

Were the First “Dead Heads” Special Agents?

By Steven W. Hooper

When you think of “Deadheads” or “Dead Heads,” you probably think of the fans of Jerry Garcia and the eclectic rock band known as the Grateful Dead. But would you be surprised to learn that before the band Grateful Dead hit the music scene in the late 1960s, some observers referred to Treasury (Customs) Special Agents as “dead heads”. We know that U.S. Customs officers are not always universally appreciated by the press or the public. This was especially true in Vermont in 1869 when the *Vermont Daily Transcript* published an article on U.S. Customs inspired by a similar article in the *New York Sun*.

We know that customs officers sometimes have an identity problem. The press and the public can be fickle in their support of our efforts to enforce the law and collect revenue. I suspect that this mercurial relationship started with the birth of U.S. Customs in 1789. It was in full effect in Vermont in 1869.

In an editorial titled “Dead Heads in the Custom Houses,” the *Daily Transcript* quoted an article from the *New York Sun* which praised the Secretary of Treasury for the removal of thirty special agents in “one fell sweep”. The piece explains that the revenue service is burdened with an excess of employees especially in the special agent branch.

Not content to leave it there, the *Daily Transcript* added that there was no need to send special agents to Vermont to “watch ” local customs officers. The newspaper seemed to like their local customs officers led by Collector of Customs General George J. Stannard. The newspaper was not a fan of special agents who worked for someone in Washington D.C. They explained that “They are independent of, and do not work in harmony with the regular customs authorities and their duties have never warranted the \$5 a day and traveling expenses they have received.” The newspaper continued “Like the leaves of autumn, the ‘dead heads’ are going, going, soon they will be gone, and the people, the tax-payers, will have occasion to rejoice.”

Well, here we are over 150 years later. Treasury and U.S. Customs Special Agents are gone, but Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Special Agents continue to enforce Federal law and protect our nation’s borders.

To quote the chorus of one of the “Dead Heads” favorite Grateful Dead songs, “Touch of Grey”:

We will get by
We will get by
We will get by
We will survive.

Now that many former U.S. Customs Special Agents are getting a “touch of grey,” they have every right to be proud of the contributions and sacrifices they and their fellow customs officers have made to our nation. The Special Agents at HSI have built on the U.S. Customs legacy and are now considered one of the finest law enforcement agencies in the world.

By the way, the *Vermont Daily Transcript* went out of business in 1870.

Primary Sources:

“Dead Heads in the Customs Houses,” *Vermont Daily Transcript* (Saint Albans, Vermont), April 5, 1869, p. 2.

“Touch of Grey by Grateful Dead”, Songfacts website,
<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/grateful-dead/touch-of-grey>.