their fate.

Martin: I saw this stamp and it reminded me of my grandfather who was a World War I veteran.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm meeting Martin to see what he's found.

Martin: Sit down please.

Wes: Thanks. Ah, there's the stamp you wrote about. Great stamp, where'd you get it?

Martin: I purchased it at a stamp show in Detroit. The doughboy there brought my grandfather, Charles Meade Runyon, to mind.

Wes: Looks like he was a marine in WWI?

Martin: Yes sir. He was in the trenches and over the top. He passed away before I was born. I really know very little about the man.

Wes: And the stamp says "Pay the Bonus". Martin thinks "Pay the Bonus" refers to the Bonus March on Washington that ended in U.S. soldiers attacking U.S. veterans. What is it that you want me to find out about this stamp?

Martin: What is it and what is the connection to the Bonus Army? Where did it come from? Really anything you can.

Wes: Martin's also curious about whether his own grandfather received a bonus.

Martin: I really don't know anything about that.



Wes: I'm gonna have to take it with me, but I'm anxious to get started. Well all right, I want to take a look at this a little more closely. It's got this picture of a soldier; he's got to be a World War I doughboy. And it says "Pay the Bonus". It looks like a postage stamp – right size, glue on the back, and perforated edges. It's got this cancellation on top of it, where it's been stamped, which is what you would expect to see for something that went through the mail. But would the post office make a stamp for a group that was actively protesting the government? There's no indication of how much the stamp cost. And I'm not sure about this franking, or cancellation mark. So I'm taking it to stamp expert Art Groten.

Art: Pleasure to meet you.

Wes: Nice to meet you.

Art: Come on in, it's freezing out here!

Wes: Art here is the stamp that I wanted you to take a look at. Have you ever seen anything like that before?

Art: It's what we call a Cinderella.

Wes: Cinderella meaning...?

Art: Cinderella is a subset of what we call ephemera.

Wes: Art explains that many stamps are never meant to carry the mail. They can be made by anyone for a variety of purposes, such as promoting causes or advertising products. Those stamps without postage are called *Cinderellas*.

Art: The sort of thing you get and throw out. Not meant to be saved.

Wes: So by Cinderella I guess you mean wasn't invited to the dance or the ball or whatever.

Art: That's right. That's right.

Wes: Okay. So this is the kind of stamp that the government didn't issue?

Art: No, this is private. There's no denomination. There's no value on it. It has perforations, it's the same size roughly, but it was used to promote causes.



Wes: If the post office didn't issue this stamp, then where did it come from? And why is it cancelled? Well, can we see if we can figure out what the cancel says?

Art: Sure.

Wes: By scanning and enlarging the stamp, art might be able to pull out some crucial details.

Art: Okay, let's see what we've got.

Wes: Oh, yeah, look at that. That's great.

Art: There he is.

Wes: I can make out some letters here....is there any way we can manipulate that so that they'll show up better?

Art: Sure. Let's see if we can get rid of some of that background color.

Wes: Oh yeah, there you go. That really makes a difference. Now I can make out "w-a-r-s, wars"...

Art: And you got a-n-s-o-f, so something of wars.

Wes: So Veterans of Foreign Wars?

Art: There you go.

Wes: I mean, that would make sense – it's a vet's organization.

Art: WWI yes! VFW.

Wes: That makes perfect sense – veterans organized the Bonus Army, and the VFW has helped veterans of foreign wars obtain benefits like medical care and pensions ever since the Philippines war in 1899.

Art: This stamp was probably on a document of some sort. On the outside of an envelope to bring attention to the message.



Wes: That message is so immediate...pay the bonus. What drove these veterans to march on Washington in such massive numbers? Paul Dickson, an expert on the Bonus Army, has asked me to meet him at the Washington D.C. Historical Society.

Wes: Hey you must be Paul?

Paul: Yes sir.

Wes: Wes Cowan.

Paul: Hey, nice to meet you Wes.

Wes: Let's go inside.

Paul: Okay.

Wes: Paul takes me through an exhibit dedicated to the Bonus Army and its march on Washington.

Paul: Gives you a whole idea of how big this thing really was.

Wes: It all began with a piece of legislation called the Bonus Act, passed on behalf of veterans by Congress in 1924.

Paul: There were 4.5 million of them and they had to pay for their own uniforms and they were expected to contribute to the war effort by buying bonds so they came out of the war destitute, they had no money. The Bonus Act was an attempt to compensate the people who fought in WWI for their service. They were given an extra dollar a day for service in country, a dollar and a quarter a day for overseas.

Wes: But vets wouldn't even see the money until 1945...unless they died first, in which case the bonus was paid to their families or beneficiaries. Some down and out vets even committed suicide to help their families.

Paul: And they immediately nickname it the Tombstone Bonus.

Wes: Paul explains that in 1932, as the vets became more disheartened, a bill was presented in Congress that would have paid the bonus immediately. But as the Depression deepened, the bill was tabled and passed over. Across the country in Portland, Oregon, that news inspired an ex-serviceman named Walter Waters.



Paul: He is a vet, a sergeant. And he says I've got to pass this. But the brilliant thing for history is the one thing that really helps everybody is that he is not a violent man, he believes in Gandhi's concepts of passive resistance, he is also is well enough read to know that the way to get things done in Washington is to lobby.

Wes: The charismatic Waters convinced roughly 300 veterans to journey with him to Washington, D.C., to make their case for the passage of the bonus. Their modest lobbying effort soon seized the public's imagination.

Paul: Just jumps on a freight car with these guys and what happens is the country is mesmerized, they're looking for heroes, this is the depths, the worst year of the Depression, and the radio and the news reel cameras are following these guys and from every corner of the country these guys are mobilizing.

Wes: And with supporters across the country cheering them on, more and more vets began streaming into Washington. By the summer of 1932, tens of thousands of veterans and their families descended on Washington to lobby for the bonus, hoping the Senate would pass the bill.

Wes: Oh my god that's an enormous camp. As we tour the exhibit, I see an incredible photo with placards about the bonus, but none that matches our stamp. I am looking at these pictures and here they are in the shadow of the White House, you have got these shantytowns, what's Hoover thinking?

Paul: Hoover doesn't want to get involved, he never goes down, never addresses them.

Wes: Herbert Hoover became president just months before the nation tumbled into the Depression. Now, four years later, he was facing the Bonus Army. But he's not alone; by his side is General Douglas MacArthur, his Army Chief of Staff.

Paul: From the day they came to town MacArthur was stationing troops all over the city outside down the river, so when he was ready to expel them, he would have tanks, he would have men with bayonets, he would have combat ready troops.

Wes: In June 1932, as the vets worried, lobbied, and waited, the senate voted not to pay the veterans an immediate bonus. Dejected and demoralized, most of them left... but more than 11,000 diehards and their families remained. A month later, D.C. police attempted to relocate the squatters, but a riot broke out, and a police officer opened fire, killing two veterans. At some point the military or Hoover, somebody says okay enough is enough so what happens then? Paul tells me President Hoover finally approved an order for MacArthur's army to march on the city and remove the veterans.



Paul: And the tanks are coming up right along the mall. The bayonets, the tear-gas.

Wes: Macarthur pushed the vets out and set fire to their camp. What was probably intended to put an end to the bonus movement once and for all had instead just brought the veterans and their crusade to the attention of the entire nation. The veterans left Washington...but the bonus movement continued.

Wes: Here is the stamp that I was telling you about, says 'pay the bonus' and I assume that refers to the Bonus March and the Bonus Army.

Paul: This is beautiful. I have never seen anything like this before.

Wes: And that's a VFW stamp on top of the stamp. Do you have any idea when my stamp might have been made?

Paul: If I had to make an educated guess I probably guess about 1935.

Wes: Paul explains that Congress finally passed a bill to pay the bonus in 1935, but FDR vetoed it. As 1936 approached, and congress got set to vote on the bonus yet again, the movement had reached its peak.

Paul: There were millions of guys who were involved in this in their families and they were using ever than I could that sort of get their message across, pay the bonus, pay the bonus.

Wes: If Paul is right, it means our stamp wasn't produced for the Bonus March in 1932, but a few years later to lobby Congress and President Roosevelt to finally pay the bonus. So I called the Veterans of Foreign Wars and they told me that the records for this particular period are virtually non existent, so what I'm doing is coming here to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, and I'm meeting Professor Steven Ortiz. He's an expert on this particular period. I've got the stamp that I sent you a picture of, and when I enlarged the stamp I can make out in this red part enough to sort of lead me to believe that that has something to do with the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Does that make sense to you?

Steve: Yes, it makes perfect sense to me. The VFW in the 1930s was a really growing organization and it was all about the bonus.

Wes: As the Bonus Bill waited for FDR's signature in 1935, the VFW joined forces with the American legion. Together, they launched an unprecedented letter-writing campaign. Tens of thousands flooded the White House mail box.



Steve: This represents a huge correspondence by everyday citizens and veterans really just pleading in many cases and threatening in other cases, Roosevelt to not veto this bonus. This one here: the greater portion of 4 million men may be mistaken in their stand, but it will take more than your veto to convince them of their error and make them feel that you have kept the faith.

Wes: This is a direct raw threat, if you don't give us this, you're going to lose 4 million votes. So I mean did these actually move Roosevelt at all?

Steve: It's actually one of the more dramatic episodes in Roosevelt's presidency. He delivers his veto message on the bonus in 1935 to a Joint Session at Congress on national radio broadcast.

Wes: In a 40-minute address, the President steadfastly defended his veto.

FDR speech: This Bill before me...regards the direct payment to the veterans of a much larger sum than was contemplated in the 1924 settlement. It is nothing less than a complete abandonment of that settlement.

Steve: He was a fiscal conservative, someone who believed in balanced budgets. Even though all the New Deal programs spent billions of dollars, he still felt their goal was balanced budgets. And this played out often in veterans' issues like the bonus.

Wes: The veterans didn't back down. The letters continued...and what we find among them puts the mystery of the stamp to rest.

Paul: Look familiar?

Wes: Oh my gosh! You know there is a great story in it and it provided, the little stamp provided me this window to understand the Bonus Army and the Bonus Act. I tell Martin about the journey his stamp has taken me on... and about what I found at the FDR Library and Museum. Oh my gosh, there's our stamps. And look at that, it's from San Francisco, California, 1935. "We, citizens and veterans of the USA who have signed this petition are in favor of the cash bonus 100%." So you think our stamp was made by this veterans post in San Francisco?

Steve: I think so. If not made by them, used by them, as they stamped their insignia on top of the stamp to Pay the Bonus as a way to kind of put their marker on these petitions, and it came from a VFW post from real veterans.



Wes: Our tiny stamp went to war on the tops of petitions and backs of envelopes, battling against a popular president and the depths of the Great Depression. And what's on each one of these petitions?

Martin: That's my stamp, right there.

Wes: In January 1936, Congress finally overturned FDR's second veto. The veterans were at long last paid their bonus...\$1.9 billion dollars. And I have another surprise for Martin. These are the military service records for your grandfather Charles Meade Runyon. On his death in 1934, he was paid the bonus; he was a tombstone bonus vet.

Martin: That is amazing.

Wes: And his combined total was \$625, which was a lot of money in 1934, and it probably helped your family get through the Depression.

Martin: That'll give me an insight into who he was. Well thank you Wes, on behalf of my grandfather and everyone, I thank you very much.

Wes: My pleasure. The legacy of the bonus movement continued into the Second World War. But in 1944, President Roosevelt, remembering the bonus marchers of 1932, signed one of the greatest pieces of American legislation... the G.I. Bill of Rights. It guaranteed World War II veterans loans, housing, and educational opportunities. It remains in effect to this day, benefiting veterans of all foreign wars...including those who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq.