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*The Real
Calvin Coolidge*

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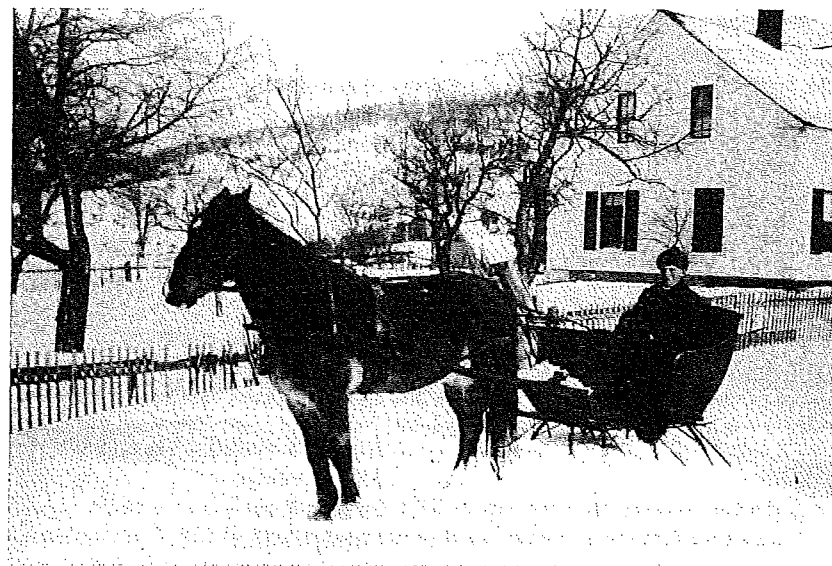
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Col. John Coolidge in his sleigh. He took Calvin, his son, to Black River Academy on a bitterly cold morning in February, 1886. Many years later Calvin wrote, "Going to the Academy meant a complete break with the past and entering a new and untried field, larger and more alluring than the past, among unknown scenes and unknown people."

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This issue is the eleventh in a series begun in July of 1983. Lawrence E. Wikander, Robert H. Ferrell, trustees, and Cynthia Bittinger, Executive Director, have brought these materials together.

Hendrik Booraem V has been a Coolidge Foundation member since 1983 and gave this address at the Coolidge Foundation's Annual Meeting in 1994. He is a social and political historian and has a new book (available from the Coolidge Foundation) entitled *The Provincial: Calvin Coolidge and His World, 1885-1895*.

Tom Slayton, editor of *Vermont Life*, comments here on how the actor Jim Cooke has been changing the image of Calvin Coolidge often portrayed in textbooks. Members may wish to ask their historical societies and schools to invite Jim Cooke to give his well-researched performance.

Writings by Grace Coolidge are once again part of the booklet (number 10 was devoted to the First Lady). Professor Ferrell has obtained these materials from Dr. Boone's son-in-law, Milton F. Heller, Jr. Dr. Boone was assistant physician at the White House during Calvin Coolidge's terms.

Our book review is by Daniel J. Kelley, a lawyer in Chicago and Coolidge Foundation member since 1993. He comments on the lives of James Michael Curley and Calvin Coolidge.

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Calvin Coolidge at Black River Academy

by Hendrick Booraem V

To honor a man is to honor the values that his life displays. Most of us are here this afternoon because we respect the values Calvin Coolidge manifested in his career — honesty, economy, eloquence, devotion to duty, absence of pretense. But Coolidge was not born with these virtues. No human is. Character is acquired through the process we call education. This afternoon I want to talk about part of the process by which Calvin Coolidge became Calvin Coolidge.

Character building begins, of course, with heredity. In his autobiography, Coolidge acknowledged this in his own characteristic way. He started the second chapter — the one about his education — with a dry reference to a New England sage who was “reported to have said that the education of a child should begin several generations before it is born.” Genetic inheritance is, indeed, important. Early upbringing is also of crucial importance.

But my focus is not on family or early childhood. For much of the past eight summers I have had the pleasure of roaming New England, gathering all the material I could find on Coolidge's adolescence for a book I was writing. In sharing the results with you, I'd like to concentrate on the years that I think really defined young Coolidge's interests and shaped his approach to life — his years at Black River Academy in Ludlow.

He entered B.R.A., as it was universally known, in February of 1886, and was graduated from it in May of 1890. In the next year, 1891, he came back to B.R.A for about six weeks in March and April, for “post-graduate study.” His total B.R.A. experience, then, amounted to four complete academic years and portions of two others.

What was Calvin Coolidge like at the time he entered Black River Academy in 1886? If you've been through the visitor center and the Homestead, you know all the basic facts: that he was the only son of a locally important man who lived just across the street, Colonel John Coolidge. Actually, his father was not a colonel in the state militia at this time. That happened later. Reporters during the years of Calvin Coolidge's national career generally referred to his father as “The Colonel.” In 1886, he was known in Plymouth just as plain John Coolidge. But since we have with us today a John Coolidge who is well known and deeply involved in the affairs of this town, I shall refer to the President's father as “The Colonel.”

Calvin Coolidge also had a sister, Abbie, three years younger, who will figure in this story.

Young Calvin had already been to school eight years — to the Plymouth Notch district school, just up the hill from his house. It was not the building that is there now. The school Calvin attended was a small, rather grim structure of field stone. It is pictured in a book called *The Boyhood Days of Calvin Coolidge*, by Ernest C. Carpenter, one of the teachers who taught him there. To judge from the teachers' official reports, the building was in very bad shape at the time. In the required report at the end of each term, the teacher had to answer a question: "Is the school house in good repair?" In the school year of 1884-85, all three teachers answered "no." Carpenter was the third, and he wrote his answer in capital letters with exclamation mark. He did not specify what was wrong with the building. Probably it was drafts. Calvin wrote in his diary, the last term he attended, "It is a cold place I tell you."

The summer after he left for B.R.A., the trustees demolished the school and replaced it with a frame building. Maybe Carpenter's complaints and those of the children had had some effect.

Plymouth Notch school usually had about thirty students. That was large for a Plymouth district. The Messer Hill district only had two students at one term; and in the 1890's, Geneva Wilder, Calvin's cousin, taught in a district where she had only one pupil.

Calvin began district school when he was five and attended until he was thirteen. He studied the usual subjects: reading and writing, mathematics, including mental arithmetic, geography, and some U.S. history, mostly in the form of poems about the first Thanksgiving and other events in New England's past. Much of the time he was in school, of course, he was not actually being taught; since it was an ungraded school, the teacher had to divide the day into ten- or fifteen-minute segments to teach each age group each of the subjects. The rest of the time, students were at their desks reading or memorizing. Most of the work was memorization, and each term closed with an exhibition in which each pupil had to memorize and recite a poem before an audience of parents and relatives.

No quick and easy way exists for measuring Calvin's performance in the Notch district school. Most rural districts did not give report cards or evaluate student work. (A few — Reading, for example — did.) The Vermont philosophy was that it was not so much the quality of a pupil's work that was important as the regularity; so children were graded only on attendance and conduct. The marks for conduct were three: plus, zero, and minus. Calvin always had a plus, and his attendance was regular. By these criteria he was a model student.

The records show that Abbie Coolidge occasionally got a zero in conduct,

along with other girls her age. The reason, most likely, was talking or whispering in class. This was not a problem for Calvin.

The memories of fellow teachers and students, however, give us some notion what kind of student Calvin was. He always had his work prepared. His teacher Ernest Carpenter called him "methodical, faithful to the tasks that were set for him to do, honest, and punctual." "Worked hard, Cal did," said his contemporary Oric Ward.

He was quiet, not boisterous, in school. Even at recess he rarely played with the other boys his own age. "What interested them didn't seem to interest him," recalled his teacher Miss Ellen Dunbar. Except for one friend, Thomas Moore, he stayed somewhat aloof from his peer group. His cousin Dallas Pollard, a son of his mother's sister, who lived in Proctorsville but often spent summers in Plymouth, told the journalist Vrest Orton that the Plymouth boys had less interest in Calvin than in anyone else who lived in Plymouth.

While the other boys were engaged in rough-and-tumble contact sports in which he had no interest, Calvin would cross the field to his Grandmother Coolidge's house, the present Coolidge home on the edge of Plymouth Notch. If it was a sunny day, he would do chores by himself. If it was rainy, he would read. There were many books in the Coolidge place, and Calvin read them all, according to Dallas Pollard. He particularly liked historical novels, like the ones about early Vermont and the American Revolution. He had an imaginative side to which these novels appealed. Later in boyhood he discovered Sir Walter Scott and devoured his novels. But the Colonel discouraged excessive reading, and it was only on rainy days that Calvin was able to indulge his taste.

We have one other indication of young Coolidge's progress. Every year the state teacher's examination was given in Plymouth. This was a test to determine if a person knew enough to teach district school. There was no age limit on it; the prevailing view seems to have been that if someone knew the material and had a forceful enough personality to control ten or twenty students, he or she was qualified to teach regardless of age. Often teenagers would take it "for pastime," as they expressed it, just to get some notion of how well they were doing in their studies. It was sort of the early Vermont equivalent of the SAT. Calvin took and passed it in the fall of 1885, when he was thirteen. Clearly he had learned all the district school had to teach him.

This, then, was young Coolidge at the time he entered Black River Academy: quiet, conscientious, a bit withdrawn, and better read than his contemporaries in Plymouth.

February 20, 1886, Calvin set off for Ludlow in the sleigh with his father, to commence his higher education. He wrote in his autobiography how excited he was at the prospect. Attending B.R.A. was not a novel thing for young people from the Notch — several Moores, Blanchards, Browns, and Sargents had been in classes at academy, not to mention his own father. But in one way Calvin's experience was atypical. The other Plymouth young people I mentioned went to Ludlow to complete their educations when they were sixteen or seventeen, and stayed only two or three terms. Calvin entered when he was thirteen, and stayed there the next thirteen terms.

Why begin his academy education so young? Did the Colonel think his son was especially gifted? I have no conclusive answer. Certainly Calvin with his taste for reading and his dutiful attitude was the kind of boy who could profit from an academy education. Another factor, which I should have mentioned before, also played a part. Calvin's mother, the bright and attractive Victoria Moor, had died of tuberculosis in the spring of 1885, leaving him, Abbie, and his father. The Colonel did not plan to remarry soon, and he may have felt that the children would be better off in Ludlow, under the supervision of B.R.A. teachers and a good boarding house keeper, than in Plymouth, where he often had to be absent in his capacity as insurance agent and town constable. For three years later, when Abbie turned thirteen, she too was sent to B.R.A.

This is a good time to say a little about Abbie — Abigail Gratia Coolidge, named for her Grandmother Abigail Moor and her Aunt Gratia Wilder. In personality she was the exact opposite of her older brother. Calvin was quiet and slender; Abbie, according to her cousin Dallas Pollard, was "fat and jolly." She "laughed as easily as anyone I ever saw," he added; she was "wonderful company." She was as intelligent as her brother, though one suspects she didn't read quite so much. She not only took the state teacher's examination when she was thirteen, she badgered the Colonel to find a school district that would hire her in the summer of 1889 — "I think you can get me one if you try I don't care where it is," she wrote him. He did get her one, in the North Shrewsbury district.

Abbie made quite a splash when she entered B.R.A. in 1888. Her grades were excellent and she plunged into various local activities. Both young Coolidges knew the Bible well and had attended the Sunday School taught by their Grandmother Coolidge, but Abbie was a regular churchgoer and Calvin was not. She joined the Ludlow Congregational Church in 1889. She persuaded the Colonel to let her buy fashionable clothes for town living. In letters to her father she combined directness and diplomacy, with sentences like "Don't you think I almost need a new hat?" Evidently she got one. A Ludlow neighbor recalled seeing her

and Calvin pass on their way home from classes in 1889, Abbie wearing a tam o'shanter, the latest thing in hats for girls, and talking a mile a minute while Calvin nodded.

Abbie died suddenly in 1890, in the spring of Calvin's senior year, of appendicitis, "a disease not well understood at the time," as Calvin wrote of her in his autobiography. He missed her very much, though he rarely said anything about it. People sometimes speculate about her influence on her brother — whether she might eventually have made him more outgoing and lively. Vrest Orton put that question to Dallas Pollard: "I suppose if Abigail had lived she would have drawn him out of his shell, would you say?" Pollard answered, "Well, I don't know I'm sure, I never knew anybody that would have much influence on him, did you?"

Actually, my contention in this talk is that Black River Academy did have a considerable influence on young Coolidge — B.R.A. and especially its principal George Sherman. Before explaining how, I'll just supply a little background on B.R.A.

Black River Academy had existed since the 1830's. It was a private institution that existed to supply the youth of Ludlow and surrounding towns with an education beyond what the district school gave — including such subjects as music, algebra, accounting, Latin, and Greek. It was partly supported by town funds, and all Ludlow children could attend it free; those from neighboring towns like Cavendish, Mt. Holly, Londonderry, and Plymouth had to pay a small fee. In many ways it was like a modern regional high school, but of course much smaller. It had a faculty of five. The principal in 1886 was a 24-year-old college graduate named Henry Kendall.

The present B.R.A. Museum in Ludlow is the building Coolidge graduated from in 1890. It is not the building he started in. It was constructed during his sophomore and junior years to replace an older and smaller building, a former church, on the same site. Claude Fuess, Coolidge's first serious biographer, and a good one, didn't think much of either building. The old building, he wrote, "stood in unmitigated ugliness" on High Street above Black River, until it was replaced by a new academy, as Fuess put it, "more commodious but scarcely more beautiful." Those of us like myself who rather admire the B.R.A. Museum must remember that Fuess was writing in the 1930's, a period when anything Victorian was automatically scorned and ridiculed.

While the new building was in progress, Coolidge and his fellow students attended classes at the other end of Main Street, near where the Chinese restaurant is now, on the second floor of what was then the town bakery. One student remem-

bered that the luscious aromas wafting up from below made it hard to concentrate on history and algebra.

The academy's year consisted of three terms of eleven or twelve weeks each. They ran August to November, November to February, and February to May. Students were not required to attend all three terms, and a majority of students did not; they stayed home if they were needed to work or for any other reason. There were graduation ceremonies every May, but the great majority of the students did not accumulate enough credits to graduate — typically, only the few who contemplated going on to college.

There were no dormitories; the students, both male and female, boarded in private houses around town. Calvin Coolidge seems to have lived at five or six different places, mostly on Pleasant Street.

One way in which his years at B.R.A. changed Coolidge stemmed simply from his experience of living in a town rather than the country. I have already mentioned how Abbie used her attending B.R.A. as an occasion to improve her wardrobe; Calvin did the same, only to a much greater extent. As a country boy, he had been used to wearing copper-toed boots, work pants, and colored shirts, often covered in summer by a long woolen smock such as Vermont farmers wore in those days. At the academy, he wore patent-leather shoes and galoshes, suits, and a white shirt with detachable dickey. He discovered that he liked to dress well and look neat. Soon he became known as the "dude" of the academy; he had a derby that he always wore, and his shirtfront was always immaculate. He let his hair, which was cut short in the country, grow fashionably long. More surprisingly, he got up a little business selling mail-order men's jewelry — cuff links, rings, watch chains, collar studs — to his schoolmates. His accounts are in the back of one of his pocket diaries.

All his life, as far as I can tell, Coolidge got a special pleasure out of dressing well and looking good. He was not a flashy dresser in any way, but he chose good clothes and took good care of them. The same holds true of grooming. As an academy student, he must have been one of the few males who really enjoyed taking baths. A good bath was an event in his diary: "I took an enormous bath," or "Took a 2 horse bath today." And this in the days of the wood stove and wash tub! He seems to have been one of those for whom indoor plumbing was especially invented.

B.R.A. changed Coolidge in other, deeper, more important ways. For one thing, it gave him confidence in his own abilities. Mastering the material taught in district school was, for a Vermont boy, no special achievement; it was what every

child in the state was expected to do. But the work in an academy was something else.

An academy like B.R.A. served several groups of students. Most were boys and girls who expected to become farmers, mechanics, merchants, housekeepers; but there were always some who aimed for careers in teaching, or the ministry, or medicine, or law. For these a college education was necessary, and in those days one had to know Latin and Greek to get into college. So B.R.A. offered three courses of study, as they were called. In order of difficulty, they were: the English Course, the Latin-Scientific Course, and the Classical Course. The great majority of students chose the English Course, studying literature, civics, U.S. history, mathematics — what we would call the basic high-school curriculum. A few took the Latin-Scientific Course; and fewer still signed up for the demanding Classical Course.

Young Coolidge elected the English Course when he entered B.R.A. After a year he changed over to the Latin-Scientific. After another year he entered the Classical. These were the decisions of a young man who was feeling more and more at home with academic learning.

I am not suggesting that he was an outstanding student. Every so often B.R.A. would calculate an honor roll of students and have it published in the Ludlow newspaper. Coolidge was never on it. Other Plymouth students were, occasionally — Henry T. Brown, for instance. Calvin never was. His overall average at B.R.A. was in the upper eighties. He was the same sort of student in Ludlow he had been in Plymouth, steady, methodical, dependable. But now he was doing a higher caliber of work, and to all appearances he was enjoying it.

Of course he did better in some classes than in others. His best subjects were history and government, and when he came to the Greek and Latin classics he found that they too were about history and government — the campaigns of Caesar, the March of the Ten Thousand, the orations of Cicero. He did consistently well in the classics.

On the other hand, mathematics was nothing but trouble for him, algebra in particular. His 1887 diary records some of his struggles. On January 8 he burst out: "O! I shall be glad when Algebra is done this is my last term in this thing I hope." January 17: "Algebra is so hard that I do not half get my lessons I did not do a single example today." February 1, with the end of the term approaching: "I do not dread exams much only Algebra." There were two parts to the Algebra exam, one written and one oral. He passed the written, after much study, with a 95, he thought. Of the oral he wrote, "I guess I just went through, but think it is doubtful." A reader

can be pardoned for wondering who is kidding whom when he reads Calvin's entry for March 2, at the beginning of the next term: "It does seem a relief not to have to study Algebra although I like it very well."

Just to follow up this subject for a moment — when Coolidge next had to tackle algebra he was at St. Johnsbury Academy in 1891, taking a single term's work in order to be certified for admission to Amherst College. His recollection years later was that he had no use for the subject and did not do well in it there, but that the teacher let him through. Then, at Amherst the following fall, he took algebra again. This time he studied under one of the great math teachers of his generation, Professor George Olds. He ended up in the top half of his class and one of the three best on the final exam. To me this suggests that young Coolidge's problem at B.R.A. and St. Johnsbury was one of attitude. He had what high-school teachers today call "math anxiety." He didn't believe he was capable of understanding algebra and so he closed his mind to it. It is pleasant to know that he finally found that he was wrong.

But in general, Coolidge's years at B.R.A. were years of gradually increasing confidence in his own abilities. The Classics Course at B.R.A., particularly, helped him identify the area that was to become central to his own career — public speaking.

In Coolidge's sophomore year a new principal succeeded Henry Kendall at Black River Academy. His name was George Sherman, a Massachusetts man in his thirties, an Amherst College graduate, a dedicated and inspiring teacher with high goals for the academy. He wanted to upgrade B.R.A. There were a few academies in Vermont, St. Johnsbury and Saxtons River among them, called "fitting schools" because preparing young people for college was their primary goal. Sherman apparently had visions of making B.R.A. an academy of that sort. He brought many changes to the school. He revived the student debating club, strengthened the music program, issued little military-type caps to all the male students (I suppose to generate school spirit — Coolidge's is on display in the lobby), and particularly tried to strengthen the Classics Course. Coolidge liked him very much.

In his junior year, Coolidge was in Mr. Sherman's Latin class translating the orations of Cicero, especially the one in which Cicero defends oratory itself, when an idea burst upon him: it was possible to influence people, to lead people, with words, and he, Calvin Coolidge, had the imagination and the verbal skill to do it himself. He began reading every great speech in history he could get his hands on. Sherman encouraged him to try his own hand at writing speeches. (Since district school, young Coolidge had been delivering memorized speeches, but writing his own material was something else.) At the closing exercises that year, he delivered

a graceful speech of farewell to the graduating seniors on behalf of the junior class. By senior year, he was seriously into oratory, and for his own graduating speech he chose a topic that combined his two favorite subjects. It was "Oratory in History." Mr. Sherman told him it was one of the best at commencement, and the correspondent who reviewed the ceremony for the Ludlow paper agreed.

How good was Coolidge as an orator by the time he left B.R.A.? I offer one more piece of evidence. This is the assessment of a classmate, Albert Sargent, a Ludlow boy who was president of the class and, in maturity, was not a warm admirer of Coolidge. He was interviewed in the 1920's by the journalist Joe Towe and said this: "Very eccentric fellow — was and is....I recall no great thing he ever did that would be of interest to the public. He didn't play ball with the rest of the boys and he wasn't a great hand with the girls. He was a good speaker; could write a good speech and deliver it well, but we boys never looked on him as a leader." The one thing that stands out from a generally negative judgment is the statement "He...could write a good speech and deliver it well."

The speeches Coolidge wrote at B.R.A. under Mr. Sherman's guidance were the beginning of a long and remarkable career. By the standards of his later work they were overelaborate and amateurish, but they got him started on the road to "Have faith in Massachusetts," "There is no right to strike against the public safety by any body, any time, any where," and the other lucid, powerful, true utterances that led him to high public office. Yes, Black River Academy did change him decisively.

I cannot end this talk about Calvin Coolidge and Black River Academy without mentioning the story that many of us have heard or read, about Coolidge's putting "the mule in school." Coolidge himself mentioned in the *Autobiography* that "a domestic animal noted for his long ears and discordant voice" was somehow "stabled on the second floor of the academy" one night, and the ex-President added: "About as far as I deem it prudent to discuss my own connection with these escapades is that I was never convicted of any of them and must be presumed innocent."

This story has always interested me. I wanted more details. When did it happen? Was anyone punished for the prank? Did it have major repercussions in town or in the academy? Who was the lucky teacher whose classroom was used as a stable, and why?

I reasoned that the incident must have caused enough stir to be mentioned in the local papers; so, seven years ago now, I spent hours in the basement of the Fletcher Library in Ludlow poring over old Ludlow *Tribunes* until I found it. The

story is in the issue of November 15, 1889. I'll quote the beginning, to give you the flavor: "One of the most outrageous pieces of mischief that has been perpetrated in this place in many years, was that at the Academy, last Tuesday night, when one of the recitation rooms was turned into a stable for one of Scott's jackasses." The room — Room 3, on the second floor — was the class of Miss Cora Butler, who taught English. The animal was there all night, kicked the wainscoting to pieces, and generally made a mess.

The story was big enough news that it even got into the *Rutland Herald*, and I was able to follow it a bit further. On Saturday after the incident, a committee of the trustees, who included Colonel Coolidge, met in Ludlow to investigate. The *Herald* reported that they found several of the culprits, but there I lose the trail of the story; no B.R.A. student was ever named, nor punished as far as I can tell.

At the distance of 105 years it probably won't hurt any feelings if I offer my guess about who did it. Dallas Pollard named one person he thought was involved — George Raymond, a son of the local haberdasher, and a friend of Calvin's. Another likely candidate, I think, is Frank Agan, who worked in the mill and who left Ludlow for three years shortly after it happened. Neither of these men was a student at B.R.A. Both were bachelors in their early twenties. I suspect that the reason no student was punished for the prank was that no students were involved, that it was a matter of young Ludlow men horsing around. But Blanche Bryant may have been right when she said that Coolidge had a "smiling" knowledge of it. I don't think he put the mule in school — he liked B.R.A. and respected George Sherman. But I bet he knew who did — maybe beforehand.

In any event, Black River Academy doesn't need this particular event except as a sidelight to the future President's years there. Its more substantial contribution is this: it set Calvin Coolidge on the path to public service that brought fame to him and honor to his community.



Black River Academy
graduates, 1890, Coolidge, second from left - standing

“Actor Jim Cooke is setting the Record Straight”

Poor Calvin Coolidge. History has been both unfair and unkind to him.

The more you know about Coolidge, the more that conclusion becomes inescapable. Most of the supposed “facts” about him just aren’t true.

Coolidge’s public persona, the Coolidge that appears in the history books, “Silent Cal,” who was grim, monosyllabic, humorless, and one of “God’s Frozen People,” from Vermont begins to wear thin as you look into the actual life and utterances of the quiet, yet bright and fascinating man from Plymouth who was our 30th President.

Actor Jim Cooke knows that Coolidge has been unfairly maligned and has been doing something about it: re-creating Coolidge from his writings and speeches. He does a one-man stage show as Coolidge, and believes that Coolidge has been unfairly portrayed as a do nothing, humorless president by New Deal historians who needed a scapegoat.

But Cooke’s one-man show makes clear, as does a reading of *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*, that Vermont’s most famous President was highly intelligent, very principled, idealistic and possessed of a dry sense of humor that went right by most of the country. He was also, Cooke believes, a pretty good President.

As most Vermont school children know, Vice-President Calvin Coolidge became President in August of 1923, when then-President Warren G. Harding died. Coolidge received the news of Harding’s death while visiting his family home in Plymouth, and was subsequently sworn in as President by his father. Cooke believes that upon taking office, Coolidge instinctively knew what the United States needed in a President, and proceeded to give the country just that.

Coolidge’s cautious, conservative nature and his firm moral rectitude certainly helped, Cooke believes, because the United States in 1923 was struggling with more social upheaval and moral drift than ever before in its history. America needed a stabilizing influence, and it desperately needed respectability restored to the presidency.

Coolidge accomplished both by returning to — in fact, embodying — the virtues of the simpler America that was even then slipping away. He personified the honesty and Puritan virtues of small-town, rural America, and the country he

led loved him for it, even if the country itself was actually headed down a different road.

Coolidge was an honest man, one who firmly believed that government was a system of restraints agreed upon for the common good, and who knew that when taxes were levied, someone had to work to pay them. Contrary to his frosty image, he could be poetically eloquent, dryly witty, and brilliantly idealistic all in the space of a single dissertation. He could also be courageous.

When a conservative hate group known as “America First” began fomenting anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic feelings, Coolidge lost no time in repudiating them and urging tolerance and good will:

“Whether one traces his Americanism back three centuries to the Mayflower or three years to the steerage is not half so important as whether his Americanism is real and genuine,” Coolidge declared. “No matter by what various crafts we came here, we are now all in the same boat...Let us cast off our hatreds.”

If that sounds like an unlikely utterance from someone called “Silent Cal,” try reading Coolidge’s autobiography. It is a lucid, graceful summation of Coolidge’s life, in words that are always clear and effective and often stunningly poetic. Much of Cooke’s performance as Coolidge is based on sections of the autobiography, memorized word-for-word.

Throughout the autobiography, there is an economy and cleanness of expression combined with an extraordinary sensitivity and precision of observation that are continually surprising. The book is neither inarticulate nor humorless. When it is recalled that Coolidge was the author (in a speech made in Bennington shortly after the Flood of 1927) of the famous “Vermont is a State I love,” passage, it is evident that he was a skilled writer with a clear and sensitive ear for language.

The actor has just produced an audiotape version of selected passages from the book, which he delivers in a strong Yankee twang. It is fascinating, and gives the listener a much different view of Coolidge than that promoted in most histories. He come across as not only a good and effective man, but witty and wise, also.

Cooke believes that Coolidge’s integrity was no sham. What you saw was what you got with Coolidge. “In all my research I can’t find a single place where Coolidge is lying, or where he attempted to deceive people or where he acted in a manner that might be described as expedient,” Cooke said. “Whatever he did, he did because he felt it was the right thing to do.”

Then why is Coolidge's modern-day reputation so low? Why is he perceived as a colorless do-nothing President, enamored of business and little else? Cooke believes that Coolidge was, in effect, a victim of history. He was, according to Cooke, done in by pro-New Deal historians, who chronicled the ascendancy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and needed a conservative scapegoat for FDR to outshine.

"Gore Vidal once used the phrase, 'the education mafia,' and there do seem to be orthodoxies in American history that you just shouldn't attempt to challenge," Cooke said. "There are people who are appalled at the idea that there should be a solo performance about Calvin Coolidge."

But Cooke plans to continue doing the show for many years to come. His cassette tape of the autobiography, while not a best seller, is doing well, and he has several performances upcoming.

Although he is not crusading to improve the Coolidge image, Cooke is aware that his performances are helping the Vermont President's reputation, and he's not at all unhappy about that.

by Tom Slayton, commentator, on Vermont Public Radio, February, 1993.
Mr. Slayton is the editor of *Vermont Life* magazine.

(Jim Cooke has appeared with great success at several Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation gatherings.)



Actor Jim Cooke
as "Calvin Coolidge"

"Suzanne Spends a Night at the White House"

This little story by Grace Coolidge is from the papers of Admiral Joel Thompson Boone with permission of his son-in-law, Milton F. Heller, Jr. Dr. Boone (1889-1974) was an alumnus of Mercersburg Academy. He served in the Alumni Association and was a member of the academy's board of regents. From 1922 to 1929 he was medical officer on the presidential yacht *Mayflower* and assistant physician at the White House. Dr. and Mrs. Boone's daughter, Suzanne, once spent a night as Mrs. Coolidge's guest.



President and Mrs. Coolidge,
John Ringling and Suzanne at the Circus

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

“Suzanne Spends a Night at the White House”

One day in October in the year nineteen hundred and twenty three, Papa Boone received a letter. The letter said, “Dear Dr. Boone: Will you come to Mercersburg Academy to speak to the boys next November fourteenth?” Dr. Boone replied, “Yes, I will come and I will bring Mrs. Boone along, too, because we like the boys at Mercersburg and I shall be glad to make a little talk to them.”

When Mrs. Coolidge who lived over in the big White House heard about this she was glad because she liked the boys at Mercersburg and she had two boys of her own there and she thought Papa Boone would have some things to tell the boys at Mercersburg which they would like to hear.

Now, Dr. and Mrs. Boone had a little girl named Suzanne who was three and one-half years old. Mrs. Coolidge had no little girl of her own and she loved Suzanne very much. When she learned that Dr. and Mrs. Boone were going to Mercersburg she thought to herself, “Now is my chance to borrow their little girl and that will be next best to having a little girl of my own.” The very next day she said to Dr. Boone, “Do you suppose Suzanne would come and stay all night with me when you and Mrs. Boone go to Mercersburg?” And he smiled and said, “Why yes, I am sure she would.”

When Dr. Boone went home he talked with Mrs. Boone and told her what Mrs. Coolidge had said, and then they asked little Suzanne if she would like to go and spend the night with Mrs. Coolidge in the big White House when they went to Mercersburg and Suzanne said, “Yes, I would like that.”

After that the time passed very slowly, or so it seemed to little Suzanne and Mrs. Coolidge, but at last the long-expected day came, as all days come, and Dr. and Mrs. Boone set forth in their automobile on their journey to Mercersburg.

After Suzanne had taken her nap, Miss Randolph came to take her over to the big White House. Her grandmother helped her put on her pretty blue coat and her little blue hat with the soft white fur and she and Miss Randolph got into the big automobile and were whisked away. Pretty soon it passed between two large stone posts with heavy iron gates, up the wide drive and stopped before the door of

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the big White House. Here Miss Randolph and Suzanne, looking very small indeed, got out of the automobile and disappeared through the great glass doors.

Safely inside, Miss Randolph helped Suzanne take off her hat and coat and hung them away in the closet. Then, a great tall man came to play with her. His name was Mr. Haley. You see little Suzanne had many friends in the big White House and they all loved her very much.

In a little while Mrs. Coolidge came to find Suzanne and they all played games and had a good time together until her supper was ready. After that Maggie read to her and helped her get undressed and ready for bed while Mrs. Coolidge went down stairs and ate her dinner.

And what bed do you think Suzanne slept in? Oh, you never could guess so I shall have to tell you. It was the big bed that Abraham Lincoln slept in when he lived in the big White House ever so many years ago, before you and I were born.

After little Suzanne had said her “Now I lay me...,” not forgetting “God bless Daddy and Mother and help Suzanne to be a good girl,” Mrs. Coolidge gave her a good-night kiss and tucked her in surrounded by her dollies and her books and turning out the lights tip-toed out into the next room and sat down with her knitting and her book trying to imagine that now she had a little girl of her very own.

Editors Note: On February 19, 1929, First Lady Grace Coolidge paid a final visit to the *Mayflower* and its officers. She brought to the luncheon a package containing an iron doorstop in the form of a Scottie dog. To it was attached a cloth tag with this verse:

"Within This Room"

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
 The Hoovers are coming to town.
 The Coolidges depart
 With a pain in the heart
 And Congress looks on with a frown.

The City is dressed in its beautiful best,
 The Avenue bristles with seats
 The "Mayflower" rocks
 At the Navy Yard docks
 While we laugh and partake of the eats.
 "Only", a dog.

From an oral history interview with Admiral Boone. The interviewer, Raymond Henle, commented, "How amusing. How really delightful. Even if it is doggerel!"

BOOK REVIEW

Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King*:

The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874 - 1958)

(Reading, Mass. : Addison-Wesley, 1992)

James Michael Curley achieved literary immortality as Edwin O'Connor's Frank Skeffington, the Irish ward boss in *The Last Hurrah*. Curley's career spanned six decades, from an unsuccessful aldermanic race in 1897 until his final election as an at large delegate to the 1956 Democratic national convention. In the intervening years he served as a member of the Boston Common Council and the Board of Aldermen, the state legislature, the U. S. House of Representatives, as well as a term as governor of Massachusetts and four separate terms as mayor of Boston. A gifted orator and political spoilsman, Curley also served two brief terms in the federal penitentiary.

Curley's political ascent coincided with that of Calvin Coolidge, who also held a series of local and state offices. While their paths crossed, Curley and Coolidge somehow avoided a direct confrontation. Curley in 1918 declared himself a gubernatorial candidate, but withdrew and the next year Coolidge was elected governor of Massachusetts. The potential of such a contest remains compelling, as Beatty notes: "[W]hat a prospect: Silent Cal versus James Michael Curley. A clash of archetypes, the yin and yang of Massachusetts politics."

The author's treatment of Coolidge alternates from insightful to stereotypical and, in one instance, to shameful. This imbalance mars an otherwise competent biography. Describing Curley's testimony before a committee chaired by Coolidge, Beatty restates the obvious, namely, that the state senate president took "the private sector as his model for the public" refusing to let an abundantly clear transcript extract speak for itself. Such asides are redundant, and the present one underscores the biographer's biases.

In an enigmatic editorial opinion worthy of an O. Henry story, "John Bantry" (the pseudonym of Clifton Carberry, managing editor of *The Boston Globe*) compares Curley and Coolidge:

Should some keen historian, after intelligent inquiry, turn the spotlight on the personalities of some of our Massachusetts notables, there is one man of whom he might write the following:

"He was a solitary and lonely man. He had few close friends. He had scant capacity for comradeship because he did not easily make friends. He lacked incentive to relax and enjoy himself. His political honors came not from the hands of an army of enthusiastic admirers, but from the public, which, not knowing him intimately, has accepted the legendary ideas that have grown up concerning him."

"Ah," you say, "The answer is easy. It's Calvin Coolidge."
No it isn't. It is James M. Curley.

This is a surprising reversal of conventional wisdom, but Beatty confuses the point by disputing "Bantry's" claim that Coolidge was a "merrier companion" than Curley, describing Coolidge as a "totem of Yankee parsimony," and repeating Alice Roosevelt Longworth's quip that he was "weaned on a pickle." With such point-making, the editorial's original effect is lost in interpretation.

Beatty also reinforces Coolidge's reputation for possessing an economy with words. After receiving a long-distance telephone call from Chicago notifying him of his nomination for vice president in 1920, Beatty describes Coolidge as hanging up the telephone, turning to his wife and squeezing out a single word: "Nominated." The ugliest canard, however, is that Coolidge Republicans courted the Ku Klux Klan in the 1924 presidential election by virtue of their silence in the face of mounting Klan activity, which in Massachusetts consisted of burning crosses assembled, placed, and ignited by Curley's gubernatorial campaign to whip ethnic Catholics into a Democratic frenzy. While praising Coolidge's Democratic opponent, John W. Davis, for condemning the Klan, Beatty minimizes the Klan's participation in the marathon Democratic convention, where the nomination of Alfred E. Smith, the Catholic governor of New York, was blocked and William Jennings Bryan was booed off the floor. He ignores the fact that a Republican-sponsored federal anti-lynching law was halted by a Democratic Senate filibuster after being approved by the House and that this same measure was endorsed in Coolidge's acceptance address and incorporated into the 1924 G.O.P. platform, which also contained a defense of civil rights for "The Negro — An American Citizen."

In September of 1930, Curley and Coolidge came together for a final public appearance, on the Common during celebrations commemorating the tricentenary of Boston's founding. Mayor Curley brought a smile to Coolidge's face by addressing Governor Frank G. Allen and the assembled dignitaries: "Your Excellency, our President that has been and, if he so desires, may again be, guests of the Commonwealth and fellow citizens." The audience roared approval at the prospect of another Coolidge presidential term, in a spontaneous demonstration of popular affection for the former chief executive.

In January 1933, the same Common reverberated with cannon fire to mark Coolidge's death. While attending the funeral in Northampton, the president-elect's son James informed Curley that his father was withdrawing the mayor's name from consideration for the cabinet as the secretary of the navy. Curley's past support of Al Smith and belated endorsement of Roosevelt proved fatal. After a lone gubernatorial term, Curley returned to Congress. Joseph E. Kennedy in 1946 financed Curley's last successful mayoral campaign in return for endorsement of his son, John, as Curley's successor in Congress.

In an otherwise valuable biography, Beatty's partisan comments frequently detract from the text. In more than a few passages, Beatty, a senior editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, vents his anger at Presidents Reagan and Bush by trashing Coolidge and the Republican party in general. He complains that Harding and Coolidge defeated two "better qualified Democrats," James M. Cox and Franklin D. Roosevelt. In truth, FDR was an unknown quantity in 1920, who secured the vice presidential nomination based upon the name recognition and popularity accorded to his late cousin, Theodore. Is it really necessary also to make references to Willie Horton and Michael Dukakis in a biography of an Irish ward politician who died in 1958? Despite its defects, *The Rascal King* is a long overdue reappraisal of Curley, with interesting glimpses of Coolidge's early career, including Senator Henry Cabot Lodge's opposition to Coolidge's nomination in 1924. As the first biography of Curley since Joseph Dineen's *The Purple Shamrock* in 1949, the book warrants attention.

Vita

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Governor Calvin Coolidge (1918-1920)

What Did President Coolidge Really Say?

At the Annual Meeting of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation August 6, 1995 Dr. Sheldon Stern, Historian, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, was the featured speaker.

In a provocative and vivid address he described his American History Project for High School students. He particularly emphasized the necessity of going to original sources to verify quotations.

He took as an example the statement, attributed to Calvin Coolidge, "The business of America is business.", which appears in several quotation books and many histories. It is used to confirm the view that the President was dominated by business interests.

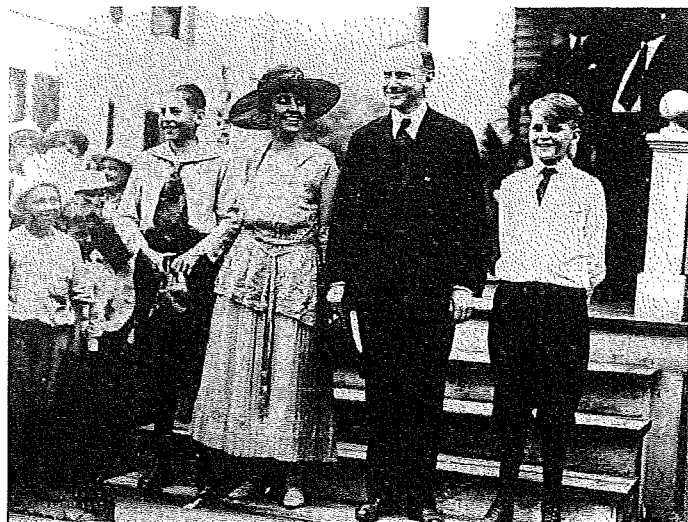
But he never said that.

Dr. Stern alluded to what he did say. In an address before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, January 17, 1925 the President declared:

"After all, the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world. I am strongly of [the] opinion that the great majority of people will find these are moving impulses of our life."

The connotation is quite different. In the distorted statement, "business" is supreme; in the actual quotation the natural desire of the "American people" to better themselves is proclaimed.

L. Wikander



Governor Coolidge Greeted in Northampton, MA

At the Chicago Republican Convention, Calvin Coolidge was nominated to run on the presidential ticket as Vice President with Warren G. Harding as President. He was formally notified in Northampton on July 27, 1920 with a ceremony at Smith College. This picture shows the family in front of their two family house at 21 Massasoit Street. The Coolidges pictured are John, Grace, Calvin and Calvin Jr. (left to right). The Harding-Coolidge ticket went on to win the election with 64% of the popular vote.