

A WEEKEND TO REMEMBER: THE INAUGURATION OF FDR

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Our Connecticut autobiographer.

The lowest point in the depression was reached in the latter part of 1932 and this was the year of the presidential campaign. On the campus there were active political groups. The principal one was the Republican Club. One of the founders of the Republican Club was "Soapy" Williams, later to become an ardent Democrat and Governor of Michigan. Prominent among the Democratic group was Edward Pritchard, '35, a brilliant and somewhat obsessed young politician from

Kentucky who later had a fine record at Harvard Law School, only to have his career smashed at a young age by a local political scandal. Being quite interested in political activities, I attended a number of meetings of both groups and recall, as a young man of 18, meeting the widow of President Benjamin Harrison (1892-1896) at a Republican meeting and the widow of President Grover Cleveland (1888-1892; 1896-1900) at a Democratic meeting.

The college Democratic group worked with the local committee and this gave us the opportunity of public speaking on street corners. On occasion we went to Trenton and addressed various groups on the merits of Franklin Roosevelt and the iniquities of Herbert Hoover and his colleagues. In March of 1933 the Mercer County committee ran a special train to Roosevelt's inauguration and we were offered tickets. A friend of mine, Bill Robbins '34, and I were happy to go to Washington at the special price of \$3.50 round trip. Before we left on the midnight train, where we travelled in a baggage car, we had the wit and wisdom to bring with us our formal dinner clothes and the appropriate garb for use in the event that we might somehow rise above our humble political associates and be invited to high places.

After arriving in Washington we did indeed meet five young ladies who had been invited to Washington by Eleanor Roosevelt as they had been her pupils at the Todhunter School. The two of us were in the enviable position of being sought as escorts. Within a few hours we were at the Hotel Washington where we watched the entire inaugural parade from the balcony in the company of these charming young ladies. They, and one mother, Mrs. Currie, who acted as chaperone (such being customary in those days), had tickets to the White House reception after the parade and we were invited to come along with the thought that whether there were seven or nine in the group would make very little difference. Thus, some ten hours after having arrived in Washington in a baggage car, we were at the inaugural reception in the White House being offered hot dogs by the First Lady.

Despite the attempt on Roosevelt's life in Miami in the prior November, security was still comparatively relaxed and I was able to wander around the White House without being bothered in the least. At one point I entered the Red Room and I saw, gathered about the fireplace, some thirty or more handicapped people in their wheel chairs and I soon realized that these were patients from Warm Springs, Georgia. Suddenly the side doors were closed, a door in the front was opened and in came the President, walking with his canes, a sight rarely seen. The President greeted each patient by name and told them how delighted he was to have them in Washington. An extraordinary talk marked by simplicity and matter of factness rarely associated with FDR followed in which he stated that the day had been a long one and that there was much work to do because of the closing of the banks. In fact, he said, he was so busy that he would not be able to greet anyone else at the reception but he could not fail to greet his own dear friends from Warm Springs. He then told us that Justice Cardozo had just sworn in the Cabinet which was meeting at this very moment. He wanted everybody to know that everything would be all right and that the country was going to be back in good shape very soon. FDR's chat that afternoon was one of the most moving experiences I have ever had.

That evening Bill and I attended the Inaugural Ball. Fortunately we both had with us our tails and white ties and equally fortunate for us, the ladies needed escorts to go to the Ball. It was arranged that we would all have dinner and proceed to the Ball. There were only two tickets so that two girls were chosen and we were to try to get two additional tickets. When we arrived at the main entrance to the auditorium where the Ball was taking place, we were told that there were no more tickets to be had. I then thought it wise to check at some of the side entrances. I soon found a guard and asked him if he had any tickets and he replied that if we had the ten dollars we could go in. I suspect that the ten went into his own pocket, but, in any event, the four of us went in.

The 1933 Inaugural Ball was the first to take place in a generation - the last was in 1909 when William Howard Taft was inaugurated. It was dispensed with by Wilson in 1913. Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, none of whom were very socially minded, never reinstated them. In 1933, the Democrats were celebrating their victory after 12 years of Republican rule and, despite the shadow cast upon the inaugural proceedings by the sudden death of 73-year -old Senator Thomas J. Walsh, the Attorney General designate, on the fifth day of his marriage, the Ball took place as scheduled.

Due to the state of emergency, the President did not appear and the Ball was presided over by the First Lady in the Presidential Box, attired in a silver blue gown and attended by Admiral Cary T. Grayson in full dress uniform, along with a group of gold-braided White House aides.

At the opening of the Ball a large number of state governors appeared in procession with their uniformed staffs and state flags. "The Star Spangled Banner" was sung by opera prima donna Rosa Ponselle, followed by selections by the Marine

Band. Most of the dancing was on the floor below the auditorium with three or four different bands, the most popular being that of Yale graduate, Rudy Vallee.

In the various boxes were a galaxy of notables including Chief Justice Hughes, Treasury Secretary William B. Woodin, Labor Secretary Frances B. Perkins (the first woman to hold cabinet office), Henry Morgenthau, Jr., and F.D.R.'s confidential advisor, Louis McHenry Howe. I recall, with particular interest, seeing in person the much written-about and somewhat unpopular Assistant Attorney General, Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who had the dubious distinction of being in charge of the enforcement of the soon-to-disappear Prohibition Amendment and the Volstead Act.

Sunday morning brought a return to reality. All the banks were now officially closed. Checks became useless and Western Union was flooded with money order requests, so much so that very soon a \$100 limit was placed on the wiring of funds. Like others, we were strapped, perhaps even more than others as, in truth, our bank accounts were so modest that we could not have covered the checks we might have given to the hotel.

Mrs. Currie perceived our embarrassment and graciously told us that she was delighted that we joined them and that she would like to consider us as her guests. Fortunately we had our return tickets, and we took the afternoon train back in the company of our new friends. We left the train at Princeton Junction and returned to Princeton where we told our weekend story to our incredulous friends.

Interesting footnote: In telling this tale at Reunion last June, I discovered that Doby Morris' wife-to-be, Mary (then 16) was in the White House that same afternoon. She was with a friend from school and was upstairs in the family quarters. She did, in fact, "peek in" through the keyhole of the door while the Cabinet was in session. Small world ?