

Jack Herford: Stockman, Lawyer, Soldier for Three Countries in Three Wars

John Brooke Herford was born in Sheffield, England in 1855, and studied in a private school, with plans to attend Oxford. When young Jack was 18, his father decided to emigrate to the US, and Jack chose to go along as the family settled in Boston. Like so many young men, he headed west in the 1870s, going first to New Mexico where he started working with stock. He subsequently worked as a cowhand over many ranges, and trailed with a herd to Montana. He became superintendent for a cattle company on the Musselshell, later buying the place in 1886.



Herford began to study law there, and passed the bar in 1891. He moved to Billings to begin his practice in 1893. Just a year later, he was elected to a two-year term as County Attorney for Yellowstone County. When his term was complete, he returned to private practice, and he established a reputation throughout the west for livestock law.

He had also joined the Montana National Guard. When war was declared with Spain in 1898, Herford joined the regular U.S. Army, and served as a quartermaster sergeant for the duration.

At the end of the conflict, he returned home to Billings and went back to his law practice, but not for long. His native Britain became involved in the Boer War in 1901. Herford entered the service of the British government, using his experience as a quartermaster and with livestock to serve as a horse buyer to provision British troops.

After the Boer War was over, Herford moved back to Boston, though he visited Billings regularly, finally returning in 1906, and once again taking up his law practice. In 1908, Sheriff Jim Webb was murdered by a shepherd. Herford joined the posse that was formed to capture the murderer. The posse located the man, who opened fire on them with his rifle, initiating and losing a gun battle. Herford was the one who ventured out from cover to check if the man was dead. He was, and the death was declared a suicide. The posse decided that Jack Herford should be sheriff, and the county commissioners agreed. Herford served out Webb's term of office.

A few years later, Herford was appointed City Attorney for Billings, and in 1912, he revised all of the standing city ordinances. Once again, he returned to his private practice afterwards.

In 1917, the United States entered into World War I. Herford applied for permission to rejoin the Army's fighting forces, but was refused for being too old. He was offered a desk job with a federal agency as an alternative, but Herford declined. However, Herford discovered that there was an error on his discharge papers from the Spanish-

American War that indicated that he was 10 years younger. So in 1918, he traveled north into Canada, showed off those papers, and was accepted into the Canadian forces. He turned 63 in Belgium, near the front line trenches. Unfortunately, he became ill and was sent to London to recuperate, where his true age was discovered. He was transferred into serving in hospitals for the remainder of World War I.

Herford was demobilized and returned to Billings in the summer of 1919. Along with his law practice, he also served as a livestock inspector.

Herford was very active in public life. Along with the various offices he held over the years, he was also involved in the founding of the Maverick Hose Company, a volunteer fire department, and developing the coal mines in Bearcreek. It was said that he was acquainted with every prominent pioneer in the west. At his death in 1923, the *Billings Gazette* described him as a “cattleman, soldier, public official, empire builder and one of the best-known pioneer characters of Montana.”

Sources:

Billings Gazette, “Pneumonia Fatal to Jack Herford”, June 16, 1923.

Sanders, Helen Fitzgerald, *A History of Montana, Vol 2*, Lewis Pub. Co., Chicago, 1913, pp. 1267-1268

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