

Homer Lea's Height

When I wrote *Homer Lea: American Soldier of Fortune*, and credited Homer Lea with being five feet, three inches tall, I based my findings largely on his sister Ermal's statements and an interview Lea gave to a journalist. I overlooked an important document, Lea's 1911 passport, which cited him as being five feet tall. As an official document, it is more reliable than the other two sources.¹

In researching Lea's height, as with several other aspects of his life, I encountered ambiguity and uncertainty from a variety of sources. I also continued researching Lea's height, along with other aspects of his life, after the publication of *Homer Lea: American Soldier of Fortune*. Determining his height posed a challenge when I sifted through the accounts six different persons who knew him and claimed different heights for him.

In considering the personal accounts of people who knew Lea, there were four persons who claimed he was under five feet tall, which included Edward C. Grenfell, Sun Yat-sen, Richard A. Falkenberg and Joshua B. Powers, respectively. Grenfell, a British banker who met Lea and Sun Yat-sen in London, in October 1911, was not impressed when he met Lea, who he considered a bit pompous and oddly dressed with his cloak and swagger stick. He wrote a colleague that he was "somewhat alarmed by the General's appearance and loquacity," and disparaged Lea as being "2 feet 6 inches high."² Sun Yat-sen, in his March 1912 *Strand* magazine article, "My Reminiscences," based on an October 1911 interview in London, stated that Lea was under five feet tall.³ Richard A. Falkenberg, Lea's nemesis for control of Chinese cadet training in the United States, wrote California Governor George C. Pardee in May 1905, that he was four feet, six inches tall.⁴ Joshua B. Powers, who lived as a youngster with Lea for a period, also claimed that Lea was about four-and-a-half feet tall.⁵ Overall, I believed that these accounts could have put Lea's height somewhere between four feet, six inches and four feet, eleven inches tall.

I dismissed the possibilities that Lea was shorter than five feet tall in *Homer Lea: American Soldier of Fortune* because I believed that the most authoritative accounts of Lea's height were corroborated by two unrelated sources, Ermal Lea and a New York *Sun* journalist. They both agreed that Lea was five

¹My thanks to Dr. Charles E. Pirtle for bringing the oversight of Lea's passport to my attention.

²E. C. Grenfell to Davison, November 15, 1911, Enclosure in E. C. Grenfell to Willard D. Staright, November 17, 1911, Willard Dickerson Straight Papers, #1260. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. I discovered this source after the publication of *Homer Lea: American Soldier of Fortune*.

³Sun Yat-sen, "My Reminiscences," *Strand*, March 1912: 304.

⁴R. A. Falkenberg to Governor Pardee, May 18, 1905, Box 62, R. A. Falkenberg Folder, George C. Pardee Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California.

⁵Joshua B. Powers made this claim in a speech, "Hit From Where Your hand Is," May 30, 1958, cited in an email, Tom Powers to Lawrence M. Kaplan, Subj: New Source on Lea, October 8, 2013.

feet, three inches tall. Out of all of the people who knew Lea, Ermal, certainly knew him best. Although some of her recollections about her brother were mistaken, I had no reason to doubt her memory about her brother's stature and features. In early April 1942, she began helping her cousin, Tom Lea, Jr., prepare a *Life* magazine article on Homer Lea. She wrote Tom that Homer Lea was five feet, three inches tall. She repeated that assertion in a May 1942 letter to the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, in response to Clare Boothe Luce's articles on Homer Lea in that magazine.⁶ Thirty years earlier, in July 1911, a New York *Sun* journalist who interviewed Lea before he departed for Germany, wrote the first article I am aware of that mentioned Lea's height. The unnamed journalist noted of Lea: "Every inch of his 5 feet 3 radiates intense purpose."⁷ The height reference in the *Sun* article not only became the basis for subsequent nationwide news articles, but I have never seen another news article from that period about Lea that mentioned a different height. I considered that other journalists who knew Lea would have corrected the height reference if it was incorrect. I also had no reason to believe the New York *Sun* journalist would have inaccurately reported Lea's height. I gave the *Sun* article more credence than the assertions of others since it matched Ermal's statements in 1942.

Given the facts that Ermal and the New York *Sun* journalist both seemed credible in asserting Homer Lea was five feet, three inches, and his June 1911 passport is the only official document I am aware of with his height listed as five feet, I believe there is an explanation for the discrepancy.⁸ It is likely that Homer Lea exaggerated his height and told people, such as the New York *Sun* journalist, he was five feet, three inches, and they accepted his statement on face value. Ermal, for her part, helped perpetuate the exaggeration out of love and devotion for her brother. It is likely that Lea's erroneous height reference was repeatedly circulated in the press with other misrepresentations about him that were never corrected. It is certain that Grenfell misjudged Lea's height, and most likely that Sun Yat-sen, Falkenberg and Powers did as well.⁹ It is unlikely, however, that Lea incorrectly filled out the passport, an official government document, under penalty of breaking a federal law.

⁶Ermal Lea Green, ANECDOTES, undated, circa early April 1942, Mr. and Mrs. James D. Lea Personal Papers, Houston, Texas; Ermal Lea Green, "She Knew Him Well," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 23, 1942: 4.

⁷"Writer Who Fears Japan," *New York Sun*, July 7, 1911: 10.

⁸U. S. Passport issued to the Leas, June 22, 1911, Box 5, Joshua B. Powers Papers, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

⁹Although it is difficult to discern Lea's height in existing photos of him, he does not appear to be four-and-a-half feet tall in a photo of him arriving in New York City with Kang Yu-wei and others in 1905. See photo in *Anaconda Standard* (Montana), July 9, 1905, Part II: 3.