



## **A Young Medical Officer's Letters from Fort Robinson and Fort Leavenworth, 1906-1907**

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Article Summary: Samuel Brown McPheeters contracted his services to the Medical Department of the U.S. Army. His letters to his family describe his daily activities at the post, comment on reading materials sent to him, and suggest his plans for the future.

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West Entrance, Post Headquarters, now Fort Robinson  
Museum, Nebraska State Historical Society

# A YOUNG MEDICAL OFFICER'S LETTERS FROM FORT ROBINSON AND FORT LEAVENWORTH, 1906-1907

EDITED BY WILLARD E. WIGHT

THE emergence of the United States as a world power following the Spanish-American War and the acquisition of "overseas" territories brought many branches of the government face to face with the need for expanded facilities. For none was this more evident than for the United States Army which was called upon to furnish men and materiel for the defense of the tropical islands so recently added to the area of national influence.

The Medical Department of the United States Army had long supplemented its meager allotment of surgeons with doctors who contracted their services to the government and were thus denominated "contract surgeons." The increased demand for the services of the Medical Department and its consequent expansion of personnel resulted in the establishment of the Medical Reserve Corps in 1908. The enabling act provided for the assignment of members to active service and for commission of contract surgeons in the corps. "All applicants for the Corps were to be first

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examined as to their physical, mental, and moral qualifications and to be commissioned only if satisfactory.”<sup>1</sup> Thus was the Medical Department able to supplement its small regular personnel of three hundred and twenty-one officers.

Histories of the military establishment have usually been written by members of the regular army and reminiscences of army life, except for war time service, have been written by those whose profession it was. Life in the peacetime army has rarely received attention. The letters here presented give a closeup view of army life during its less glamorous period through the eyes of one who did not select the army as a career. While the true aura of the frontier had vanished from the two posts where Dr. McPheeters<sup>2</sup> saw service, they yet retained remnants suggestive of their earlier history.

The problems of adjusting to the “army routine” which are described are more or less duplicated each time a reserve officer of today reports for duty to his first post. The question of satisfactory housing and “housekeeping” must be solved, the “niceties” of the service learned and observed, and the code of conduct acquired in civil life must be adapted to the new situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Percy M. Ashburn, *A History of the Medical Department of the United States Army* (Boston, 1929), pp. 89, 247-249.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Brown McPheeters was born June 22, 1880, at Rockbridge Baths, Virginia, the son of the Reverend William M. and Emma Gold (Morrison) McPheeters. Following his graduation from Washington and Lee University in 1900, he received his medical degree from Washington University in 1906. From October 17, 1906, to July 22, 1908, he served as contract surgeon. On the latter date the contract was annulled, and he was appointed first lieutenant, Medical Reserve Corps, with rank from July 7. He was honorably discharged in the same grade June 3, 1909. His service at Fort Robinson was from October 25, 1906 to January 16, 1907, when he was transferred to Fort Leavenworth. McPheeters left for the Philippine Islands with the Thirtieth Infantry Regiment and arrived there August 4, 1907 and returned to the States January 15, 1909. During World War I, he served as first lieutenant in the Medical Corps. Later he was associate physician of the Tuberculosis Sanitarium, Catawba, Virginia, and chief of the Mobile Chest Clinic, Alabama State Board of Health. (Letter, Adjutant General, Department of the Army, to the writer, December 18, 1952; letter, secretary, Washington and Lee University Alumni, Inc., to the writer, March 25, 1953.)

[Undated, but the envelope is postmarked, St. Louis, Missouri, Oct. 11, 1906]<sup>3</sup>

Dear Folks<sup>4</sup>

I have been delaying a letter to you in the hopes of telling you definitely about a proposition I have on hand.

In consequence of the sending of army surgeons to Cuba,<sup>5</sup> the Govt is engaging contract surgeons to serve at the posts in this country. The contract is for a service of six months, is renewable at the option of both parties, and pays \$150.00 a month, quarters and mileage. I have put in my application and received a letter from the Surgeon General's office saying that my name is on the list and that I will be notified by telegraph in case I receive an appointment.

The reasons with which I am seeking this service will be obvious to you. I have no idea of course of going into the army permanently but if I can save \$500.00 or \$600.00 [*sic*] dollars, get some very good experience, Though not equal to that I am getting in the City Hospital, get the prestige that comes from having been an army surgeon, it seems to me to be worth while. Every one advises me to take the position if I can. I believe I have a good chance of getting it. I should like to hold the position for two years so that I can pay off what I owe and have enough to start in for myself. Then there is the possibility of getting into the Marine Hospital Service, which gives a man the best medical education obtainable in this country and abroad and pays well at the same time. These are the ideas which I am seeking to get in the service.

Yr. devoted Son,

S. B. McPheeters

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<sup>3</sup> The manuscript letters are in the William M. McPheeters Collection, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia.

<sup>4</sup> William Marcellus McPheeters (1854-1935) graduated from Washington and Lee University and Union Theological Seminary. He was ordained in 1879 by the Montgomery Presbytery and was a member of the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary from 1888 to 1932 when he became professor emeritus. He was a prolific writer of tracts and articles and served as editor or associate editor of many Presbyterian publications. In October, 1878, McPheeters married Emma Gold Morrison by whom he had two sons and two daughters. (E. C. Scott, *Ministerial Directory of the Presbyterian Church, U. S.* 1861-1941 [Austin, Texas, 1942], p. 488.)

<sup>5</sup> "In 1906, threatened uprisings in Cuba caused intervention by the United States under the terms of the Platt Amendment, and the Army was sent back there after an absence of four years. Cuba was this time occupied for two years, and the troops were then withdrawn permanently." (Ashburn, *op. cit.*, p. 248.)



Ft. Robinson, Neb.  
Oct. 25, 1906

Dear Folks:

I arrived here at about ten o'clock. Went to headquarters and reported to Col. Auger<sup>6</sup> the commandant. He knows Aunt Mary Scott very well. I find that Capt. Robt. Paxton<sup>7</sup> is stationed here, but is away at present with the troops who have been sent after the Indians who are causing some trouble.<sup>8</sup> The other doctor at the post accompanied the troops. I would have [had] to have gone in his place if I had not missed connection in Kansas City and gotten here a day late. As there is a likelihood of several months campaign and the weather is cold I am glad it turned out as it did. The officers here are very nice and cordial. I have met only a few as yet. I like the place very much thus far and the people.

I am quartered at the hospital at present as the officers messes are broken up at present on account of the absence of the troops. I believe this experience is going to be fine.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacob Arnold Augur (1849-1909), son of Brevet Major-General Christopher Colon Augur, graduated from West Point June 15, 1869, at which time he was commissioned second lieutenant of the Fifth Cavalry. Most of his service was on the frontier and in Indian country, except for the period 1883-1887 when he was instructor of cavalry tactics at West Point. Augur became the colonel of the Tenth Cavalry in 1902 and accompanied that unit to the Philippines where he died at Fort William McKinley. (George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point* [Boston, 1891], III, 130; *Official Army Register for 1907* [Washington, 1907], p. 138; *Official Army Register for 1910* [Washington, 1909], p. 578.)

<sup>7</sup> Robert Glasgow Paxton (1865-1930), a native of Virginia, graduated from the Military Academy, June 12, 1887, when he was commissioned second lieutenant of the Tenth Cavalry. After he had risen to the rank of major in that branch, Paxton transferred to the Quartermaster Corps. He retired at his own request after thirty years' service but was recalled to active duty during World War I. (Cullum, *op. cit.*, III, 411; *Official Army Register for 1907*, p. 138; *Official Army Register for 1930* [Washington, 1930], pp. 843, 948.)

<sup>8</sup> A band of approximately three hundred Ute Indians under the leadership of Appah, their chief, had left the Uinta and Ouray Agency, at Whiterocks, Utah, determined to locate in the Big Horn country of South Dakota. As the band worked its way across the country, the settlers became anxious, and the Governor of Wyoming telegraphed to President Roosevelt. The net result was that United States troops were sent out to persuade the Utes to go to Fort Meade. Major Grierson was sent with two troops of the Tenth Cavalry commanded by Captains Johnson and Paxton. (*Annual Reports of the Interior, 1906, Indian Affairs* [Washington, 1907], p. 368; *New York Times*, November 5, 1906.)

Love to Mother and Mary, Charles and Emma Gold.<sup>9</sup>

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

Fort Robinson, Neb.

Nov. 13, 1906

Dear Folks:

I have not had the pleasure of hearing from you since I came here, but I want to thank you for sending me the papers.

Every one has been most kind to me here. My patients are all doing very well and I have had quite a lot of work to do without being crowded. They are all [an] unusually nice crowd of people here. There are only a few unmarried officers here but I like those I have met very much.

The climate is magnificent and agrees with me admirably. I think I am going to have a profitable experience.

Mother writes me that Tom Kirkpatrick<sup>10</sup> has offered to have me transferred to Fort Moultrie. That is very kind of him. I should like the best in the world to be where I could see you all once in a while. But I could do that very little oftener than I can here and I would be cooped up on a small island. Here I am in an open country with a magnificent climate that agrees with me well. So far summers do not agree with me so well. So I think I had better stay here where I can be out of doors riding and shooting and building up physically, though I am not sick at all. So I hope that I will not be transferred from here.

The troops are coming back from the Indian campaign the Indians having come to terms. It seems to be the opinion here that the grievances of the Indians were just and the Indians were acting within their right except

<sup>9</sup> Sisters and brother of McPheeters.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jellis Kirkpatrick (1868-1936), a graduate of the Medical School of the University of Virginia, was appointed assistant surgeon, Medical Department, November 6, 1895. In 1919 he retired with rank of colonel as the result of disability in line of duty. He was stationed at Fort Moultrie, South Carolina, until November 28, 1906, when he left there for duty in Washington. (*Official Register for 1906* [Washington, 1906], p. 41; *Official Register of the Army for 1937* [Washington, 1937], p. 1055; Letter, the Adjutant General to the writer, December 18, 1952.)



for shooting some game and breaking the game law. The Gov't sent out about four times as many troops as there were Indians to make sure that there would be no trouble. They then agreed that the Indians should remain in winter quarters at Fort Meade [South Dakota] and should send a deputation to Washington to lay the case before the President. The whole complaint of the Indians was that they had been taken off of their old reservation and had been sent to a reservation where they could not earn a living from the land. So the Indians left. They harmed nobody. They said they were American citizens and could go where they pleased and they said they would die before they would go back to Utah. So they finally compromised and went to Fort Meade and they will send a delegation to see the President.<sup>11</sup>

Captain Paxton returned yesterday. He has asked me to quarter with him. That's fine. Isn't it?

I am glad to say that in a fair degree I am maintaining my own standards and am gaining the appreciation of these people. I have been reading the book of Joshua. He was a fine sturdy Christian wasn't he? Joshua I:9.<sup>12</sup> gives me great comfort.

Love to Mother, Mary, C. & E.G.

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

I expect to perform my first major operation Saturday. It will be an operation for inguinal hernia.

S.B. McP.

Fort Robinson, Neb.  
Nov. 20 1906

Dear Folks:

We are having zero weather here; or rather the thermometer has once registered zero and has been between that and 10° above for some days. One would never know it however unless he saw the thermometer. I am now staying with Captain Paxton and every morning at [seven] I

<sup>11</sup> Chiefs Red Cap and Black Whiskers were to see President Roosevelt. (*New York Times*, November 7, 1906.)

<sup>12</sup> "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed; for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

have to go over and take sick call at 7:15 A.M. A strong wind blows down the valley and your ears and hands register a low temperature. But when the breeze lets up you scarcely notice the cold. I like the climate immensely. I am feeling fine. I have an appetite enough for two.

The people here have been very kind to me and things have gone smoothly enough for the most part but they are not well acquainted to [*sic*] Calvinistic view of things here. However I believe I shall make it all right.

This is a fine post. There are a nice crowd of officers here. The colored troops are more easily kept under discipline than the white troops are.

I had a glorious ride this afternoon on one of Capt. Paxton's horses. I covered about ten miles. I did not wear an overcoat and felt as warm as toast. The climate is wonderful.

I have not had a letter from home for some time now. Tell Charles that he owes me a real good letter. The one he wrote me does not count. It was nothing but a scrap of a letter. He had plenty of time. He ought to write a real long letter.

I get the papers you have been sending me and read them with great pleasure.

Love to all.

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

Fort Robinson, Neb.

Jan. 14, 1907

Dear Folks:

I have received your letters today. I am ashamed of myself for having allowed so much time to go by without having written home. I have been very busy of late but could have written had not a strange disinclination to write letters come over me.

I get up and go to the hospital and take sick call at 7:15 A.M. At this time all enlisted men and non-com. officers who are ailing report and are prescribed for and assigned to duty, quarters or the hospital as the case may be. I get through a little after 8:00 A.M. and come back for breakfast and return to the hospital at 9:00 A.M. Here I

see patients of one sort and another until about 11:00 A.M. The rest of the morning and two or three hours in the afternoon are taken up in making calls at the houses of officers and non-com. officers. Night before last I was up until 3:00 A.M. on a confinement case and worked until 6:00 P.M. yesterday. I left here yesterday at 3:30 and rode to Crawford<sup>13</sup> to assist in an operation. It is three miles to Crawford and the thermometer was below zero, but I enjoyed the ride. We lunch at 1:00 P.M. and dine at 6:30. By the way you are mistaken if you think board is provided officers. My mess bill was \$30.20 last month. Quarters only are provided. In the evening I usually make a social call or so. They are very particular about these matters in the service.

Sunday I go to church when I can. This has been less than half of the time so far. I am busy a good part of the day & usually read in the afternoon and evening. I enjoy the papers you send very much. Were it not for them I should be at a loss what to do with the time.

Every afternoon when I can I go horseback riding. There have been only a few days when the weather did not permit this. It was 14 below zero last night and has been 10 below all day.

The 10th Cavalry is ordered to the Philippines. I do not know whether I am going with them or not yet. I hope I am. I want to see the Islands and Japan and if I can come back by the eastern route, I shall have been around the world and be saving as much money as I am now.

The Lity Digest is coming regularly. Pleases me very much. I have been wanting to take some weekly periodical. I have access to the club but do not go there much. Thank C. for the handkerchief he sent me and Mary for the pictures. I was especially glad to get the one of her and E.G.

I paid my subscription to the salary of the Pres. of Clinton College today. Sent a check to Prof. Spencer.<sup>14</sup>

I continue in fine health and am enjoying my work. Two years will be enough for me.

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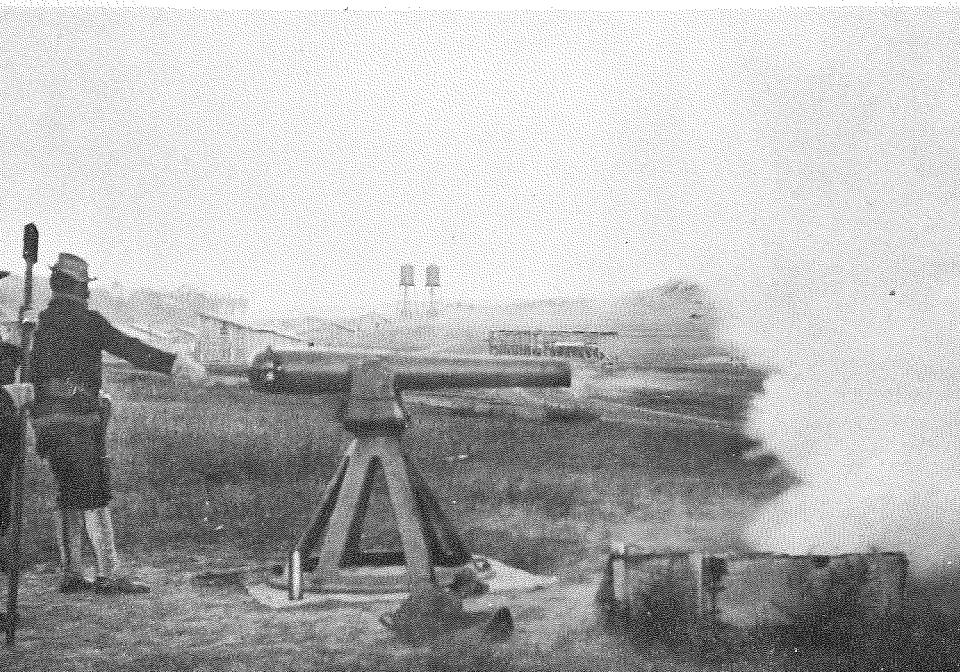
<sup>13</sup> Crawford, a village in Dawes County, Nebraska, had a population of 731 persons in 1900 and by 1910 had risen to 1,323 persons. (Bureau of Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910* [Washington, 1913], III, 27.)

<sup>14</sup> A. E. Spencer (d. 1939) was a Presbyterian minister. In 1906 he was pastor of the church at Rome, Georgia, and in 1907 was serving Hopewell Church, Claussen, South Carolina. (Scott, *op. cit.* p. 562.)



Above—Ninth Infantry troopers going on guard,  
Fort Robinson, about 1900

Below—Ninth Infantry troopers at reveille, Fort Robinson,  
about 1900





Above—Adobe Duplexes, Fort Robinson

Below—Old Wheelwright Shop, Fort Robinson





I shall not be remiss in writing again if I can help it.

Love to Mother, Mary, C. and E.G. I shall kept [sic] your confidence regarding C.

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

Fort Leavenworth, Kas.  
Feb. 19, 1907

Dear Folks:

It seems quite a while since I heard from home. How are things going what is the news about the house? How is C. coming with his Sunday School? and Mary with her music? What are you doing these fine days? How I would like to get a schedule of the daily program of each of you.

Nothing very exciting has been happening here since I last wrote there is not a great deal of sickness though considerable grippe. My medical duties do not require me to work after lunch except to teach a class of the hospital corps for an hour five times a week.

I have had to furnish my rooms here. I got a bed mattress and pillows from the Quartermaster. I will return them when I leave. I borrowed some chairs and bought some bed clothes, towels and a flat topped desk. The latter is very nice and will do for my office when I start out. It is Flemish oak and cost \$14.00. I think that as soon as I can get together \$500.00 I shall go back to St. Louis. I am enjoying my experience in the army and am glad I went in but I do not care for it as a permanency or rather I do not feel that a man can make the best of himself in the service.

I hope they will move me around a good deal as I want to see the country. I would like to see the Philippines, Haiwai [sic], Guam, Japan, China, as well as our Western Coast, and come back by way of the Suez Canal with Uncle Sam paying my traveling expenses and \$150.00 a month besides. You bet I would and I expect I will. If they send me to the Philippines, it will be for two years, but I will resign before the time is up and pay [my] own way back or try to get a job as Surgeon on some line Steamer and make expenses.

I rarely go out in the evening here. I try to read medicine, though I seem to make slow progress. In the after-

noon I read and walk. Sometimes drive or ride officers horses. I got some skating a week or so ago. I am not meeting people very much in a social way as I am shy on clothes, want to study and am not inclined to do it and I am not strong on Society.

I have got to buy a dinner coat as I have to have something besides a dress suit to call in. I ought to have a dress uniform but I am not going to buy one if I can avoid it as one costs about \$65.00.

I have begun to keep a diary and chronicle my daily experiences.<sup>15</sup> I believe it will be interesting in after years. If I go to the Philippines I am going to buy a kodak.

Will you tell Father that I am going to subscribe to the Bible Student and Teacher.<sup>16</sup> I never got those Presbyterians he mailed to Fort Robinson though I sent some stamps, and I have never gotten a copy of the Literary Digest though I have written the publishers.

Tell Charles if he can't secure writing material in Columbia, I'll send him some.

Love to all.

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

P.S. I enclose some letters that may interest you.

Fort Leavenworth, Kas.  
Mrch. 6 1906 [1907]

Dear Mother:

I am sorry to hear that you have been so miserable of late. I wish I could advise you of something that would make you well. I suppose your dietetic experiences have made you somewhat skeptical about the virtue of dieting rigidly. Well it does look as though things are topsy turvey as regards principles of diet in your case. I believe in your stomach tube and vomiting.

Your letter gave me great pleasure. It had some news in it. It must be a great pleasure to you to have C. and E.G. in the house. They keep things more lively.

<sup>15</sup> The diary, if kept, is not now extant.

<sup>16</sup> *The Bible Student and Teacher* was published at Columbia, South Carolina, from 1904 to 1913.



The other night I went coon hunting. It was a beautiful moonlight night. The party consisted of two officers besides myself and a negro named Jordan who was the guide, man of all work, director of the hunt, master of the hounds, expert hunter, and character study all combined. We tramped for about 15 or 20 miles. Got two coons, and ceased about 4:00 A.M. having been out 7½ hours. It was an interesting and enjoyable experience. As I had been out target shooting all afternoon, I made quite a day of it.

One of the doctors is away on special duty and I am using his pony. I have to pay \$5.00 a month to a man to look after him and that is all he costs me. I have had him only since Monday. I expect to get a great deal of pleasure from riding. He is a good pony but has the most suspicious disposition I ever saw.

I have several interesting cases on hand now. I am reading some medicine every day and so far I am making some progress in that line.

I had the carpenter at the Hospital make me a chest as my trunk and suit case are not spacious enough to carry my stuff.

You ought to see what they call the bed roll for field service. It consists of a piece of canvas to cover a cot, chair and table which fold up into the smallest space you can imagine, bedding, etc., and it all rolls up into about the space of a narrow mattress rolled on itself. This is for field service.

I hope Father's trip to New York was successful.

Love to all,

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

Fort Leavenworth, Kas.

Mrch 15 1907

Dear Father

Your letter of the 9th inst was received and read with much pleasure. I had begun to wonder why I was not hearing from you but I supposed you were busy. I have been a little luckless in the matter of letters of late.

I am much obliged to you for sending me the Presbyterians. I am very glad to get such literature. I want to

ask your advice on the purchase of "A Dictionary of the Bible" by Dr. Jno. D. Davis<sup>17</sup> advertised in the Bible Student. I am going to get something of the kind. I do not see the Earnest Worker.<sup>18</sup> I should be very glad to read your articles and wish you would send me copies of the magazines containing them.

You will probably be surprised and certainly be gratified to know that I could not obtain a seat in Chapel last Sunday night. The chaplain<sup>19</sup> [*sic*] conducts services of the "good music-stereoptican-moral talk" type. He is earnest and industrious and a good writer, a good talker but not a profound thinker. He is the Y.M.C.A. type. He is very well thought of. I heard one officer say that he was the only chaplain in the army that was worth a damn. I don't know how general his views regarding chaplains. The chaplain at Robinson was a negro.<sup>20</sup> He was very well thought of by the officers and was said to have considerable influence with the soldiers.

Sat up all night last night with a young man a major's son who is dying slowly of uremia. I am Officer of the Day (O.D.) today and have put in a good deal of time sleeping. I gave an anaesthetic yesterday for an operation and assisted in another so feel that I had a good day's experience.

The past week until yesterday has been rainy and damp so have not gotten out much. The climate of Western Nebraska is the finest I ever saw.

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<sup>17</sup> John D. Davis, *A Dictionary of the Bible, with Many New and Original Maps and Plans and Amply Illustrated* (Philadelphia, 1903).

<sup>18</sup> *The Earnest Worker; A Journal for Sunday School Teachers and Leaders* began publication in Richmond in 1870.

<sup>19</sup> John Thomas Axton (1870-1934), son of John and Matilda L. (Webb) Axton, was graduated from Middlebury College. He served as general secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association, 1893-1902. Appointed to the chaplaincy of the United States Army in 1902 with the rank of captain, he became chief of chaplains with the rank of colonel in 1920 and retired in 1928 for disability in line of duty. In March, 1907, he was chaplain of the Eighteenth Infantry Regiment at Fort Leavenworth. (*Official Register for 1906*, p. 87; *Official Army Register, January 1, 1929* [Washington, 1929], p. 719; *Official Army Register, January 1, 1935* [Washington, 1935], p. 1021; letter, Adjutant General to the writer, December 18, 1952.)

<sup>20</sup> William Thomas Anderson (1859-1934), was born in Texas and graduated from Howard College and the Cleveland Homeopathic Hospital College. He was appointed to the chaplaincy from Ohio with the rank of captain on August 16, 1897. In 1910 he was retired for disability in line of duty. In October, 1906, he was chaplain of the Tenth Cavalry at Fort Robinson. (*Official Register for 1906*, p. 87; *Official Register for 1911* [Washington, 1911], p. 440; *Official Army Register, 1935*, p. 1021; letter, Adjutant General to the writer, December 18, 1952.)

I am sorry to learn of Tom's coup d'etat but glad he got back again. Poor boy! He is having as hard a time learning wisdom as I did. It comes high to some of us but it's worth the price. Tom's statement that "the only request I will make of you is to help me out in a financial way" recalls to mind that pathetic ballad entitled, "All I want is a hundred million dollars."

What do you think of the movement for Simplified Spelling? On the whole I believe it is a good thing, tho I do not take to some of the changes much. The Board sent me some of their literature the other day. I suppose you have gotten the same thing.

I inclose a check to induce C. to send me a statement of what I owe him. You [said] he let you have part of the money and I borrowed from you. So I do not know exactly how much I owe him and how much I owe you. How are your houses coming on?

Love to Mother, M.C. and E.G.

Yr. devoted Son,

S.B. McPheeters

P.S. I am sorry to hear you confess your opposition to domestic reform and vent such sarcasm on the mistakes of maiden enterprises.

S.B. McP.