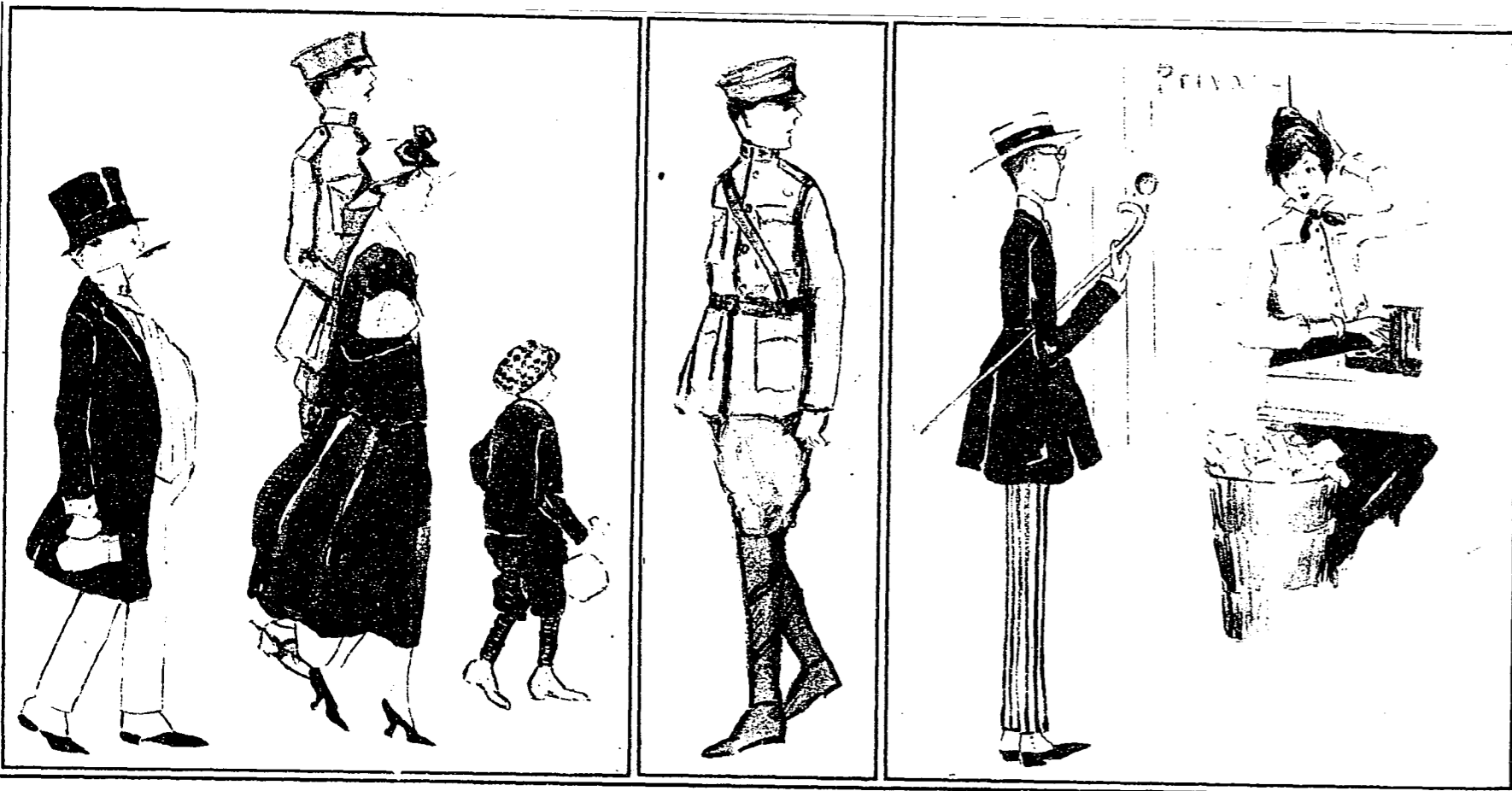


## Echoes in Lighter Tone from Washington

Some Observations on the Military Salute, the Stenographer, and the Temporary Buildings—Wartime Capital Seen in Its Amusing Phases



"Washington clerical life troops to work equipped with paper bags." "He looked around to see if his arm had dropped off." "Oh, yes, Mr. So-and-So has attended to that matter."

**F**IVE of the interesting aspects of wartime Washington may appropriately be classified as follows: Salutes, Stenographers, Desks, Lunches, Temporary Office Buildings.

The instructor of our home defense company says (after consulting the handbook he keeps in his hip pocket) that there are three kinds of salutes, or salutes. One is the hand salute, the other two are rifle salutes, at order and right shoulder arms, respectively. As a rifle in wartime Washington is so seldom seen as to be something of a curiosity, the Washington salute is the hand salute, fingers extended, palm to the front, hand raised briskly to the visor of the cap or the brim of the hat, then dropped to the side; done in two counts, "Hand sloop, one, two."

This is according to the manual. According to the practice, it varies in a scale between the motions of a baseball pitcher winding up and the languid use of one finger in a die-away "How de doo-oo."

As to the frequency of its manifestations, it may be said that many who take their exercise vicariously and formerly watched baseball games to that end, now stand on F Street and get the robust exercise of watching the hand salute constantly going on at either of the busy corners. The salute most frequently cheered by onlookers has a snappy finish like the motion when you are trying to keep them from stealing your bait, but there is a round arm punch that is interesting to observe, and gives the exercises by proxy an exhilarating jolt.

There is a little mechanical Uncle Sam which taps on one of the store windows to call attention to a display. At times he taps at infrequent intervals and at others he pounds away as if the boss was expected in. You get something of the same effect if you follow, say, a medical officer from the Army Medical School on Louisiana Avenue up to the War Department. After he has saluted everything that bears the shade of khaki in the vicinity of the Medical School he gets a few moments' rest by keeping to the side of lower F Street, pervaded by

the Shipping Board, which wears no uniform, scuttles by the Provost Marshal's office, and at Ninth Street braces himself for running the gauntlet. From Ninth to Twelfth Street he makes it in about 4-4, or common time, gradually accelerating, until at Fifteenth Street and the avenue, if it goes less than sixteen notes to the measure at any time, he looks around to see whether his arm has dropped off.

From there on it is a matter of picking the right party. Shall he slight this marine and salute this French officer? Marines are very touchy; better salute him. Here is a private of the sanitary corps and a Colonel of the General Staff. This is a democratic army, but may not Colonels have good memories for neglected salutes? And at the end of his journey a great light of Scriptural interpretation rewards him. And they stood on the right hand and on the left and held up his hands. Sure, the old Sunday school puzzle is plain enough now!

It has been calculated that the number of sanitary desks in the City of Washington at the present time, if placed end to end on the Great Wall of China, would be sufficient to make a bicycle path to Vladivostok, the additional support required being supplied by the number of colored porters, allowing one to each desk leg, who are at present employed in installing the desks and immediately removing them to another and a far distant point.

The rolling of tumbrils in wartime Washington is that of motor trucks bringing in desks, more desks, and still more desks, all of identical pattern. Formerly the official desk of Washington was more than a desk—it was a tradition. Moraines of cockroach paste testified to years of use, and if one desk had more honorable scars than another it was the new desk that was brought up from the storeroom to equip the new appointee. But hygiene and efficiency changed all that even before the war, and they get lovely desks now, highly polished tops, three drawers with ostentatious locks on either side, and little, spindling legs that lift them high and

make it impossible to realize the thrill when you move your desk and find something under it that you had given up for lost. You see them going in, fresh, frail, and shiny. You see them coming out, ink-spotted, paste-spotted, and with an occasional scratch that looks as though Uncle Joe Cannon were right about the spurs. There is no special reason to smile over them, only—there are so many of them and they look so much alike. You feel that they ought to be personified, typified, Lewis Carroll'd in some way.

The temporary buildings which stand in Foggy Bottom and also where the Tiber formerly flowed as a broad and navigable stream house hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these desks. They stand, each in its pasteboard partitioned cubicle, on a fibre rug of artistic pretensions and lighted by inverted bowl porcelain electric fixtures. Were the desks bought to put in the buildings, you wonder, or the buildings built to shelter the desks?

The Grecian porticoes of these temporary buildings may indicate that they are temples of the plastic arts, a popular divinity in Washington because the products she fosters make a good deal of show for the money—for which see inaugural court of honor decorations. There are still to be remembered the livid effigies brought to Washington from the St. Louis Exposition and placed in the shadow of the Washington Monument till the plaster exterior fell off and the interior hay protruded indecorously.

Ample radiating surface and a good head of steam have brought the temporary buildings through the Winter successfully, but they are facing the more serious test of the Washington Summer with its blistering, warping heat, and its intensive thunder showers. The buildings are closed in with pebble dash and partitioned with what is practically pasteboard. Pebble dash is a malicious sprite, the Fuck of the building world. The House of Seven Gables is described as having a wall finished with practically the same substance. It is quite possible that there is some Colonial pebble dash still standing, and any pebble dash is

likely to stand till its supports rot away, or it is just as likely to fall down within six months. This fascinating uncertainty as to the exterior and the evident certainty that the interior will warp and warp and warp, constitute the interest in the contemplation of the temporary buildings as a building proposition. Already the pasteboard panels bulge and gape; already moldings have snakelike convolutions; already floor boards pull their nails and raise their heads. Comes the July sun, and it will take more than a Congressional investigation to stop this kind of crookedness!

The interest in the temporary buildings as an office proposition lies in their contribution to the theory that no sound is lost, but goes on echoing through infinity. The buildings are vibrant. Discounting the palpable noises such as those made by the repairer's hammer and by playful male children of the age of 10 to 12, officially a messenger force, but giving much of their time to roller skating in resounding corridors, there is still a constant shimmer of sound waves, crescendo, diminuendo. Hundreds of typewriters, hundreds of dictating or conversing voices, hundreds of tramping feet communicate their rhythm to these masses of fibrous cells and the buildings whisper continuously a thin complaint.

And, hurrah, here come the stenographers! They are here from multi-storied city skyscrapers and from country lawyers' offices; from business colleges and from just-learned-it-by-myself; calm, self-possessed, clear-eyed; helpers of detail—helpless men. Power resides in their right hand and in their left. The entire clerical personnel of at least one commission has to be renewed every four months, and the stenographer's dependents who hold executive positions will stand for a good deal before they will risk losing a stenographer who can read at least 80 per cent. of her notes. Therefore, some future historian may call this the stenographers' war. At least, they know who is running it.

Did you ever happen to hear what Washington was like during the civil war? Take the opposite, and you will get what Washington is like in this war—

clear, clean, straight-cut. Loyalty? Why the way those women stenographers lie for their chiefs brings tears to one's eyes. Just business lies, you know; transparent little lies that are more informing than if they told the truth. Mr. So and So will be right back. Oh, yes, Mr. So and So has attended to that matter. Yes, that letter has already been mailed. Shielding, great-hearted lies, trying to bring the enshrined deity of the inner room up to that ideal of business efficiency that a careless, blundering, procrastinating, conversation-loving and time-wasting man is constantly nicking and battering.

In the old days, ah, those good old days, when a social engagement was perfectly valid as an excuse for leaving departmental duties, a few in Washington took their lunches disguised in one form or another and ate them, as it were, behind their hands. For the most, there were, as the calendar revolved, in due season, the shad, the soft or deviled crab, the fried chicken, a dish or two of reed

birds in the season of plenty, the oyster in many a guise, the country sausage, and so on, and so on. The surroundings where these were eaten were a trifle uncleanly, but the Grub, speaking of it with a large G, was good.

That was before the Greeks arrived accompanied by the steam table. Someone has said "When Greek meets Greek, they start a restaurant." Not at all. These are the lines: "When Greek meets Greek, they conjointly and with each other, with malice prepense and aforethought, willfully and knowingly conspire to set up a certain device known as a steam table and thereafter to maintain the same."

So that Washington clerical life either troops to work equipped with paper bags containing lunch with the content of butter more or less apparent, or it lunches on one of three dishes, spaghetti à la grease, tainted beef done up with strange and bitter herbs, or deboshed fish with a sauce containing streaks of an unknown scarlet substance. Some kickshaw

like a piece of foundry pie or a globule of machine-made ice cream completes the feast, and the vendors thrive, Sirs, they thrive.

As a result, we have the luncheon in the park, one of the features of wartime Washington. Groups of girls, groups of boys, groups of boys and girls, and just he and she, are eating from paper bags. It has been stated by persons from New England that such a condition of open and shameless eating in the sight of everybody would not be tolerated on Boston Common, to which the rejoinder is that it is so much the worse for Boston, for this, look you, is a pretty sight at the noontide hour; and if two should take alternate bites from the same sandwich, what harm?

Another novelty in Washington is the expression "Out to lunch." It used to be that everybody had a well-defined and well-known luncheon hour. Now, between 11:45 and 3:30 o'clock, the countersign for the grand rounds is "out to lunch," an expression which, like charity, covers

a multitude of sins. The habit of transacting business in every old place except your office has been imported from New York, and the girl at the Bureau of Information puts it about like this: "I'd send you up to Mr. Blank, but he's never in. Mr. Other is out to lunch. Mr. Which may be in the cafeteria, but the chances are that he is out to lunch. Would you like to wait?" Sure, one just loves to wait! Meanwhile, your man is transacting business in whatever club or lunch lair he frequents.

Thus Washington in these wartimes is assimilating the ways of the big business bees, sealing a few of them up in the wax of precedent and routine, seeing some fly off again with a zip and a hum, and others gradually settling down to regular existence. The good old hive will gradually shake down to order and to getting things done without the noise of battle and the buzzing of the Captains, to say nothing of the Majors and the Lieutenants and the Second Lieutenants so liberally provided.