



Text Version of Audio Story: Lucky Penny

She was 7 years old, the little girl who gave Harry the penny. Harry was working on her family's farm. It was a strange-looking coin, almost 100 years old, a collectible — a United States penny with the date of 1820 on it. The penny was special to her. It was something she had cherished. What a fabulous good luck charm it would make. She just had to give him something.

The little girl and her family hated to see Harry go, but they had little say in the matter. President Wilson needed him more — and millions of other American boys like him. They were headed for Europe, many of them to a violent death. They were headed for World War I; more specifically Harry, the Argonne forest. Harry promised the little girl he would carry the penny at all times. Once in Europe and under the command of the legendary General Black Jack Pershing, Harry was given one of the most dangerous assignments of all. Harry became a mule skinner. Mule skimmers, as they were called, had a team of mules and a wagon and carried munitions right up to the front lines. Harry, being a farm boy, was quite experienced at handling a team. Mule skimmers and their loads were a favorite target of the enemy. If the enemy could just take out a load of ammo on its way up to the front, that would be all the less bullets flying their way. As odds would have it, one day while racing a load of munitions to the front, Harry and his team took a direct hit.

All of Harry's mules were killed, and he, himself, was seriously injured but would miraculously survive. At that very moment, Harry wasn't scared. He was mad. He had not hated the Germans before this, but now his mules were dead. He cared deeply for the animals. He was furious. In the confusion of everything, somehow Harry lost the lucky penny, the penny he had promised the little girl he would carry at all times. For Harry, losing the penny was the same as breaking a promise.

After some four months of recuperation, Harry was being sent home. He sat on the edge of a bed in a small European seaside town. In a matter of days, the ship would arrive to carry him across the mighty Atlantic, home to America. As he sat on the edge of his bunk, he struck up a conversation with a soldier in the bunk next to his, a stranger but fellow soldier. In the course of their conversation, Harry brought up the story of the lucky penny. The man sitting next to Harry said, *"Well that's odd! While in a small shop in Paris, I received in my change an odd-looking coin like the one you speak of, an old American penny that I figured someone had confused for French money. Maybe it's yours. If you can describe it, you can have it."*

Harry described everything about the coin — the date, the wording, every little nick and mark, the wear patterns. Without any doubt, it was the very same penny the little girl had given Harry when he was drafted. The two men figured someone must have found it and confused it for French money, as it closely resembled one of the common coins of the French currency at the time. With the lucky penny back in his pocket, Harry sailed home for America.

As a boy growing up, I often saw, and held, the lucky penny and heard its story. Harry Strausser was an old World War I veteran who lived in my hometown of McAlisterville, Pennsylvania, a kind quiet man with an easy way. Harry passed on a few years back at the ripe old age of 99. Among the personal effects in his pocket was the lucky penny that went everywhere he did for 80 years.

I'm the American Storyteller.