

3300 words

They Called Him “Useless” –
Grant’s Years of Failure before the Civil War
by Duane Schultz

His real name was Hiram Ulysses Grant, but no one called him Hiram. He was given that name because his maternal grandfather liked the sound of it. His own father, Jesse, a self-educated tanner, chose the name Ulysses because he had read a biography of the Greek hero and thought it was the perfect name for his first-born son. “My Ulysses” he called him proudly, believing him to be the smartest, most beautiful, most perfect baby ever born.

Other people in the small town of Georgetown, Ohio, did not see him that way. Biographer Ron Chernow described him as a “country bumpkin.” Ulysses was a sensitive, awkward, unsociable boy with no discernable talents, interests or abilities beyond being able to ride a horse, which he did very well. He was studious and tried to avoid fights. Whenever he went hunting with other boys, he refused to kill anything. During school recess periods he sat on a tree stump and watched the other children playing, but he did not join them. The kids made fun of him, and when he insisted on calling himself Ulysses, they laughed and taunted him with the nickname “Useless.”

At age eight, he desperately wanted a pony that belonged to a neighbor and asked his father to buy it. Jesse Grant offered the neighbor \$20, but the man held out for \$25, insisting he would not sell for less. Ulysses kept badgering his father, but Jesse said the pony was not worth \$25. However, he gave his son the opportunity to learn how to make a proper business deal.

He told Ulysses to offer the farmer \$20, and if he refused then he should offer him \$22.50. And if he still refused, then Ulysses could offer the full \$25, but only if he truly wanted the animal that much. The boy did want it that much and when he approached the farmer, he

blurted out exactly what his father had said, word for word. “Papa says I may offer you twenty dollars for the colt, but if you won’t take that, I am to offer you twenty-two and a half, and if you won’t take that, I am to give you twenty-five.”

Years later, Grant wrote, “This transaction caused me great heart-burning. The story got out among the boys of the village, and it was a long time before I heard the last of it.” He became a laughingstock and never truly lost the sense of humiliation the incident brought him.

When it came time to choose a career, he realized that he had no ambition or goal other than not to work in his father’s foul-smelling tannery. Since Ulysses could not decide, his father did it for him, obtaining for him an appointment to the military academy at West Point, New York. If the boy could not do anything else—and he certainly seemed to have no talent for business—then maybe he could be a soldier. And West Point was free.

Ulysses did not want to go to West Point where he would have to wear a uniform, train to be a soldier, and listen to military band music, which he had always hated. But he had no other option, so off he went to a place that gave him a new name. The congressman who had offered the appointment, Thomas Lyon Hamer, was an old friend of his father and, like everyone else, called the boy Ulysses. When he filled out the appointment form, he assumed that the boy’s middle name must, by tradition, be Simpson, which was his mother’s maiden name. And that was how Hiram Ulysses Grant officially became U. S. Grant, not a bad name for a soldier. Grant decided not to change it, and he got the nickname of “Sam” from the initials U.S. which fellow cadets said referred to Uncle Sam.

Ulysses hated everything about West Point and had no intention of becoming a soldier. A fellow cadet, William T. Sherman, commented that “A more unpromising boy never entered the Military Academy.” After that awful first year, even as Grant started doing better in his classes, he still insisted that he “had not the faintest intention of staying in the army should I be

graduated, which I did not expect.” He wanted to be a professor of mathematics at “some respectable college.” He graduated in 1843, ranking 21st in a class of 39, but was disappointed to be commissioned in the infantry and not the cavalry, despite his outstanding riding skills. The decision was based on two incidents: once he kicked a horse and another time hit one with the broad side of his saber.

Nevertheless, Grant was eager to show off his uniform to the folks back home, particularly the girls. But that did not work out as expected. A rather dull-witted local stable boy began mocking him, marching barefoot with exaggerated stiffness up and down the street wearing dark blue pants with a crude white stripe down the side, just like Grant’s fancy uniform. “The joke was a huge one in the mind of many of the people,” Grant said, “and was much enjoyed by them.” He was not amused, and he wrote in his memoirs some 40 years later that the experience left him with “a distaste for military uniform that I have never recovered from.”

A rare instance of good fortune occurred at his first post, Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, Missouri. There he met Julia Dent, the sister of a classmate, Frederick Dent, who lived only five miles away at White Haven, her family’s 900-acre farm. Julia was strong-willed, schooled in the social graces of the time, and, more important to Grant who was smitten with her, she could ride a horse as well as he did.

Julia was determined to marry him, even though her parents objected that Grant’s background and lack of money made him an unsuitable prospect. But they did marry four years later, in 1848, with Pete Longstreet as his best man. In a letter to Julia, Grant wrote, “You can have but little idea of the influence you have over me, Julia. If I feel tempted to do anything that I feel is not right I am sure to think, ‘Well now, if Julia saw me would I do so?’ I am more or less governed by what I think is your will.”

But before they could marry, Grant got caught up in the Mexican-American war, which for him turned out to be mostly boredom. He was on leave from the army when it started and before he could return to his unit it had left. He spent most of his time drilling troops and playing cards with Longstreet in camps in Louisiana and Corpus Christi, Texas. The most popular card game of the day was "Brag," a forerunner of poker, which required the ability to bluff. Grant was no better at bluffing than when he had tried to buy the colt as a child. He lost almost every game, but he kept playing.

The head of the regimental theater troupe chose Grant to act in a performance of Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*. Grant was to play Desdemona, Othello's wife. Everyone agreed that the role of a girl was perfect for the short, slight Grant, who was later described by biographer Geoffrey Perrett as having an "almost feminine prettiness" when in his 20s. Some officers in the regiment even referred to him as "Beauty," and Julia's sister said he was as "pretty as a doll." However, it was eventually decided to send for a professional actress from New Orleans, because Grant did not play the role with enough passion. His response was to give up acting, grow a beard, and take up liquor and cigars.

When he was finally sent to Mexico, he was assigned quartermaster duties and spent his time purchasing mules and supplies, more a clerk than a soldier. "I felt sorry that I had enlisted," he said. He wrote a formal protest about his assignment, arguing that it "removes me from sharing in the dangers and honors of service with my company at the front." But he remained a quartermaster.

At Resaca de la Palma he was finally given command of a company, but his first experience in combat left him disappointed, feeling as though the battle would have been won even if he had not been there. He was sure his presence had made no difference.

Three months later, during a larger battle at Monterrey, Grant, though still a quartermaster stationed behind the lines, said that curiosity overruled his judgment and so he rode to the front to observe. "I had been there but a short time when an order to charge was given, and lacking the moral courage to return to camp, where I had been ordered to stay, I charged with the regiment." The regiment lost one-third of its men.

The following day Grant volunteered to ride through heavy enemy fire, by hanging down on the far side of his horse, in order to bring up more ammunition. "I got off safely without a scratch," he recalled. Partly due to his courage, the regiment was able to capture the city of Monterrey. But although other officers in the regiment received glory, medals and promotions, Grant returned to quartermaster duties with no formal recognition of his actions.

Toward the end of the war, in an attack on Mexico City, Grant again saw combat and this time was commended for initiative and gallantry. The recommendation was written by Robert E. Lee, a young staff officer. The commanding general, William J. Worth, was so impressed with Grant's heroism that he sent an aide to bring Grant to meet him. The aide, John C. Pemberton, would encounter Grant again in 1863 when Grant defeated him at Vicksburg.

Grant spent four more years as quartermaster stationed in Detroit. Julia was with him for some of that time but when she became pregnant, she spent winters at her parents' home where she could live more comfortably than on an army post. In 1852, when Grant's regiment was transferred to the west coast, Julia, with a second child on the way, again moved in with her family, pampered by her parents and four slaves, who were a gift from her father. Grant was left on his own and that proved to be his undoing.

Stationed first at the isolated Fort Vancouver in Washington State, he wanted to bring his family with him, but his salary, even with his recent promotion to captain, was not sufficient. The days there were dreary and depressing; he wrote to Julia of his loneliness. "How forsaken I

feel here!" He tried to add to his income through various business ventures but failed at everything he tried. He invested his small savings in a store run by a friend, but it went out of business, taking Grant's money with it. He tried lumber, then farming, and even shipping ice and chickens to San Francisco, but nothing worked. When he planted a crop of potatoes and oats near the banks of the Columbia River, it flooded and wiped out his stock.

He was reassigned to another isolated outpost, Fort Humboldt, 250 miles north of San Francisco. He hated his new commanding officer, Colonel Robert C. Buchanan, who had established the fort as a buffer among the settlers, prospectors, and Indians. Buchanan, in return, despised Grant and gave him few military duties to perform. "You do not know how forsaken I feel here," he wrote to Julia. "I do nothing but sit in my room and read." He did not say that most of what he read, over and over, were her letters, and there weren't that many since mail was delivered only twice a month. He treasured one that contained a tracing of his son's hand. He carried it with him and showed it to the few people he met with tears in his eyes.

And so, Grant turned to drink, but unlike so many others in the army back then, he could not hold his liquor. He only needed a small amount, no more than two drinks, to lose control. Once he annoyed a visiting officer, George McClellan, and soon stories of Grant's drinking spread everywhere there was an army post. He begged Colonel Buchanan to give him a transfer back east so he could be with his family, but his request was refused. He was trapped, and as biographer Chernow wrote, "Loneliness, ennui, frustration, inactivity . . . always conspired to drive him to drink." Finally Buchanan gave him two choices: stop drinking or resign from the Army. If he did not reform, Buchanan said, Grant would face court-martial. Grant saw only one way out; on April 11, 1854, he submitted in his resignation from the army.

Grant was 32 years old with no money, no business sense, and no prospects. His appearance was so sad, so dissolute, that an old army friend who saw him in San Francisco said he was ashamed to be seen with him. When Grant reached New York, an old West Point

classmate, Simon Bolivar Buckner, took up a collection among fellow officers to pay Grant's hotel bill. Finally, Grant had to suffer the embarrassment of writing to his father to ask for enough money for train fare back to St. Louis.

It was not a glorious homecoming. He was a failure who had to start over in order to support his family. His father, convinced that Grant would never succeed, wrote to Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, pleading with him to reject Grant's letter of resignation. Davis, who had heard the tales of Grant's drinking, refused the request to let Grant remain in the army.

For the next seven years, Grant lived up to his childhood nickname of Useless. Every enterprise he attempted was a flop. He tried farming on 60 acres Julia's father had given her, but had to ask his father for another loan to purchase seeds and horses. Grant spent a year and a half building a crude cabin that he called "Hardscrabble." Julia thought it primitive and ugly. She wrote, "A black cloud fell around me and I exclaimed (aloud, I think). Is this my future?" Grant pawned his watch and hauled cordwood into St. Louis to sell on street corners, looking no better than a derelict wearing his old blue army overcoat caked with dirt and mud.

He knew his colleagues and friends at Jefferson Barracks were embarrassed to see him in circumstances, and he felt enormous shame and humiliation. Although he grew increasingly depressed, he did not drink. "He will go into a bar with you," an old friend, Major Joseph Reynolds wrote, "but he will never touch anything." But eventually Grant had to auction off almost all their possessions as well as the farm, and send Julia and their three children to live with her parents.

He tried real estate, working for a relative of his father-in-law (who had not wanted to hire him). That job failed too. It seemed that all he was ever good at was being a soldier. He lived in a bare unheated room and every weekend walked the 12 miles to see his family, and back again; he could not afford to rent a horse for the trip. Fired from the real estate job, he

wandered the streets of St. Louis asking friends and acquaintances, even strangers, if they had work for him, or if he could borrow a dollar or two.

There was only one thing left to try. At the age of 37, Grant asked his father for a job. Jessie Grant's tannery had grown over the years and he had several retail outlets for his goods. He offered Ulysses a job at the Galena, Illinois, location as a clerk working under his two younger brothers. Grant did not like the job, and he wasn't very good at it, but what else could he do? Except for being a soldier again. His chance came with the Civil War.

But even then, when the country desperately needed trained officers, Grant had a difficult time. The rumors of his drinking persisted, along with the memory of him seeking handouts on St. Louis street corners. No one wanted him back in the army. His West Point classmates were quickly being promoted in rank, among them George McClellan, who had been a plebe when Grant was a senior. McClellan had become a major general.

The best offer Grant had was with a local regiment being formed in Galena, hired as a recruiter at \$2 a day. He was not truly a member of the regiment and had no military rank. He wore an old ragged suit and floppy hat and sat at a 3-legged desk that he braced against a wall to keep it upright.

He wrote to the adjutant general of the army in Washington asking to be reinstated, but never received a reply. He travelled to Cincinnati to appeal in person to McClellan, who was then organizing the Army of Ohio. "I had hopes that when he saw me, he would offer me a position on his staff." Grant sat in the general's outer office for two days. His presence was announced each day, but McClellan refused to see him.

Grant thought he was finished, but his local Illinois congressman Elihu B. Washburne, came to his rescue. For some reason, Washburne saw potential in Grant. Every congressman in those days wanted to have high-ranking officers in their debt because if they earned fame

and glory it would reflect well on their benefactor. And so two months after the war began, Grant found himself a colonel in command of the 21st Illinois Regiment. He had to borrow money to have a uniform tailored and buy a horse.

Not long after, he was ordered to attack a rebel camp in Missouri. He had seen action during the Mexican War, but only as a member of a regiment. This time he was to lead one into battle. Grant grew increasingly nervous as they approached the Confederate camp. "I would have given anything then to have been back in Illinois, but I had not the moral courage to halt and consider what to do; I kept right on." He was relieved to find the Confederates had fled and then realized that the rebel commander must have been "as much afraid of me as I have been of him From that event on to the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting an enemy, though I always felt more or less anxiety."

He read in a newspaper that President Lincoln had asked Illinois congressmen to recommend men worthy of promotion to brigadier general, and the following day learned that Washburne had put his name on the list. Not only was Grant back in the army, he was suddenly a general. Julia was overjoyed, but Grant's father reacted differently. Jessie Grant had seen his beloved son fail so many times that he mixed his congratulations with a caution.

"Be careful, Ulyss. You're a general now; it's a good job, don't lose it."

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Duane Schultz has written numerous articles and books on military history including *The Dahlgren Affair: Terror and Conspiracy in the Civil War*, and *The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862*. See www.duaneschultz.com.

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