

The Mad Hatter

May 9, 2022

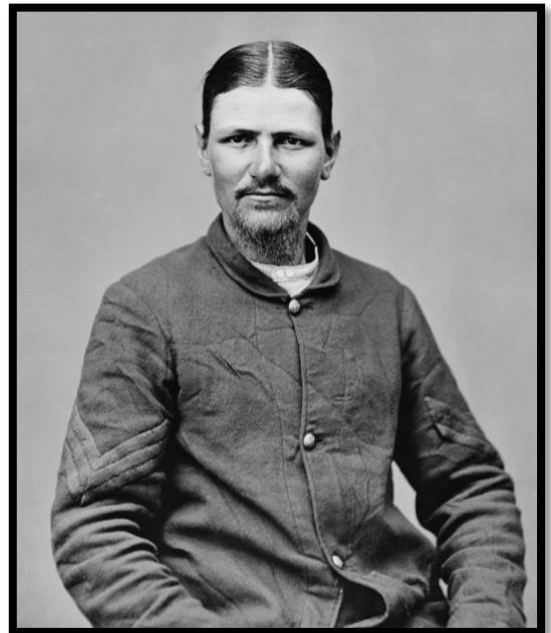
Concordia, Kansas

John Wilkes Booth is one of the most recognizable villains in American history, but few people know much about President Lincoln's assassin's assassin, *Thomas H. "Boston" Corbett*.

Thomas Corbett was a milliner by trade. Milliners (commonly called "hatters") were prone to occupational hazards, like hallucinations, psychosis, and twitching (known as "hatter's shakes"). In the 1850s the milliner industry didn't yet understand that exposure to mercury nitrate, used as a treatment in the manufacture of felt, caused the maladies.

Thomas Corbett inhaled the poisonous chemical daily in his work. By the time he was 26, Corbett was a raving lunatic.

A devoutly religious man, Corbett became increasingly vociferous in his faith as his psychosis progressed. He began to wear his hair long to imitate Jesus and became progressively more vocal in his praise of the Lord. Corbett's fanatic behaviour earned him the nickname "*The Glory to God man*" around Boston, where he lived at the time.



On July 16, 1858, Corbett was accosted by two prostitutes while walking home from a church meeting. He was deeply disturbed by the encounter. Corbett returned to his boarding house and took solace in his bible. He stumbled upon a line in *Chapter 19 of the Gospel of Mathew* that read:

"...and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake".

Corbett interpreted the passage as a sign from God. He felt that God was telling him that he should castrate himself to avoid sexual temptation and remain holy. Which he did, with a pair of scissors. Corbett then ate a meal and went to another prayer meeting before checking himself into a hospital.

Corbett recovered from the self-mutilation incident, but his faith never wavered, in fact it flourished.

Now going by the name “Boston”, Colbert joined the army as the American Civil War began, but his erratic behaviour soon got him into trouble. Boston Corbett was continually belligerent to his superior officers, berating them for taking the Lord’s name in vain and condemning them for perceived violations of God’s word. He regularly held unauthorized prayer meetings and refused to take orders from his superiors.

Corbett was court-marshalled for his insubordinate and disruptive behaviour and sentenced to face a firing squad. He was subsequently given a reprieve and discharged from the army. Less than a month later, Corbett reenlisted in *Company L, 16th New York Calvary Regiment*.

On April 24, 1865, Corbett’s regiment was ordered to apprehend John Wilkes Booth, who had assassinated President Lincoln ten days earlier. Their orders were to take Booth alive.

The soldiers located Booth in a tobacco barn on a farm in Virginia. Claims of what transpired next differ but what is known for certain is that Boston Corbett shot John Wilkes Booth in the back of the head. Booth died in excruciating agony two hours later.

Corbett was arrested for his actions and faced a second court-marshal, but public opinion was on his side. The army reversed its decision to prosecute; Corbett was a hero in the eyes of the public and army brass didn’t want to endure any negative publicity.

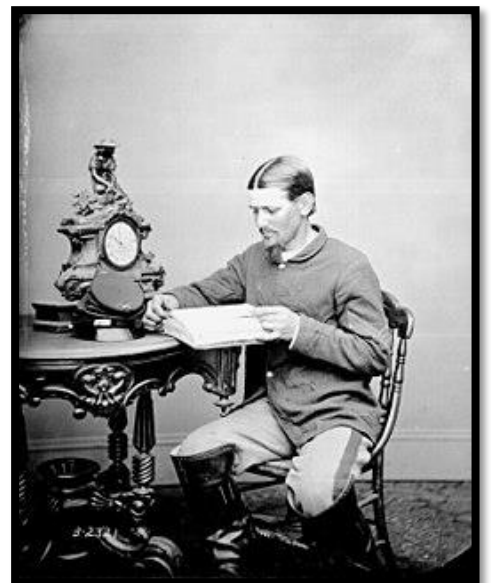
Boston Corbett became an instant celebrity. He had his portrait taken for the newspapers and shared in the reward offered for the “capture” of the President’s assassin. But Corbett’s delusional behaviour never subsided.

After he was discharged from the army, Corbett drifted from Boston to Connecticut, then to New Jersey. He used his fame as “*Lincoln’s Avenger*” to get preaching positions and menial employment placements, but his fanatical behaviour always resulted in his dismissal.

Corbett’s mental state deteriorated to the point that he was declared insane in 1887 and sent to *Topeka Asylum*. Corbett escaped on May 26, 1888 and disappeared.

No one knows for sure what ultimately happened to Corbett. At one point he drifted to Concordia, Kansas where he lived in a dugout bunker hole in a field on Key Road. The hole was vacant one day when a neighbour came by to check on him.

That is the pitiful end to the story of ...



... **The Mad Hatter**