

# *The Real Calvin Coolidge*

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A Publication of  
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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

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Opinions and conclusions in *The Real Calvin Coolidge* are those of the authors and may not necessarily reflect those of the Coolidge Foundation.

*The Real Calvin Coolidge* is free to Foundation members. Inquires on membership should be sent to the foundation offices.

This issue is 13th in a series. Back issues are available for purchase year round through the Foundation offices, Box 97, Plymouth Notch, VT 05056. During the season (May to October) the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site sells copies at the Cilley Store for \$2.95 each.

This issue is 13th in a series begun in July, 1983, and is a special version to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Calvin Coolidge's homestead inaugural. Jim Cooke has done extensive research to produce his article on who was really in the room with Calvin Coolidge when he was sworn in as president by his father. The research will be helpful when the re-enactment is done on Monday, August 3rd at 1:47 a.m., 1998. Jim has read unpublished accounts from the archives of Coolidge Foundation and the Division for Historic Preservation. Just this year, a letter was donated to the Coolidge Foundation from the Bryant family that was quite helpful. Col. John Coolidge, Calvin's father, told of the events of 1923 in a letter to his sister-in-law.

Lawrence Wikander, former curator of the Coolidge Room at Forbes Library, has written two articles for this publication: "Will Rogers and Calvin Coolidge" and "The Second Oath". The solo historical interpreter of Will Rogers is appearing at President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site this summer as part of the festivities along with "Amelia Earhart" and "Calvin Coolidge". Mr. Wikander felt that it would be appropriate to reveal that Calvin Coolidge was sworn in a second time in Washington, D.C. to make sure that he was the legitimate president. See his revealing research!

J.R. Greene has contributed a book review and developed his own book of postcards on Plymouth Notch and Coolidge now available through our offices.

Professor Robert H. Ferrell has edited this publication and written a book on Coolidge's presidency just available this year.

Cyndy Bittinger, our Executive Director, has overseen the publication of this issue and found many archival pictures to enhance the issue.

Thank you to all volunteers with a contribution to this issue and a special thanks to Anything Printed for layout.

The Publication Committee:  
Robert H. Ferrell, Chairman  
John Coolidge  
John A. Lutz  
John A. Waterhouse  
Lawrence E. Wikander

***Will Rogers****Courtesy Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, OK****Calvin Coolidge****Courtesy Forbes Library, Northampton, MA  
"Where seldom is heard a discouraging word."*

## Will Rogers and Calvin Coolidge

by

Lawrence E. Wikander

Today Will Rogers is dimly remembered as a smiling cowboy who did rope tricks and averred simply, "I never met a man I didn't like."

In the 1920's he was nationally known as a newspaper columnist, an author, a vaudeville artist, toastmaster, movie actor—both silent and talking—and political commentator. Not entirely facetious proposals for his nomination for President were made.

Will Rogers first met Calvin Coolidge in April 1925. He was to talk, or perform, at the Gridiron Dinner, an annual affair at which newspaper correspondents put on skits and songs that spoofed the important political figures in attendance.

President Coolidge would attend. Prior to the dinner Nicholas Longworth, Speaker of the House of Representatives, took Will to meet the President. Longworth (or perhaps his wife, Alice Roosevelt Longworth) had bet that the comedian could not make Coolidge laugh. When presented Rogers cupped his hand to his ear. "I beg your pardon; I didn't catch the name." The President either smiled or laughed. "I never heard him so talkative," said Longworth as he paid up. "Why he was as agreeable as an insurance agent," Rogers concurred.

In August 1925 Will Rogers returned from an extensive European tour. During it he had sent back a series of articles, "Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to his President," published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, a popular weekly. They were in his humorous deprecating style, sometimes obtuse and sometimes very acute.

Despite the implication in recent books that the President wanted Rogers to make some kind of "report" on the trip it was Rogers who initiated his White House visit.

On September 29, 1926 a telegram to Secretary Everett Sanders read: I AM COMING TO WASHINGTON TOMORROW OR NEXT DAY AND I WANT TO SEE AND HAVE A CHAT WITH THE PRESIDENT IS IT POSSIBLE REGARDS

WILL ROGERS

ASTOR HOTEL

A reply went out the same day: WILL ROGERS ASTOR HOTEL NEW YORK CITY TELEGRAM RECEIVED THE PRESIDENT HOPES YOU WILL STAY AT THE WHITE HOUSE DURING YOUR VISIT WIRE ARRIVAL AND CAR WILL MEET YOU EVERETT SANDERS The invitation provoked a fulsome reply the same day by telegraphic night letter, a reduced rate overnight message which was transcribed by the White House staff.

Everett Sanders

The White House

Washington, D.C.

If that gentleman is not kidding me that is the greatest honor that ever fell my way, and I not only appreciate it but I am going to take him up on it. I have to stop off in Philadelphia and see Mr. Lorimer [publisher of the *Saturday Evening Post*] and I will come down in the afternoon. I will be there one night if they have to put a cot in the Blue room.

Just think, the only non-office seeker that ever slept in the White House. If he wants to stay in there and make that job permanent and even hereditary why I will call the solid south for him. [For many decades unified by the Civil War and Republican Reconstruction, the Southern states always voted Democratic.]

I will wire from Philadelphia. If this is not on the level you better stop me there. Just think, it will be the first meal I ever had on the government and it's just my luck to be on a diet now. I have an awful lot to report. It's Mrs. Coolidge I want to meet.

Regards, 'till somebody wakes me up.

W.R.

And the following day a brief message from Philadelphia:

Everett Sanders

The White House

Washington, D.C.

Will arrive Washington six twenty.

Will Rogers

The train was late, and the visit did not begin auspiciously. President Coolidge decided not to wait beyond the usual seven o'clock dinner hour. He and Mrs. Coolidge were on the soup course when Will arrived.

"This is what I call democracy, the President and his wife waiting dinner on me, such as I am," he quipped. Mrs. Coolidge was more amused than the President at his stories.

After dinner all three worked at a jigsaw puzzle chatting idly. At ten-thirty, just when Will hoped the President would inquire about his travels abroad, he was disappointed to hear his host asking his wife where their guest was to sleep.

Will found the room assigned too imposing and bedded down in a small anteroom. He had been informed that he could have his breakfast in his room when he liked.

He was similarly left to his devices the following morning, and he visited Alice Roosevelt Longworth and James J. Davis, Secretary of Labor.

He returned for lunch. It did not escape him that they had fish for dinner and fish hash for lunch. Although the visit seemed uneventful, the cowboy comedian was able to work humorous reference to it in columns and talks.

Will Rogers wrote a daily telegram (column) and frequent articles. Relying on his motto, "All I know is what I read in the papers," he often had occasion to make humorous remarks about the Nation's President.

Some examples:

He said that during his visit he had inquired, "What sort of crooks and horse thieves did you meet today, Mr. President?"

"The Cabinet," Coolidge replied.

Referring to a report that the President was worried about the state of the union, Will observed, "I never knew a Vermonter to do any tremendous worrying on \$75,000. a year."

When touring abroad he met the Prince of Wales. "Just between you and me, Calvin, he don't care any more about being King than you would going back to Vice-President again."

"Cairo is a great place. I was the only tourist who never went to see the Sphinx: I've seen Cal Coolidge."

In turn Rogers appreciated Coolidge's deadpan Vermont wit. "I wish I had a dollar for every good gag he has pulled that has gone over some politician's bean. He pulls 'em—if you don't get 'em that's your fault."

The dedication page of his book on foreign travels reads, "Respectfully dedicated to three ladies who have the keenest sense of humor that it has been my good fortune to encounter: Mrs. Calvin Coolidge, Lady Nancy Astor, Mrs. Alice [Roosevelt] Longworth."

On December 15, 1926 a few months after the overnight visit, the President received a 106 word telegram from the Committee on Entertainment of Beverly Hills soliciting a message from the President.

As often the case his response was shorter, "Congratulations on your elevation to the office of Honorary Mayor of Beverly Hills Calvin Coolidge."

In early summer of 1927 Will Rogers was reported suffering from gallstones. After an operation his condition was listed "grave." President Coolidge wired him from his vacation headquarters in Rapid City, South Dakota on June 20. "I am sincerely sorry to learn of your illness and trust that your recovery will be speedy and complete. Calvin Coolidge." A reply to Secretary Sanders came three days later, "Certainly did appreciate the President's kind telegram and it will never be forgotten you must be having a great time up there wish I could be there for the rodeo on the fourth of July. Will Rogers."

During the 1924 election, sometimes termed the "radio election," President Coolidge gained audience as more and more radio stations linked up to carry his messages.

But the biggest hookup to date was aired January 4, 1928 when master of ceremonies Will Rogers, from his California home, linked with actor Fred Stone (Rogers's best friend), his daughter Dorothy, in Chicago, Al Jolson, in New Orleans, and Paul Whiteman's orchestra in New York—this complicated arrangement honored new Dodge automobiles.

At one point Rogers introduced the President of the United States for a few words. Assuming the President's rural Vermont accent Rogers rambled on for a few preposterous paragraphs. For example he started out, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am supposed to deliver a message every year on the condition of the country, I find the Country as a WHOLE prosperous I don't mean by that, that the WHOLE country is prosperous, But as a WHOLE, its prosperous, That is its prosperous as a WHOLE. a WHOLE is not supposed to be prosperous, There is not a WHOLE lot of doubt about that" [Rogers's punctuation.]

Inevitably, some listeners didn't get it. They thought it was Coolidge, and a number were upset that the President was plugging Dodge automobiles.

The *New York Times* weighed in with an editorial headed: "Going Too Far" which declared, "Mr. Rogers is a national favorite, and he has been granted the unofficial status of a court jester, but there are marked bounds to his privilege . . ." and warned of the consequences.

Will Rogers was astonished at this reaction which he learned of in detail when he dined with the Longworths. He took to his typewriter and wrote an abject apology.

The Willard

Washington

My Dear Mr. and Mrs. President,

I find that due to my lack of good taste, or utter stupidity, that I have wounded the feelings of two people who I most admire, and should have been the last to embarrass, had I purposely started out to annoy the entire World. If it will lessen the annoyance any to know that there was absolutely and positively no inkling of a thing of that kind intended, why I want you to believe me when I tell you that was the case,

Why Mr. Coolidge you and your wife have been nicer to me than any one in high public life in America, I was never invited to the White House by any other President, and in dozens of ways you have been kind to me,

Why I have just finished visiting in the home of your best friend, Mr Morrow, A man that I tremendously admire, and a family that I would cut off my right arm rather than have them think I had been in any way rude to you his friend, I am not as ungrateful as that, in all my little jokes and remarks of you, I had never felt that I passed the borders of good taste, I have had people say to me time and again, "Will I notice you joke a lot about Coolidge, but you generally wind up by having something might complimentary to say of him before you finish, I believe you are a real admirer of him". And that is exactly the way I have felt about it,

If I didn't have sincere admiration for you both and know the good you have been to our Country, regardless of the personal kindness's you had shown me, this

thing wouldn't hurt so bad, But it does hurt me, to think that I have to resort to bad taste to make my living from men who have befriended me, I did the little talk in a moment of jest, never for one moment thinking the most stupid of people could ever mistake it for anyone but me, On another page I want to write you the very remarks, and leave it to your judgement as to how anyone in any part of their sane moments could possibly picture the President of the United States uttering such words.

I just misjudged the intelligence of the people listening, and I can't lay all the blame to them, For I can see now after due thought that it was not the proper thing to do under any circumstances, But it's the intent that I do ask forgiveness for, I realize now that radio is not the stage, where they can see you, and I also realize that the class of people who would come into a Theatre to see you are above the average of some of the ones who would be listening over a radio, all this I have learned to my sorrow, And if you can see it in your heart, you and that dear wife of yours to forgive me, I will certainly see that it, or nothing approaching it will ever happen again, I have always so boasted of the friendship of all the men that I joke about, and said that I hope that I would never do anything that would cause them embarrassment, I lived in Mr. Morrow's home for over two weeks and I think he will tell you that I am not quite as bad as I appeared. My wife and I knew nothing about it till we got here, I had heard nothing of it on the coast, everyone took it as I had meant it, We went to Mrs Longworths for dinner and we were told, and it certainly has been a gloomy night and day for us, I hate to face the Jackson day dinner now for I know how the feelings of some of them will be that I will do something that will upset the affair,

If there ever was a sad Comedian, I am one, and I do ask all the forgiveness that it's in your and Mrs. Coolidge's power to give,

Yours most respectfully,

Will Rogers

The Willard

Washington

Radio fans,

I have a friend in Washington who on account of what the Automobiles have done for his Economy wants to speak to you, Mr. Coolidge, all right Mr. Coolidge go ahead,

"Ladies and Gentleman, I am supposed to deliver a message every year on the condition of the country, I find the Country as a WHOLE prosperous. I don't mean by that, that the WHOLE country is prosperous, But as a WHOLE, its prosperous, That is its prosperous as a WHOLE. a WHOLE is not supposed to be prosperous, There is not a WHOLE lot of doubt about that,"

(Now can you picture anyone being so devoid of humor that they would picture you uttering such nonsense)

"Mr. Mellon has saved up some money for the country, and laid by some for himself."

"Mellon is the only Treasury that the United States ever had that has saved faster than Congress can divide it up"

"They are here now to split up the swag, The cheapest way would have been to have taken each Senators and Congressmans address and just mailed him his Pro Rata share, that would have eliminated any cause for holding this session at all, and been cheaper in the long run on the people",

"Pretty near all the men I come in contact with are doing well, Hoover, Dawes, Lowden, Mcadoo, Smith, Course none of them are doing as well as they hope to be doing this time next year, But they are doing well".

"I sent Dwight Morrow to Mexico, He is doing good work, Smart Boy Dwight, One of the two smartest boys in our class at Amherst, where we were preparing for College".

"Lindberg is down in Central America, We seem to get in wrong faster than that Boy can get us out, Wish he was twins".

"I am leaving next week for Cuba, Going to show South America that we are not as bad as we've been".

"Nicaragua, We are having a little trouble in Nicaragua, But I think we will soon get that buried",

"Last summer I made a statement in which I said I didn't "Choose to run, Well/its seems to have been misunderstood, So at the opening of Congress I clarified it by stating, "I still don't "Choose" to run. I don't see how any one could misunderstand that statement".

"Prohibition, Prohibition is going down about as well as usual".

Now there Mr. President is an exact copy word for word of the nonsense I uttered that night, HOW could it ever be mistaken for you?

This apparently went to the White House by messenger, and the President's handwritten reply came back in a few hours.

#### THE WHITE HOUSE

Washington

January 11, 1928

My dear Mr. Rogers:-

Your letter has just come to me. I hope it will cheer you up to know that I thought the matter of rather small consequence myself though the office was informed from several sources that I had been on the air. I wish to assure you that your note makes it all plain that you had no intention save harmless amusement.

I hope you will not give the affair another troubled thought. I am well aware how nicely you have referred to me so many times.

Cordially yours,

Calvin Coolidge

Mr. Will Rogers

Washington, D.C.

Even a slight acquaintance with the President would convince one that he would not send such a warm letter if he were offended.

Nevertheless biographers of Calvin Coolidge agree that he was offended.

Ike Hoover (*Forty-two Years in the White House*) recalls Coolidge remarking "Rogers had been a guest in the house once, but if he was to be again some other President would have to do the inviting."

The usually reliable Claude Fuess (*Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont*) writes "Coolidge was much offended and refused to accept the humorist's apology." The above letter contradicts this.

Donald McCoy (*Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President*) suggests that after Rogers's first visit, "he made fun of the President and was never invited back." This rather begs the question.

Ishbel Ross (*Grace Coolidge and Her Era*) notes that Coolidge had said of Rogers's frequent mentions, " 'Oh, Will's all right,' but he was far from pleased when Will Rogers mimicked his speech and mannerisms 'but that Rogers had to make a living the same as the rest of us, . . . and if this was the way he could do it [Coolidge] didn't think he ought to object to helping him.' "

Whatever the secondary impressions, Will Rogers accepted the President's letter at face value. At the Democratic Jackson Day dinner, January 12, 1928, he quoted the letter saying the imitation "had not offended him in the slightest particular."

Again in his regular column Rogers writes, "I want to here publicly thank Mr. Coolidge for the lovely letter, for I am personally very fond of him."

So for Will Rogers the incident was closed. According to notes from the Will Rogers Memorial he again imitated the President at a talk in Raleigh, North Carolina, and said his original broadcast should not have been taken seriously "because, after all, it was made after 11 o'clock at night."\*

After March 4, 1929 when the Coolidges returned to private life Will Rogers had fewer occasions to refer to him.

The lingering illness of Mrs. Coolidge's mother kept them from traveling far from Northampton, Massachusetts, and Plymouth, Vermont. But on October 4, 1929 Lemira Goodhue died and that winter the Coolidges traveled to Florida. The ex-President had accepted a position on the board of directors of the New York

\* The help of Patricia Lowe, Librarian of the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremont, Oklahoma, is gratefully acknowledged.

Life Insurance Company which had its annual meeting there. They remained for some weeks and then made a leisurely trip to the West, visiting William Randolph Hearst among others.

In Will Rogers's column for February 26, 1930 he observes "was out to Mr. Harry Chandler's to dinner Wednesday. Just his family and Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge." Harry Chandler was the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* and an important California landowner. A daily columnist is working all the time, so Rogers pretended to turn the dinner table conversation into an interview. He asked Mr. Coolidge a long complicated question. "Yes," came the reply. Another query invited a detailed response. "No," he heard. A third attempt won an "un-huh." Finally giving up he said, "Will you please pass the biscuits?" After a brief delay the former president said, "Probably."

Rogers was again on hand March 4, 1930, to report on the dedication of the Coolidge Dam near Globe, Arizona:

"Well, Calvin did a mighty fine job of dam dedicating here this afternoon. He made a dam good speech favoring dams . . . Mr. Coolidge and an Apache chief and a Pima Chief all took a whiff from the same pipe. The Indians didn't bat an eye, but Calvin coughed a carload's worth." Another gentle jibe.

On June 11 of the same year Will Rogers had planned to fly (as he always preferred) from New York to an engagement in Boston. But all flights were grounded. He decided to pay a surprise visit to the Coolidges and entrained for Springfield, Massachusetts. There he hired a car to Northampton. He was disappointed to learn at the Coolidge & Hemenway office that the ex-President was in New York on business. He called on Mrs. Coolidge and was given a brief tour of the Coolidges' new home, The Beeches. Its site on a secluded seven-acre tract gave them the privacy that their rented duplex on Massasoit Street had lacked. Mrs. Coolidge thought it was a little large.

Back in Springfield he was interviewed and photographed, but he refused to pose with the portable typewriter on which he banged out his daily telegrams.

Over the next few years these columns mentioned Calvin Coolidge from time to time.

On July 2, 1930 he complained that the new column, "Calvin Coolidge Says," was so high-minded that Rogers was left alone with the task of berating Congress and politicians. Mr. Coolidge wanted to return to "old early New England when if you wasn't praying you was burning someone that was."

On May 15, 1931 after commenting on supposed financial wizards who had sustained huge losses in the stock market, Rogers announced, "I tell you, and I believe it as strong as I ever believed anything in my life Calvin Coolidge was the only man in America who saw this whole thing coming and got out from under."

On June 6, a couple of weeks later, he declared ex-Presidents should have a pension and not have to write a daily column.

On August 10, 1932 noting that Mr. Coolidge was avoiding President Hoover's Notification (of his renomination) exercises in Washington, D.C., to escape aggravating his hay fever, he observed that the regrets came "from a farmhouse in a Vermont hayfield."

On October 14 reporting from Lima, Peru, Rogers wondered that he never could get anything on the radio outside of Orange County, California, but he met an old Peruvian farmer who had been listening to a Coolidge campaign talk. "I'll bet Calvin will be all broke up when he hears he wasted his speech on people away down here that can't vote."

The full text of Will Rogers's column on January 6, 1933 the day after Calvin Coolidge's death reads:

#### Will Rogers Pays Tribute In His Own Way to Calvin Coolidge

Mr. Coolidge you didn't have to die for me to throw flowers on your grave. I have told a million jokes about you, but every one was based on some of your splendid qualities. You had a hold on the American people regardless of politics. They knew you were honest, economical, and had a native common sense.

History generally records a place for a man who is ahead of his time. But, we that lived with you remember you because you was WITH your time.

By golly, you little red-headed New Englander, I liked you. You put horse sense into statesmanship.

"All the News That's Fit to Print."

# The New York Times.

EXTRA  
6 A. M.  
TWO CENTS

VOL. LXXII... No. 25,802... NEW YORK, FRIDAY, AUGUST 3, 1923.

## PRESIDENT HARDING DIES SUDDENLY; STROKE OF APOPLEXY AT 7:30 P. M.; CALVIN COOLIDGE IS PRESIDENT

COOLIDGE TAKES THE OATH OF OFFICE  
His Father, Who Is a Notary Public,  
Administers It After Form Is Found  
By Him in His Library.

WOUNDES HE WILL FOLLOW THE HARDING POLICIES  
Wants All Who Aided Harding to Remain in  
Office—Roused After Midnight to Be Told  
the News of the President's Death.

Statement by President Coolidge  
JANUARY 6, 1933  
PLYMOUTH, Vt., Aug. 3.—President Calvin Coolidge issued the following statement early this morning:  
Reports have reached me, which I feel are correct, that President Harding is gone. The world has lost a great and good man. I mourn his loss. He was my chief and my friend.  
It will be my purpose to carry out the policies which he has begun for the service of the American people and



DEATH STROKE CAME WITHOUT WARNING  
Mrs. Harding Was Reading to Her  
Husband When First Sign Appeared  
—She Ran for Doctor

BUT NOTHING COULD BE DONE TO REVIVE PATIENT  
News of Tragic End Shocks Everybody, Coming  
After Day Said to Have Been the Best Since  
His Illness Began a Week Ago.

SAID FRANKLIN, Aug. 3.—President Harding died at 7:30 after  
suffering 11 1/2 hours of a stroke of apoplexy.  
The end came suddenly while Mrs. Harding was reading to him the  
last evening newspaper, and after nine and a half hours he lay  
dead but about the beginning of his illness nearly two weeks ago.  
A doctor ran through the President's rooms and he collapsed.  
Mrs. Harding and the two women in the sick room knew the  
bad news, and Mrs. Harding rushed out of the room and called for a  
doctor and the others to "come quick."  
Dr. Barnes and Dr. Goss, however, reached the President before  
he died, but were not able to save the President.  
The funeral arrangements following were held in the city of

Copy of *The New York Times* printed after President Harding died

## ***Dramatis Personae: Plymouth Notch, Vermont, Thursday-Friday, August 2-3, 1923***

by Jim Cooke

Two scenes of high drama unfolded on the night of August 2-3, seventy-five years ago. First—in San Francisco, at 7:32 Pacific time, Warren G. Harding died in the presidential suite at the Palace Hotel. The news flashed across the country—crossing four time zones, to a village on the eastern slope of the Green Mountains. There—at Plymouth Notch—Vice President Calvin Coolidge took the qualifying oath of office by the light of a kerosene lamp, at 2:47 in the morning of August 3, administered by his 78-year-old father, John Calvin Coolidge, a notary public.

Today, questions remain about these two events. (I'll only touch upon the first but will dwell upon the latter.) The story has been told and retold; each teller seems to assure us that his or her version is so. There is little agreement. But, as they say: one thing is certain . . .

It was a hot and humid August night . . . Mark Breen, meteorologist at Fairbanks Museum in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, says the record shows a high of 87 degrees in St. Johnsbury that day with thunder and a light sprinkle of rain around 2:30 a.m. Fierce thunderstorms reported elsewhere in the state rendered some roads impassible. The morning of August 3 is recalled as "muggy."

The Coolidge family had arrived in Plymouth on July 8, traveling over wet roads from Northampton, during a downpour. Calvin Coolidge, not much used to repeating himself, more than once remarked: "It always rained on my moving days." Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge rode in the rear of their government-owned Pierce Arrow; the boys took turns riding up front with the driver. The front seat was much preferred since their father's asthma often dictated that the back windows be closed. They would be welcomed in Plymouth at the Coolidge homestead by the vice president's father and his housekeeper, Aurora Pierce. Miss Pierce was assisted in these days by a local girl, Bessie Pratt, just for the summer.

Vice President Coolidge's sons would leave Plymouth on Thursday afternoon; they were driven over unpaved road to the railroad station at Ludlow by Joseph L. McInerney, a chauffeur of six months. This was the same twelve-mile route their father had sometimes walked when attending Black River Academy where he graduated in 1890.

John Coolidge, sixteen years old and named for his grandfather, would change trains at Bellows Falls for Camp Devens to begin a month of service in the Citizens Military Training Corps. John was not looking forward to this—but he had been made to understand that the eldest son of the vice president of the United States must set a good example for the youth of the nation.

Fifteen-year-old Calvin Coolidge, Jr., would stay on the train down to Northampton. In the morning he would rise early, leaving the Coolidge half of that two-family house at 21 Massasoit Street—looked after by housekeeper Alice Reckahn and her cat. He would ride off on his bicycle to begin summer employment on the farm of Dickinson and Day in Hatfield. Young Cal was eagerly anticipating this opportunity to earn money and increase his savings. That spring his father had dictated a daily regimen of walking to build up the boy's strength for work in the tobacco fields. Perhaps the father's long-ago twelve-mile trek to Ludlow was held up as an example.

Calvin Coolidge had recently been to Woodstock to visit Dr. F.R. Jewett, his friend and dentist. With that visit behind him, the boys gone for the summer, he planned to leave Plymouth next day and make the journey to the summer house of his friend Frank W. Stearns—"Red Gables" on Little's Point in Swampscott, Massachusetts. Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge would stop overnight in Peterborough, where they would be guests at the mansion of Guy Currier, often redundantly identified as "wealthy millionaire Guy Currier." The Curriers were planning to treat the Coolidges to an alfresco production of William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" in the evening.

On Thursday, Coolidge was photographed chopping out rot in a maple tree in front of the homestead in preparation for filling the cavity with cement. The shot looks like a photo-op staged at the request of the "picture boys." In some shots Mrs. Coolidge is seen raking nearby. The vice president has taken off his jacket and is in shirt sleeves and vest. He stands on a scaffolding that in later photographs would be called "President Coolidge's first platform." Throughout his career Coolidge was endlessly patient with photographers—responding to their often foolish requests. Today we laugh at their results; it might have been better had he laughed at their requests. When told that "people would laugh" to see pictures of him in a cowboy outfit or an Indian headdress, he replied, "It's good for people to laugh." Remember—this is the same man who told Ethel Barrymore, "I think the people of America want a solemn ass for president and I do not plan to disappoint them."

Reporters say that in his last day as vice president he helped a neighbor, D. P. Brown, by "awkwardly" operating a horse rake. Numerous writers pass judgment

on Coolidge's skill with farm tasks. If he was unfamiliar with that rake or that horse, or the horse with him, I can well believe his operation, that day, would have been awkward. From newsreels of Coolidge raking and pitching hay, I would say—with most farm chores—that he knew what he was doing and did it well.

### Cast of Characters

Warren Gamaliel Harding, President

President Harding left Washington in June for a trip that would take him to Alaska. His journey came to be called a voyage of understanding. He was the first president to visit Alaska and he loved to travel. Usually, it took his mind off his problems—but this time the trip itself became a burden.

Calvin Coolidge described Harding's situation this way: "Later it was disclosed that he had discovered that some whom he had trusted had betrayed him and he had been forced to call them to account. It was known that this betrayal was a very heavy grief to him, perhaps it was more than he could bear. I never saw him again. In June he started for Alaska and—eternity."

Room 8064, the Palace Hotel—San Francisco

Florence Harding, affectionately called "the Duchess" by her husband, "Wurren," had been reading aloud. For years it has been reported she was reading from a Saturday Evening Post article written about the president titled: "A Calm Review of a Calm Man," by Samuel G. Blythe. We have been told that President Harding's last words were: "That's good. Go on; read some more." Francis Russell tells it that way in The Shadow of Blooming Grove published in 1968. He goes on to say, "Mrs. Harding finished reading and left the room. Harding's nurse, Ruth Powderly, entered with a glass of water to give him medicine. She saw his face twitch sharply and his mouth drop open. He was pronounced dead at 7:32 p.m."

Robert K. Murray in The Harding Era (1969) keeps Mrs. Harding at her husband's side at the moment of his death and adds that at first she thought he was choking on a piece of chewing gum.

More recently, in The Strange Deaths of President Harding (1996), Robert H. Ferrell—who has been examining the newly available papers of White House

physician Joel T. Boone—says she was reading aloud an article about Henry Ford from the Dearborn Independent.

Now, Carl Anthony in Florence Harding (1998) agrees that the president faces eternity having just heard words of praise for Henry Ford. But that is not the story I have chosen to tell. Return with me, now to Plymouth.

Calvin Coolidge, Vice President

Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge went to bed at their usual time, around nine o'clock. That's eight o'clock "our time." There would still have been traces of twilight. The sun had set a few minutes after seven. Our nation was still on "God's Time"—daylight savings time was not generally observed until 1942 as part of our war effort.

Coolidge recalled: "On the night of August 2nd, 1923, I was awakened by my father coming up the stairs calling my name. I noticed that his voice trembled. As the only times I had ever observed that before were when death had visited our family. I knew that something of the gravest nature had occurred.

"His emotion was partly due to the knowledge that a man whom he had met and liked was gone, partly to the feeling that must possess all of our citizens when the life of their President is taken from them . . .

"He had been the first to address me as the President of the United States. It was the culmination of the lifelong desire for a father for the success of his son.

"He placed in my hands an official report and told me that President Harding had just passed away. My wife and I at once dressed. The oath of office was taken in what we always called the sitting room by the light of the kerosene lamp. The Bible which had belonged to my mother lay on the table at hand. I do not know of any other case in history where the succession comes by election, where a father had administered to his son the qualifying oath of office. It seemed a simple and a natural thing to do at the time. Father was then, as always, a Notary Public. I can now realize something of the dramatic force of the event."

The message informing Coolidge of Harding's death was from George B. Christian, secretary to President Harding. It was delivered by Winfred Perkins. Colonel John speaks of him as the "telephone man." It had been received in Bridgewater, eight miles from Plymouth, by Mrs. Nellie Perkins, at 11:30 p.m. Perkins reached Plymouth Notch around midnight. Within minutes other cars arrived

with reporters and messages. Among them was a telegram from Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty advising the vice president to qualify as president with as little delay as possible.

Coolidge remembers, "My wife and I at once dressed. Before leaving the room I knelt down and, with the same prayer with which I have since approached the altar of the church, asked God to bless the American people and give me the power to serve them." This interesting word—"power"—is repeated at least two dozen times in the *Autobiography* (1929).

He sends the following telegram to Mrs. Harding:

"We offer you our deepest sympathy. May God bless and keep you."

Calvin Coolidge

Grace Coolidge

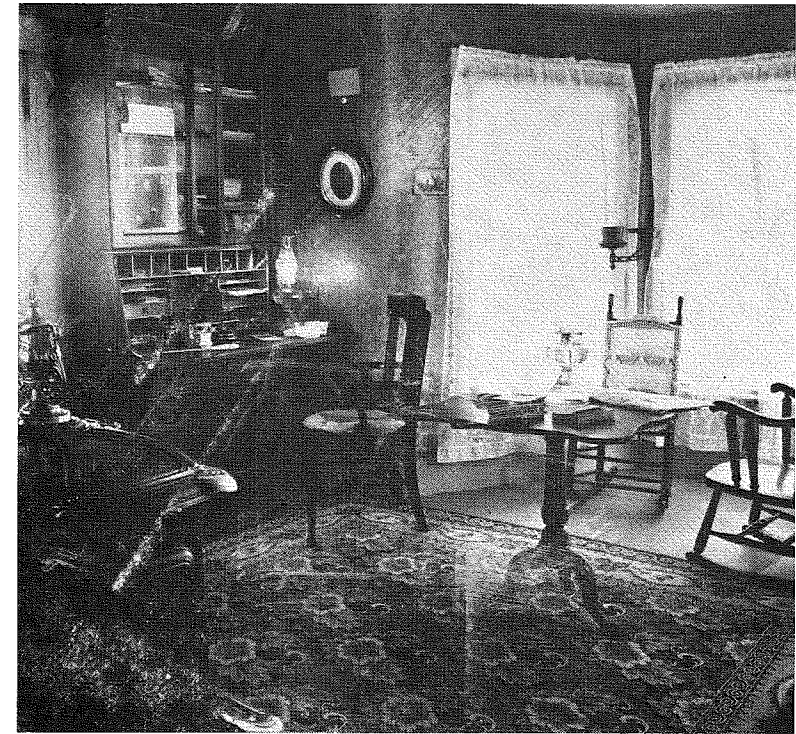
The following statement is the "first act" of the Coolidge administration:

"Reports have reached me, which I fear are correct, that President Harding is gone. The world has lost a great and good man. I mourn his loss. He was my Chief and friend.

"It will be my purpose to carry out the policies which he has begun for the service of the American people and for meeting their responsibilities wherever they may arise.

"For this purpose I shall seek the cooperation of all those who have been associated with the President during his term of office. Those who have given their efforts to assist him I wish to remain in office that they may assist me. I have faith that God will direct the destinies of our nation.

"It is my intention to remain here until I can obtain the correct form for the oath of office, which will be administered to me by my father who is a notary public, if that will meet the necessary requirement. I expect to leave for Washington during the day."



*The Oath of office Room, Homestead,  
President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site, Plymouth, Vermont*

### **Present at Homestead Inaugural**

Coolidge tells us: "Besides my father and myself, there were present my wife, Senator Dale, who happened to be stopping a few miles away, my stenographer, and my chauffeur.

"The picture of this scene has been painted with historical accuracy by an artist named Keller, who went to Plymouth for that purpose. Although the likenesses are not good, everything in relation to the painting is correct."

For the "picture of this scene" see Jane and Will Curtis, Return to These Hills (1985) or Vermont Life (summer, 1998). The original appeared in the Ladies Home Journal, and was given to Mrs. Coolidge. It hangs in the Reception Center at Plymouth Notch. In a letter of August 12, 1938 (Phillips Andover archives) to Claude M. Fuess, her husband's biographer, Mrs. Coolidge writes: "Replying to your inquiry about those who were present when the oath was taken were those Mr. Coolidge named . . . In addition, Mr. Crawford was there." Mrs. Coolidge adds: "It shows two shadowy figures in the doorway leading into the kitchen."

In Arthur Keller's picture we see a single kerosene lamp on the table. We see Coolidge's mother's Bible; the table is covered with orderly stacks of papers. Colonel John is wearing a bow tie; he holds a magnifying glass in his right hand—I assume to read the oath. The president's son John recalls his grandfather had reading glasses, but does not recall seeing him reading with a glass. The fact that Coolidge says the scene is "painted with historical accuracy" carries much weight with me. Like many quiet people he was observant; little escaped him; when it comes to details he's seldom wrong.

#### Grace Goodhue Coolidge

Mrs. Coolidge "sets the stage" for the homestead inaugural. Already in mourning for her father, Andrew Goodhue, who had died in April, "she donned a black and white dress, white shoes and stockings and stood to her husband's right and a little behind him at the oath taking." (Isabel Ross, Grace Coolidge and Her Era [1961].) Perhaps, although one lamp would provide adequate light and a second would contribute to the oppressive heat of the night.

### Coolidge Luck and the Coolidge Lamp

#### Calvin Coolidge

There was much talk of "Coolidge luck" in the 1920s. Good weather, in fact, was called Coolidge weather. The enduring image of the homestead inaugural was a crowning example of Coolidge luck. In Coolidge's words, "Where succession to the highest office in the land is by inheritance or appointment, no doubt there have been kings who have participated in the induction of their sons into their office, but in republics where the succession comes by election I do not know of any other case where a father has administered to his son the qualifying oath of office which made him [Colonel John] the chief magistrate of a nation. It seemed a simple and

natural thing to do at the time, but I can now realize something of the dramatic force of the event."

Remember: if Harding had died one day later we would have found our vice president watching an outdoor production of a Shakespearean play as the guest of Currier, probably in the company of fat cats and plutocrats. There are few votes in that image. It was said at the time that a kerosene lamp was worth as much as a log cabin any day.

Louis Lyons in Newspaper Story: One Hundred Years of the Boston Globe (1971) asserts that his paper in its afternoon edition of August 3, 1923, "was the first published reference to the oil lamp in the oath-taking scene." Lyons says that other Boston and New York papers show the oil lamp featured only in August 4 editions.

#### Colonel John Coolidge

John Coolidge answered the door in his nightshirt. As soon as he understood the nature of the occasion he dressed in his usual black suit, white shirt, and bow tie. There is a photograph of Calvin Coolidge and his father, taken on the morning of August 3. In it Colonel John is wearing a bow tie—he is so depicted in the Keller painting. (I dismiss the suggestion that he was without collar or tie. The first time I met his grandson, in June, 1985, he straightened the collar on my jacket.)

Cyndy Bittinger, executive director of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, called my attention to a letter recently given to the foundation, dated August 5, 1923. Colonel John writes to Flora Smith, his sister-in-law, of recent events: "Calvin and Grace retired around 9:30 Thursday night. I was up until 11. At 12 I heard a rap on the front door. On opening it I found Mr. Perkins the telephone man from Bridgewater with a telegram conveying the sad news." Flora was the sister of Coolidge's stepmother, Carrie Brown. When Colonel John's second wife died it was a double loss for Flora, since she lost not only her sister but her husband, William Smith, who died at nearly the same time.

After the oath was taken, the new president and the new first lady go back to bed. Colonel John stays up through the night.

#### William H. Crawford

Crawford had an appointment to see Coolidge on August 1 or 2 or both. He was on assignment from Collier's. His version of the homestead inaugural, "Two

Quiet Days and a Fateful Night with Calvin Coolidge," is in *Collier's* for August 25, 1923. He relates that he was in Bridgewater and awakened by the vice president's stenographer, Erwin C. Geisser, and McNerney. He rode with them in the Pierce Arrow to Plymouth. One interesting feature of his story is his claim to have been the first to address Coolidge as president. Coolidge tells us it was his father who first pronounced his new title. (Vrest Orton vouches for Joseph E. Fountain's presence in that small room but both are oblivious of Crawford's.)

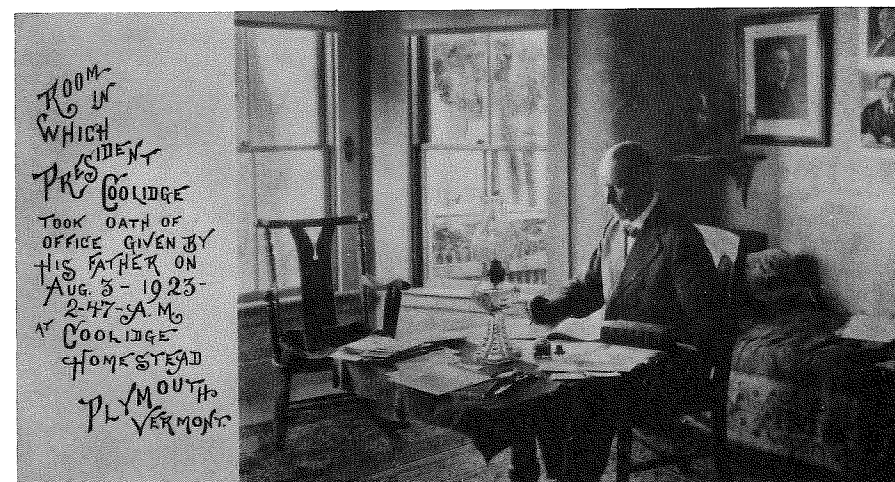
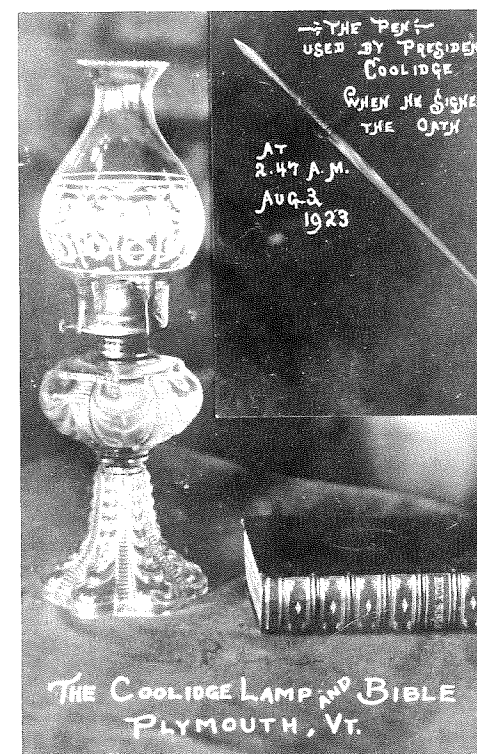
#### Porter H. Dale

Soon-to-be Senator Dale was born in 1867 in Island Pond, Vermont and admitted to the bar in 1896. He was a long-time friend of the Coolidge family and had served in the Vermont Senate with Colonel John Coolidge in 1910. He served in the United States House of Representatives from March 4, 1915 to August 11, 1923. Dale had just become the Republican candidate to the United States Senate for an upcoming special election necessitated by the death of Senator William P. Dillingham. In Vermont, in 1923, this meant he was the state's next Senator. In the Senate, he delivered an eloquent tribute upon the death of the president's father in 1926.

Orton in *Calvin Coolidge's Unique Vermont Inauguration* (1960) says Porter Dale stood to Coolidge's right, in the very spot Ross assigns to Mrs. Coolidge. Orton and Fountain, I think, unfortunately represent Dale as a pompous fool—ceaselessly trying to persuade Coolidge to take the oath: "The country is without a president!" Etc. etc. In fact, Fountain's and Orton's general attitude of superiority and condescension causes me dismay. In Fountain's case, he was drafting on Dale's coat tails; I think he should have been just a little more grateful.

Clearly Dale urged Coolidge to take the oath; what is not clear is whether Coolidge needed urging. Once he had the advice of the attorney general and of Secretary of State Charles E. Hughes, I think, it was inevitable that he would take the oath at once. There were precedents which would have been in his mind: the most recent—Theodore Roosevelt.

Given Coolidge's political instincts, I cannot help but think that in recent days he had given some thought to what would be required if the President should pass on to his reward. He would have been derelict in his duty if he did not think about it. A vice president must be ready without appearing to be ready. It's a difficult role and Coolidge played it brilliantly. On August 3, he was planning to go to Swampscott. If President Harding's prognosis remained doubtful—instead of encouraging—I think Coolidge would have chosen to stay in Plymouth. There was no better place for him to be.



Joseph E. Fountain, Reporter

The twenty-two-year-old editor of the Springfield Reporter also represented the Associated Press. Joe Fountain would later be mayor of St. Albans, Vermont. He is the author of Homestead Inaugural published in 1950 and now available in a seventy-fifth inaugural anniversary edition. For some reason there have always been questions and doubts surrounding Fountain's participation. His indignation at being doubted has been vociferous. In any case, it seems to me that Fountain overflows, inflating his small role in events of the evening. Orton explains that Coolidge mistook Fountain for McInerney. Orton tells us, "It was Fountain who stood next to Dale and it was the chauffeur who stood in the shadows of the room."

Was Mr. Fountain in the room? I don't know. But if "Truth is that which is strongly asserted and stoutly maintained," he was there. John Coolidge has told me that Orton did not originally believe Fountain was "in the room" but that Fountain convinced Orton he was. There is no doubt that he was in Plymouth and is one of several reliable witnesses as to what happened in the room. (Let's face it: we all want to be in the room.)

In Homestead Inaugural, Fountain tells us that "along with the lamp and the Bible, on the table in the sitting room there was a copy of the revised statutes of Vermont plus a farm tool catalog." By the time he wrote his account he had told the story many times. In 1923 he was a young reporter; he had scooped the nation. I think his story improved with the telling. For instance, do we believe this dialog:

"Father, Mr. Dale thinks I should immediately take the oath of office. You are you still a notary, aren't you?"

"Yes, Cal, I am."

Erwin C. Geisser, Stenographer

Mr. Geisser — while not "secretary" and not "Edwin" nor "Irwin" and not "Geiser" was one of the first to arrive in Plymouth, he had been staying in Bridgewater at Furhman's boarding house with Joe McInerney and William Crawford. The oath was probably typed by him, in triplicate. (Porter Dale's recollection was that Colonel John wrote out the oath in pencil.)

Leonard Lane

Lane was from Chester, Vermont. He was president of the New England division of the Railway Mail Association and viewed himself as the only government official on the scene. He sat through the night guarding the new president armed with a tiny pistol, or a large one—depending on who tells the story. He arrived in Plymouth with Dale, Fountain, and Thompson.

Joseph McInerney, Chauffeur

McInerney set down a recollection of this night, As I Remember, and of his later service in Washington. Perhaps he originated Orton's and Fountain's misspellings of Geisser's name. McInerney said he was in the room for the oath taking; Calvin Coolidge and Mrs. Coolidge say he was there, too. He was there.

Herbert P. Thompson

Thompson was the American Legion commander from Springfield, Vermont. He rode from Springfield to Ludlow to Plymouth in Captain Dan Barney's large taxi with Fountain, Lane, and Dale.

Aurora Pierce, Housekeeper

Asleep upstairs? I wonder if she was asleep. If Miss Pierce was awake, what was going on downstairs was "none of her business." I don't think she would come down unless called. Duff Gilfond, author of The Rise of Saint Calvin (1932), thinks so too.

Bessie Pratt, Hired Girl

Asleep upstairs? Is she the woman in the kitchen? Orton sees her there. He says she got up, built a fire in the kitchen stove, heated water for Colonel John to shave.

## Who Was in the Room?

Score for persons present:

Calvin Coolidge .....	6
Joe Fountain .....	6
Grace Coolidge .....	7
Duff Gilfond .....	7
William Allen White .....	8
M. E. Hennessy .....	8
Vrest Orton .....	8
Joseph McInerney .....	8
Ishbel Ross .....	8
Claude M. Fuess .....	9
Donald R. McCoy .....	9

### The Oath

Article H, Section I, paragraph 8, U.S. Constitution, "Before he enter on the execution of his office, he shall take the following oath or affirmation:

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Calvin Coolidge adds:

"So help me God."

The Constitution of the United States is in *The Vermont Legislative Directory: 1876-1877*. This edition, along with other legislative directories, is on the shelf above Colonel John's desk today. The always helpful William Jenney, state historic site administrator in Plymouth, believes these directories were there in 1923. Would this be the book of revised Vermont statutes that Fountain saw? I think so.

Some writers give us an account of a search for a copy of the oath. ("Now, where can it be?") I believe both Coolidge and his father would have known the exact location of a copy of the Constitution. Coolidge elsewhere says, "I was ready,

from the time the Justices named me clerk of Courts to the time my party nominated me for President." As vice president he would have been ready. I can see why he would not want to be the first to find a copy of the Constitution. But I think he could have laid his hand on that very copy of the Constitution he first studied at Black River Academy. "The more I have studied it the more I have come to admire it." The site administrator in Plymouth agrees—the Coolidges saved everything.

The oath was typed by Geisser in triplicate on strips of paper. Was it typed three times on one sheet and then cut into strips, or typed once with two carbons? There is agreement that it was on strips of paper.

These pieces of paper, signed by all present and imprinted with Colonel John's notary stamp, have all disappeared; they disappeared that night. Hmmmm . . . Where are they?

Colonel John reads the oath, his son repeats it. Calvin Coolidge perhaps sits in the armchair to sign each copy of the oath. Joe Fountain has him bending over the table to sign. According to Orton all present sign: Calvin Coolidge, Grace Coolidge, Colonel John Coolidge, Porter H. Dale, L. L. Lane, Joseph E. Fountain, Erwin C. Geisser, and Joseph H. McInerney. Mrs. Coolidge, then Fuess and McCoy, add one more person to the throng—William H. Crawford.

At some point Colonel John observes that the pen they are using has been in the family for fifty years. Colonel John affixes his notary seal to each copy. Calvin Coolidge nods; he and Mrs. Coolidge leave the room without speaking.

Orton says Coolidge shook hands with his father. Hennessy says Coolidge embraced his wife. (Michael E. Hennessy, *Calvin Coolidge* [1924].) That seems likely. Fountain says he didn't embrace his wife. That seems likely, too.

Some suggest that congratulations are given. That seems unlikely; it was a time of grief, not of rejoicing.

Fountain agrees with Coolidge's arithmetic, saying, "There were but six persons within the room proper, including the President, when the oath was administered." After the oath, Calvin and Colonel John sign, then Mrs. Coolidge, then Dale, Geisser, then Fountain,—then Fountain brings Lane inside for a seventh signature. Fountain does not allow the chauffeur to sign.

Nearly thirty years after the event Joe Fountain puts Lane, Thompson, and McInerney outside on the porch looking in through the screen door when the oath was taken. He asserts that the oath was signed with Geisser's fountain pen. Colonel John, of course, is on record that it was the old family pen. It occurs to me that with

six, seven, eight, or nine persons signing three documents (if everyone signed) you would want other pens. It would have been natural for Geisser to offer his pen for use. So, perhaps Fountain and others did use Geisser's pen. Fountain remained standing when he signed, and in recalling the event decided that Coolidge had done the same thing. Maybe.

Roland Sawyer in *Cal Coolidge: President* (1924) is of the opinion that the oath was telephoned from Washington to Plymouth. Maybe.

### Where Are Those Three Copies of the Oath?

It takes me a little over half a minute to sign my name on three strips of paper and that's with a ballpoint pen; I don't have to dip it in an inkwell. I don't need to blot my signature. I don't have to be careful. This is an important record; you want to do it right; Colonel John Coolidge, notary public, is watching you. How long does it take how many people to sign an oath?

### Other Players Offstage and in the Wings

#### Captain Dan Barney, Taxi Driver

Barney was the taxi driver in Springfield. He drove Dale, Fountain, and Thompson from Springfield to Ludlow to Plymouth. Orton places Barney on the piazza with Thompson at the time the oath was taken. He says Thompson didn't think he was dressed well enough to go in.

#### Florence V. Cilley, Dealer in General Merchandise

Miss Cilley was asleep in the house attached to the store she now owned where Coolidge had been born fifty-one years ago on the Fourth of July, 1872. The ringing telephone in the store did not disturb her. John Coolidge, the president's son, believes the phone was in the rear of the store to one side of the door leading into the house. (The number was Peoples Phone 24-3.) The instrument hung on the wall and was crank-operated, local calls—to the people with whom you shared a line—you cranked yourself. Two longs and a short, or one short and a long, etc. When you heard your ring you answered. In Vermont no one ever listened in on calls to others. Sure.

#### Edward Tracy Clark, the Vice President's Secretary

Coolidge spoke to Secretary Clark on the phone in the early hours of August 3. Clark had remained in Washington attending to the affairs of the vice president's office but was waiting for Coolidge on the platform at Grand Central Station, New York, that afternoon. Ted Clark was Amherst College class of 1900 and had been secretary to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. He was recommended to Coolidge by Stearns. I believe they were both in New York to attend a reunion of Amherst alumni.

#### Percival W. Clement, Coolidge Friend

Former governor of Vermont, from Rutland, a director and former president of the Rutland Railroad, owner of the *Rutland Herald*, Clement had provided a private railroad car to transport President Theodore Roosevelt to Washington when he became president upon the death of William McKinley in 1901. Coolidge said he would ride the day coach to New York City, but if they wanted to provide the parlor car and attach it to the local train, he would ride in it.

Orton says Geisser made some comment about being "surprised" that Vermont had Pullman private cars! He also informed his secretary that the former president of the Pullman Company lived in Manchester. His name was Robert Todd Lincoln! His father was Abraham Lincoln!

(I once asked John Coolidge, "Who was your father's favorite president?" His response was swift: "Abraham Lincoln." I was interested to learn that John does not believe his father ever met the son of his favorite president.)

#### Calvin Coolidge, Jr.

When told the next day that his father was now president, young Cal said, "Where would you like me to put this tobacco?" Later, when one of his fellow workers said, "If my father was president I would not be working in a tobacco field," Calvin replied, "If my father were your father, you would."

#### John Coolidge

The soldier-in-training at Camp Devens was asked on August 3 by his captain if he had seen the morning papers? He had not. It was at breakfast in the mess hall that John learned of the death of President Harding and that his father was now president of the United States. He went on with his month of training.

## Harry M. Daugherty, Attorney General

The attorney general was with President Harding in San Francisco. When told by Dr. Boone that Harding was dead, "Before talking to Mrs. Harding I went to the telegraph office in the hotel and wired Vice President Coolidge at Northampton, Massachusetts . . . and suggested that he immediately take the oath of office . . . " From Daugherty, The Inside Story of the Harding Tragedy (1932).

Perhaps the attorney general might not know the exact whereabouts of the vice president and in any case the telegraph operator at Northampton would have instantly redirected the wire to its proper destination.

Probably Daugherty did think Coolidge was in Northampton; in any case Coolidge said he had a message from the attorney general. Daugherty had not been traveling with the president's party to Alaska but came west to San Francisco when he learned of Harding's illness.

## Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce

Hoover was in San Francisco, too. "Secretary Hoover was the first person to arrive at the presidential suite, and when he came out he appeared to be stunned by grief, tears running down his cheeks, unable to speak." From Robert H. Ferrell, The Strange Deaths of President Harding (1996).

## Charles Evans Hughes, Secretary of State

Secretary Hughes was on the phone several times that night with Coolidge. He had been spending the summer at the remote Macsfolly farm near Kensington, Maryland. He was picked up and driven to the State Department by Allen W. Dulles. Hughes told Coolidge what he already knew, that upon the death of Harding he was president but should nonetheless take the oath at once. Merlo J. Pusey, Charles Evans Hughes (1951).

## Earle Kinsley, Republican National Committeeman

Kinsley lived in Rutland. He was in Plymouth on the afternoon of August 2 and said he was then shown a telegraph from San Francisco indicating Harding's condition was "serious but there was no imminent danger."

On August 3 he met Coolidge in Rutland at the station and accompanied him on the train to New York. He tells the following wonderful Coolidge story of that journey in Recollections of Vermonters in State and National Affairs (1946). "As we were leaving Arlington station I told the President the scenery appearing on the Vermont coat of arms was from that point of view. As the train proceeded he spied a large pine tree, and remarked, "It must have been, because there's the tree." Shortly afterward he saw a cow, and continued, "I'm certain of it now, for there is the cow."

## Nellie Perkins

Nellie Perkins took the call in Bridgewater on August 2, around 11:30 p.m.—she was the first of the Vermonters to learn that President Harding had died. Her husband owned the telephone company. Today the old telephone switchboard is in the Bridgewater Mill Mall on display next to the elevator. Nothing identifies it; I think few people know what it is.

## Winfred A. Perkins

Perkins is the first to arrive in Plymouth and wake Colonel John Coolidge. Perkins is sometimes spoken of as the telegraph operator in Bridgewater. I don't believe there was a telegraph in Bridgewater, just the switchboard.

When he received the message from his wife he "put on his clothes, grabbed the message of Harding's death, and sought out Coolidge's staff, which was staying in the small town. Erwin C. Geisser, Joseph N. McNerney, accompanied by newspaperman William H. Crawford, raced over the bumpy country roads in Coolidge's official car." Donald R. McCoy, The Quiet President (1967).

Orton also says that Mrs. Perkins got the message at 11:30 from White River Junction. She wakes up her husband, he drives his own car to Plymouth, a 1918 Cole-8, beating Geisser, McNerney and Crawford in the vice president's Pierce Arrow by three minutes with the news. Orton says she gave him a lengthy interview and a written account in 1959. I believe the Orton family still has these accounts.

## Henry Cabot Lodge, Senior Senator from Massachusetts

In a biography of Henry Cabot Lodge—The Gentleman from Massachusetts by Karl Schriftgiesser (1944)—we learn: "On the night of August 1 [sic] Warren

Gamaliel Harding died. A newspaperman telephoned the Lodge home at Nahant. Lodge, sleepy-headed, came reluctantly to the telephone. 'Sir,' said the reporter, 'I am sorry to disturb you, but word has just come through that President Harding has died.' He was about to ask if the senior senator from Massachusetts cared to make a statement, when the harsh voice cut through: 'My God! That means Coolidge is President!' "

#### Frank Waterman Stearns, Coolidge Friend

Stearns, like Coolidge a graduate of Amherst, was owner of the R. H. Stearns drygoods store in Boston. Behind his back he was sometimes called "Lord Lingerie." Stearns shared Coolidge's love of cigars and they each enjoyed the other's silent company. He had a mannered and distinct pattern of speech that people loved to mimic. Stearns had been anticipating the arrival of Vice President and Mrs. Coolidge on August 6 in Swampscott. On August 3 he was on the platform at Grand Central in New York City along with Presidential Secretary Ted Clark when the Coolidge train pulled in. They rode down to Washington. Coolidge says of Stearns, "It is doubtful if any other public man ever had so valuable and unselfish a friend."

We cannot let the dawn break on this long night without taking a look at the Moxie story or "incident."

Here it is: Calvin Coolidge, in company with Porter Dale, Joe Fountain, maybe Erwin Geisser, and sometimes Joe McNerney goes over to the Cilley store to use the Notch's only telephone. While waiting for a connection Coolidge says, "Want a drink?" They all say yes. Moxie is ordered and drunk in silence. After a time Coolidge places a nickel on the counter, saying "That's for mine." The point? Coolidge is cheap? He pays his own bills and expects you to do the same? This is a classic Coolidge formula joke. "Silent Cal" sets them up with an expectation of being treated and then makes them pay their own way. Did it happen? I don't know.

Duff Gilfond told it nine years after the supposed fact in The Rise of Saint Calvin. I believe she interviewed Joe Fountain, he told it to her, and he repeats it in 1950 with himself in the central role of observer. Orton repeats it in 1960 but righteously inserts that Coolidge would not have made the other imbibers pay for their own Moxies. Vermonters aren't like that! Gilfond and Fountain have them drinking glasses of Moxie, indicating to me a hazy "Our Town" drugstore image of the Cilley general store, which probably originated when she interviewed Fountain.

Time and distance stretch in Fountain's memory. He informs us, for instance, that the Cilley store is less than two hundred yards from the homestead. So in his mind you cannot quite fit two football fields between the homestead and the Cilley store. (The distance is more like the width of a tennis court.) Orton has them paying a nickel a bottle, which sounds right to me.

Gilfond was an H. L. Mencken protégé; Fuess dismisses The Rise of Saint Calvin, saying: "The book is in the 'smart aleck' manner, in the debunking mood, and belongs for the most part under the category of malevolent fiction." He is right, of course. Gilfond gets a lot wrong but gets many things right, too. Fuess's index reveals he believed Gilfond to be a man which, of course, she is not. Robert Sobel, Coolidge: An American Enigma (1998), is similarly mistaken. I've met her; Gilfond's interview in John Karol's "Things of the Spirit" is one of the "star turns" in this eagerly awaited documentary film. In 1931 she interviewed many people, including Coolidge.

On Memorial Day weekend, 1998, the 96-year-old Gilfond told her friend, Jim McGrath, "I did not deserve the graciousness he extended to me. The interview came off so clean! He responded with great generosity and warmth. I was intending to lampoon him and he treated me so much better than I deserved. I was unkind to him and he was very kind to me."

Gilfond may have been unkind but she gave a more careful reading to Coolidge's Autobiography than did Fuess who dismisses it as "unrevealing." But near the end of his otherwise excellent Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont (1940), Fuess quotes Grace Coolidge on Gilfond's book: "You know there is an element of truth in that book." Fuess tells us that in the weeks before her husband died Mrs. Coolidge believed that "Something was on his mind which was bothering him terribly and she was trying to learn what it was." She wondered if he had read the Gilfond book?

On this seventy-fifth anniversary of Coolidge's inauguration there are new Coolidge books to read. The conference at the John F. Kennedy Library, "Calvin Coolidge: Examining the Evidence," will it bring a more careful discipline to the study of the thirtieth president? Maybe.

I've not yet given Sobel's Coolidge the reading it deserves. I can see he has examined the most recent scholarship on his subject. But Sobel is the declared winner in the sweepstakes for the number of persons present at the homestead inaugural. He does what no one else has done; he rounds up nearly all of the usual

suspects and then adds the two Coolidge boys, while simultaneously neglecting to include Joe Fountain! I wish I did not take a perverse pleasure in this: late score for number of persons present in that small, hot, fourteen-by-seventeen-foot room with the eight-foot ceiling, the three bay windows, stove, table, desk, daybed, and chairs:

Robert Sobel ..... 10!

Coolidge recalled the methods of Charles E. Garman, his teacher at Amherst College: "Much stress was placed on a thorough mastery and careful analysis of all arguments presented by the writers on any subject under consideration. Then when it was certain that they were fully understood they were criticized, so that what was unsound was rejected and what was true accepted. We were thoroughly drilled in the necessity of distinguishing between the accidental and the essential . . . Our investigation revealed that man is endowed with reason, that the human mind has the power to weigh evidence, to distinguish right and wrong and to know the truth."

Perhaps to understand the riddle of Coolidge we must learn to use the tools he was taught to use.

From Washington, President Coolidge sent regrets:

August 7, 1923

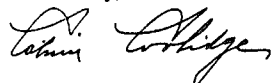
My dear Mrs. Currier:

We were very disappointed at not coming to your house and seeing the presentation of the play.

Tell Mr. Currier that Pres. Smith spoke most complimentary of him.

With every good wish, I am,

Cordially,



Calvin Coolidge

# Other Sources\*

Horace Green, A Life of Calvin Coolidge (1924)

J. R. Greene, Calvin Coolidge: A Biography in Picture Postcards (1987)

Louis M. Lyons, "Calvin Coolidge Called Me 'Mr. Lyons,'" Yankee Magazine (July, 1972)

Cameron Rogers, The Legend of Calvin Coolidge (1928)

Roland D. Sawyer, Cal Coolidge: President (1924)

William Allen White, Calvin Coolidge: The Man Who Is President (1925)

William Allen White, A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge (1938)

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\* Calvin Coolidge was once told much more than he wished to know about a prize-winning bull. When its owner at last finished, Coolidge said, "Some bull."

## *The Second Oath*

by

Lawrence E. Wikander

"TELLS OF COOLIDGE AND SECOND OATH" ran the headline of a column on the second page of the February 3, 1932 edition of The New York Times. The subheadings read, "Ex-Justice Hoehling Confirms Story He Swore in President in Capital Hotel [followed by] Understood It Was a Precautionary Measure as Some Doubted Validity of Act by Father."

"The story of a second oath secretly administered to President Coolidge, two weeks after his father swore him in as successor to President Harding, was related today by Former Justice A. A. Hoehling of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. The second oath, Justice Hoehling said, was administered in a room in the New Willard Hotel, and, according to the ex-Justice, 'I think a Gideon Bible was used.'

"For more than ten years the story of such an oath taking has been unrevealed, Justice Hoehling stated. It was Harry M. Daugherty, former Attorney-General, who had pledged him to secrecy, and he never disclosed the incident, the judge added. Mr. Daugherty recently alluded to the matter in a biography of President Harding. [Harry M. Daugherty with Thomas Dixon, The Inside Story of the Harding Tragedy (N. Y.: Churchill Company, 1932)]

"Justice Hoehling said that while he did not know the reason for the second oath he believed it was a precautionary measure, inasmuch as there was a question in some minds of the validity of the oath which Colonel John Coolidge administered to the new President in the Coolidge Homestead in Plymouth Notch, Vt., early in the morning of August 3, the day following President Harding's death in San Francisco. Colonel Coolidge, a justice of the peace, swore in his son on the family Bible and by the light of a flickering kerosene lamp.

"Later it was understood that Mr. Coolidge had sought advice here and had been told that the oath administered by the father was perfectly legal. But, it is now stated, there was also some criticism that the oath at Plymouth Notch had been administered by a State officer, empowered only to swear in other State officers.

"After Mr. Coolidge arrived in Washington, Justice Hoehling said tonight, Mr. Daugherty told the justice that the President desired to take a second oath. Justice Hoehling agreed to hold himself in readiness and on the afternoon of August 17 he received a call to go to the hotel where Mr. Coolidge was living.

" 'It was raining heavily, and it was 2:45 o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, the 17th,' Justice Hoehling stated.

"With little ceremony, he said, the justice was admitted past a group of Secret Service men into Mr. Coolidge's room and there the oath was administered. Mr. Coolidge and Justice Hoehling were alone and the oath-taking was over in a few minutes. The justice then departed and, he said tonight, had never told the story before.

" 'I just kept my mouth shut about it,' he explained.

"Justice Hoehling said that once when touring Vermont he visited Colonel John Coolidge, who was then ill and who proudly showed him the room where the early morning ceremony [sic] had occurred. The justice did not reveal to the father that another oath had been given.

"Members of Mr. Coolidge's entourage now living here were surprised to hear the story that a second oath had been taken. Some ascribed the silence surrounding the matter to sentiment on the part of Mr. Coolidge, who possibly preferred the belief to exist that his father had given him the only necessary oath."

Here follows the account from Daugherty's book, pages 278-280, which Judge Hoehling felt released him from his pledge of silence.

"When I sent to Mr. Coolidge the wire informing him of Harding's death and suggesting that he immediately take the oath as President, he was sworn in by his fine old father, Colonel John Coolidge, a magistrate and notary public.

"Incidentally when I read this report in the press I had grave doubts of the legality of this oath.

"Shortly afterwards, the opposition press raised the question.

"Mr. Coolidge's father was not a little disturbed by the discussion and issued a statement in which he said:

'I am quite sure it was binding and proper. I would never have attempted such a thing if assurances had not been given by Washington officials that it was perfectly legal and all right for me to do it.

'I guess it's all right and holds good,' he continued, 'Though I expect it may be administered again in a more formal manner at Washington. At least I hope so.'

'Mr. Coolidge was very fond of his father and not a little proud of the unique distinction fate had conferred on him, the opportunity to make his own son a President . . .

'When I returned to Washington from the Marion funeral ceremonies [of President Harding in Ohio] I asked my Solicitor-General, James M. Beck, to examine the law and give me his opinion in a memorandum. He did and declared that he did not believe the oath administered was valid.

'President Coolidge had not yet taken possession of the White House, out of deference to Mrs. Harding who was packing her things preparatory to moving.

'I called on the President and told him that in my opinion, as well as the opinion of the Solicitor-General, the oath administered by his father was not a valid one for a President.

'He was very much surprised.

'I read to him Beck's memorandum and advised that such a situation might cause trouble if some lawyer should raise this question as to one of his official acts.

'Under the law only judges of a certain rank could administer this oath.

'The new President moved into the White House and I sent for Judge A. A. Hoehling, Justice of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. He was in Atlantic City on his vacation.

'He came the next day, met the President in the White House at four o'clock in the afternoon and administered the required oath.

'I asked Judge Hoehling to say nothing about the matter and no publication of the fact was ever made.'

Daugherty's recollection must be corrected on a couple of points. A letter from Louise C. (Mrs. A. A.) Hoehling of March 12, 1961 declared, 'Judge Hoehling was not in Atlantic City at the time. I recall so well his coming from Court and telling me he was to give the oath to Mr. Coolidge at the Willard Hotel.'

Daugherty is remembered as a shrewd politician who manipulated Warren Harding's career rather than as any constitutional lawyer, but James M. Beck, the Solicitor-General, in the popular phrase "wrote the book" on the subject. His work,

The Constitution of the United States: Yesterday, Today—and Tomorrow?, was first printed in 1922.

The seventh printing (N.Y.: George H. Doran Co., 1925) carries a Foreword by President Calvin Coolidge. That edition was distributed to thousands of schools and libraries through the generosity of Eldridge W. Johnson, founder of the Victor Talking Machine Company.

Checks at the National Archives and Records Administration and the U.S. District Court (successor to the Supreme Court) of the District of Columbia do not reveal documentary evidence. Historical writer A. A. Hoehling III regrets his father's discarding of his papers shortly before his death.

We must regard the Second Oath as a safeguard, like a lifeboat or a fire extinguisher, the need for which never arose.

## New Books

Since publication of Donald R. McCoy's Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President (New York: Macmillan, 1967) — reprinted with a new preface in 1988 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas) — there have been few books about the nation's thirtieth president. A notable exception was Hendrik Booraem V's he Provincial: Calvin Coolidge and His World, 1885-1895 (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1994). Lawrence E. Wikander and Robert H. Ferrell edited Grace Coolidge An Autobiography (Worland, Wyo.: High Plains, 1992). otherwise books have touched Coolidge, having concern for society in the 1920s or such themes as political parties or the economy.

Two important collections of historical materials meanwhile have become available. Lawrence Wikander's A Guide to the Personal Files of President Calvin Coolidge (Northampton, Mass.: Forbes Library, 1986) has made possible the scholarly use, in libraries across the nation, of the president's private correspondence, sequestered at the end of Coolidge's administration and sent to the homestead in Plymouth Notch, where for many years the letters were stored in the attic and some of them nibbled by mice. John Coolidge gave them to Forbes Library in 1883-84. The other notable new Coolidge collection is the papers of the late Vice Admiral Joel T. Boone, which became available at the Library of Congress in Washington in 1994, the gift of Dr. Boone's daughter Suzanne and son-in-law Milton F. Heller, Jr.

But there clearly is continuing interest in President Coolidge, as testified by two books published this year. One is by Ferrell, The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), a volume in the American Presidency Series, which now surveys the presidencies of thirty-two holders of the office. It opens with a chapter on Coolidge's life until the presidency, and turns to the economy, society, and foreign relations. The other book is by the economic historian Robert Sobel. Entitled Coolidge: An American Enigma (Washington: Regnery), it analyzes his outlook on the America of the 1920s — problems of the time, his point of view, his personality.

## Book Reviews

Sean Dennis Cashman

*America in the Twenties and Thirties: The Olympian Age of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*

(New York: New York University Press, 1989)

Michael E. Parrish

*Anxious Decades. America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941*

(New York: Norton, 1992)

Beginning with Frederick Lewis Allen's 1931 book, Only Yesterday, the 1920's have been a popular topic for both academic and nonacademic historians. This interest has yet to abate, but it now seems to be tied in with the following decade, as evidenced by Page Smith's book on the era (reviewed in #10 of The Real Calvin Coolidge) and these two more recent volumes.

Cashman and Parrish are academics, and both make good use of illustrations to enhance their works, but similarities end there. Cashman's emphasis is on social history; he skips around in chronology to accommodate his chapter themes. He used fewer materials than Parrish, particularly original sources. Parrish's book is more concerned with political events, and follows a fairly chronological course.

Like Smith, Cashman gives the twenties short shrift, covering it in one fifth of his book. Taking off from John Hicks' 1960 book title, he calls his brief chapter on Harding-Coolidge Era "The Incomplete Politics of the Republican Ascendancy." The only photograph of Coolidge shows him and his cabinet beneath a memorial photograph of President Warren G. Harding. This scene is described as "mawkish", and Cashman sets the tone for his views of Coolidge by snidely remarking that "it is difficult to tell who are the living and who are the dead among such glum waxworks."

This author says surprisingly little about Coolidge, except to contrast him with Harding. He describes Coolidge as "shriveled and insignificant...aloof and austere," and refers to his "imperturbable serenity." Cashman gives the reader an enigmatic election-year conversation of Coolidge's and three examples of Coolidge's "mordant wit." Coolidge gets less coverage than Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover or FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Parrish takes the decade of the 1920's much more seriously than Cashman, using almost half of his book to describe it. He tells us much more about Coolidge

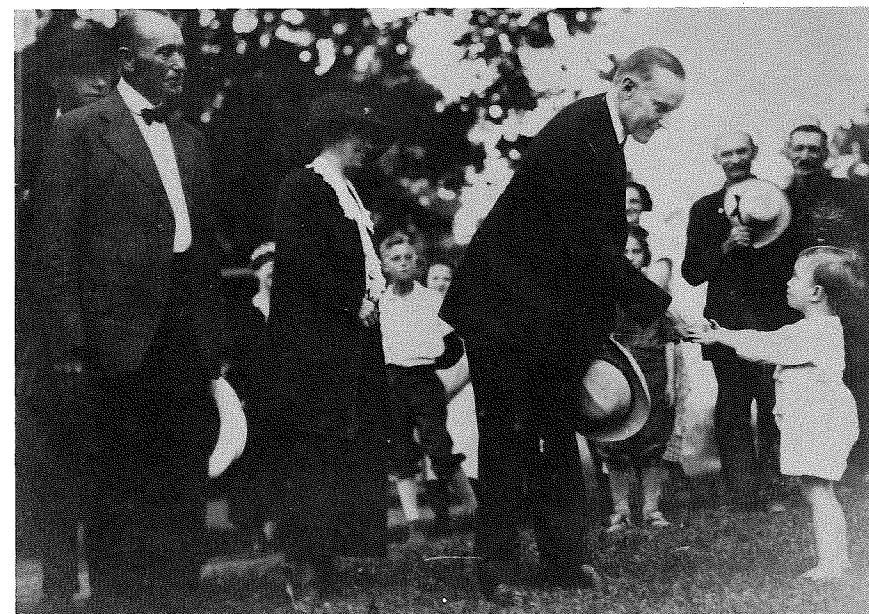
the politician and the man in a chapter entitled "A Puritan in Babylon" (from William Allen White's book by the same title). He compares Coolidge with President Ronald Reagan ("both...were ideologues") describing Coolidge as the "more sophisticated in matters of politics and government." He astutely characterizes Coolidge as "an ideal leader for Americans who wished to explore materialism and self-indulgence, but who also feared the loss of traditional values."

Parrish cites examples of "frugality, along with "the dry wit, his penchant for practical jokes, boorishness, and his frequent cruelties" to show that these traits were not "exaggerated." He believes that Coolidge's reputation for taciturnity was exaggerated, citing the press conference transcripts and speeches.

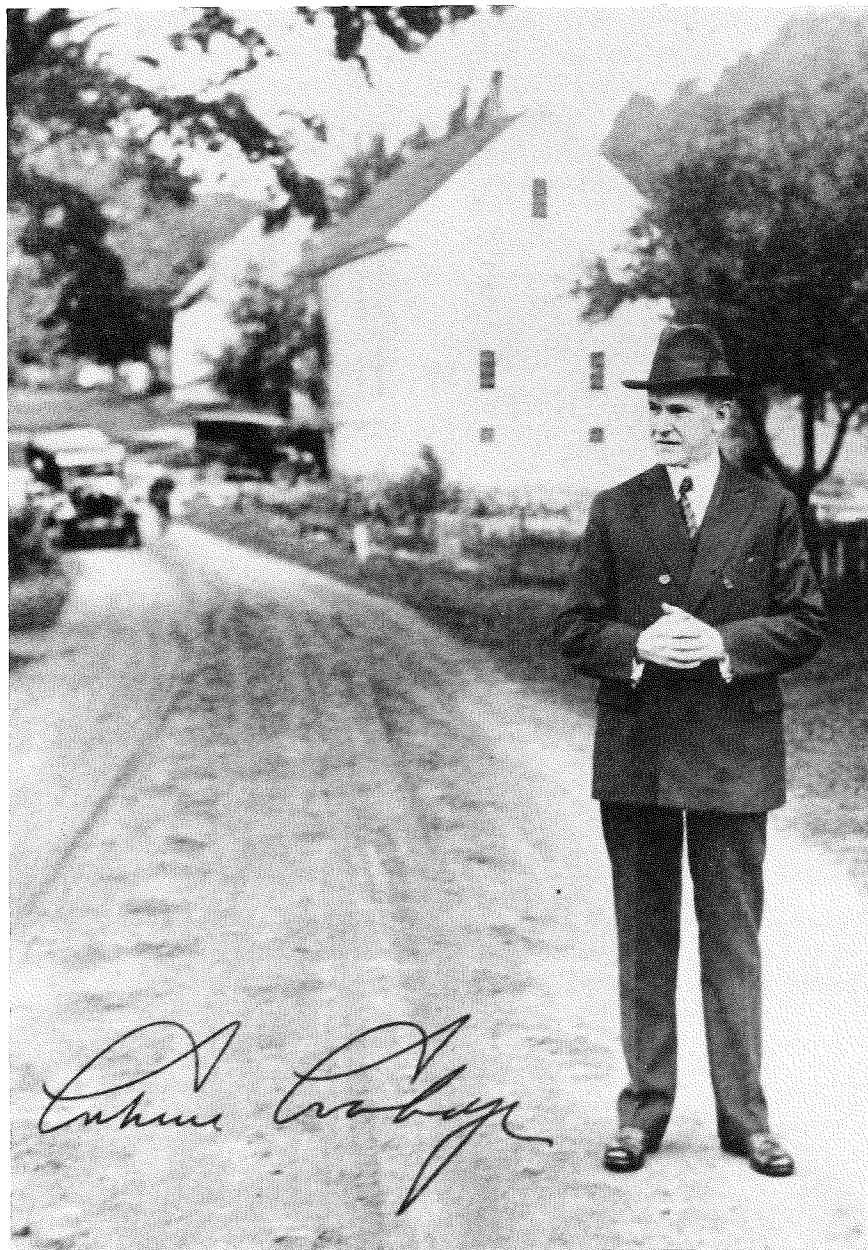
In summary, Parrish feels that Coolidge pursued his "rigid devotion to an unfettered capitalist economy" with "ruthless consistency." Coolidge's term was the "nadir" of regulation of business by government. He ignores Coolidge's lack of success with Congress, but points out the benefits to business conferred by such policies as fiscal economy, the Mellon tax plans, and appointments to regulatory agencies.

Although neither author is sympathetic to Coolidge, Parrish uses varied sources to present a portrait of Calvin Coolidge as a politician in his time. This makes Parrish's book by far the better of the two.

Review by J.R. Greene, Coolidge Foundation member since 1985. An ardent collector of Coolidge memorabilia, he is the author of Calvin Coolidge: A Biography in Picture Postcards and Calvin Coolidge's Plymouth, Vermont.



*Newly sworn in President Coolidge greets Plymouth neighbors, August 3, 1923. L to R: Chauffer Joseph McNerney, Col. John Coolidge, Grace and Calvin Coolidge greet James Willcox.*



*President Calvin Coolidge out walking in front of the homestead with the cheese factory behind him, August 19, 1924*