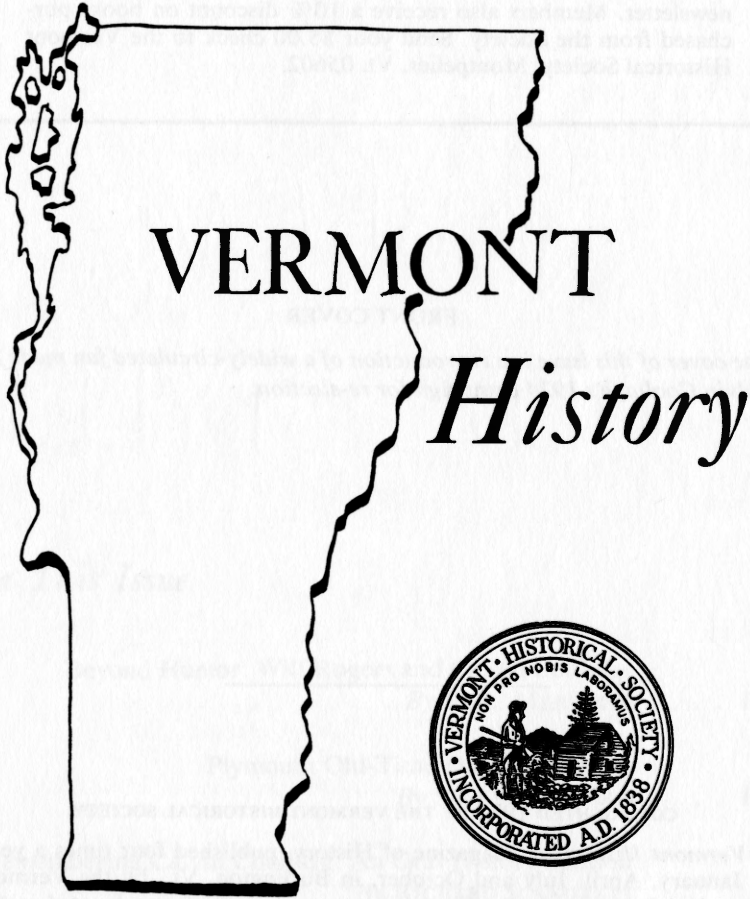


Summer 1972

Vol. 40 No. 3



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Beyond Humor: Will Rogers And Calvin Coolidge

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IN August, 1923, after Warren G. Harding's death, Calvin Coolidge became President of the United States. For the next six years Coolidge headed a nation which enjoyed amazing economic growth and relative peace. His administration progressed in the midst of a decade when material prosperity contributed heavily in changing the nature of the country. Coolidge's presidency was transitional in other respects, resting a bit uncomfortably between the passions of the World War I period and the Great Depression of the 1930's. It seems clear that Coolidge acted as a central figure in much of this transition, but the degree to which he was a causal agent, a catalyst, or simply the victim of forces of change remains a question that has prompted a wide range of historical opinion.

Few prominent figures in United States history remain as difficult to understand as Calvin Coolidge. An agrarian bias prevails in much of the historical writing on Coolidge. Unable to see much virtue or integrity in the Republican administrations of the twenties, many historians and friends of the farmers followed interpretations made by William Allen White. These picture Coolidge as essentially an unimaginative enemy of the farmer and a fumbling sphinx. They stem largely from White's two biographical studies; *Calvin Coolidge, The Man Who Is President* and *A Puritan in Babylon, The Story of Calvin Coolidge*.¹ Most notably, two historians with the same Midwestern background as White, Gilbert C. Fite writing of the struggle for farm relief in the Coolidge years in *George Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* and John D. Hicks in *Republican Ascendancy* tended to perpetuate this image of Coolidge.²

Another sort of historical writing, largely apologetic, appeared with the publication of Claude Fuess's biography of Coolidge.³ Counteracting the work of the agrarian critics, this volume only disclosed a

1. William Allan White, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man Who Is President* (New York, 1925); William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (New York, 1938).

2. Gilbert C. Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman, 1954); John D. Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy, 1921-1933* (New York, 1960); also note John D. Hicks, "The Subtreasury: A Forgotten Plan for the Relief of Agriculture," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 15 (December, 1928), 355-373.

3. Claude M. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge* (Boston, 1940).

more sympathetic caricature of the man. Within the past few years newer works have appeared, such as Donald R. McCoy's *Calvin Coolidge, The Quiet President* and articles by Robert James Maddox and Benjamin D. Rhodes, adding dimension to the President's years in the White House.⁴ Rather than perpetuating the views of the agrarian critics or suggesting the apologist's position, these studies add perspectives to the study of the man and his times.

Historical research about Coolidge suffers from a lack of materials, and because of this historians look to the opinions of contemporaries. Both William Allen White, in his principal study, and Allan Nevins, in his biographical sketch of Coolidge in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, relied upon a statement by Will Rogers as one of their strongest indictments of Coolidge as a public figure.⁵ Yet historical study has largely ignored the large body of manuscripts produced by Rogers, even though he was one of the nation's leading commentators and humorists. David A. Shannon has noted Rogers' "many shrewd political observations,"⁶ and Harry Truman recently wrote: "... Will Rogers was one of the most penetrating observers and commentators on American officialdom in the entire span of life of this nation."⁷

By the time Coolidge took office, Rogers was nationally prominent. He had traveled from his home in Indian territory around the world and gained lasting fame through his appearances with the Ziegfeld Follies in New York. His wit and insight were projected through every medium available during this period, including stage, lecture tours, motion pictures, newspapers, magazines, and radio. Small volumes of his observations began to appear in 1919 on such topics as the Paris Peace Conference and prohibition. By 1923, Rogers' written work appeared weekly through a nationally syndicated newspaper column.⁸ Rogers remained primarily a talker or oral humorist but as a writer the whimsicality in his thoughts allowed him to convey his subtle meanings. In this manner he pointed to the absurdities and oddities

4. Donald R. McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge, The Quiet President* (New York, 1967); Robert James Maddox, "Keeping Cool With Coolidge," *Journal of American History*, 53 (March, 1967), 772-780; Benjamin D. Rhodes, "Reassessing 'Uncle Shylock': The United States and the French War Debt, 1917-1929," *Journal of American History*, 55 (March, 1969), 787-803.

5. White, *Puritan in Babylon*, p. 371; Allan Nevins, "Calvin Coolidge," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (eds.), *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1928-1944), XXI, 198.

6. David A. Shannon, *Twentieth Century America, The United States Since the 1890's* (Chicago, 1964), p. 284.

7. Harry Truman, Independence, Missouri, to Theodore L. Agnew, April 24, 1968, Will Rogers Papers, Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma.

8. Paula McSpadden Love, "Oklahoma's Will Rogers," *American Scene, Magazine of the Gilcrease Museum*, 4 (1962).

of the American scene with a clear view of problems and alternatives.

In February of 1922, Rogers had turned his humor on the Harding administration, arousing the President's anger. Such remarks as this one irritated the President:

Mr. President, would you like me to tell you some good Republican jokes?

No, replied the President. I know them. In fact I appointed most of them.⁹

Perhaps the most pointed jibe about the Harding Administration came the night of the Treasury Building fire. Rogers stated that: "The fire started on the roof and burned down and down until it got to the place where the money ought to be and there it stopped. The Harding Administration had beat the fire to it."¹⁰ Coming more than a year before the Harding scandals became public knowledge, the nation was much disturbed by Harding's apparent lack of a sense of humor, without knowing the full implication of the remark. Harding snubbed Rogers after that night and not until after Coolidge took office was Rogers again invited to the White House.

Rogers wrote of Coolidge only after he occupied the Presidency for a month. But instead of joining the general critical harangue, Rogers noted that: "The masterpieces of literature this week is on the failure of President Coolidge. From what I have read about what people want him to do he seems about the most colossal flop of any President we have ever had."¹¹ He enumerated such faults as the President had not come out publicly for more rain, against the boll weevils, and brought the wheat prices from 90 cents a bushel to \$1.50 a bushel. The critics, he observed, thought the President "should have come out on all these problems the night he was sworn in up in Vermont."¹² From this beginning, Rogers took the position that Coolidge was a leader who sought to serve the nation through effective representative government rather than close management of the populace and economy as Woodrow Wilson had done during war time.¹³ In this vein Rogers wrote: "Coolidge is the first President to discover that what the Ameri-

9. Bascon N. Timmons, "Jokes Invented by Will Rogers Anger President," *Tulsa Daily World*, February 21, 1922.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Will Rogers, "Poor Coolidge! Why Is He So Quiet?" [typescript of September 2, 1923 column], Rogers Papers.

12. *Ibid.*

13. William E. Leuchtenburg, "The New Deal and the Analogue of War," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America* edited by John Braeman, et al. (New York, 1966), pp. 81-143.

can people want is to be let alone."¹⁴

In 1924, Rogers reported that the Republican Convention illustrated Coolidge's real leadership qualities. He wrote, in fact, that Coolidge could have been nominated by post card.¹⁵ This leadership ability in the party and the nation existed, in Rogers' opinion, mostly for two reasons. First, Coolidge successfully opposed Congress; and more importantly: "Mr. Coolidge has gained well deserved fame by being our first public official to know when not to say anything."¹⁶ He added, "that was such a novelty among politicians that it just swept the country. Funny we never had another one to think of that before. You see, originality will be rewarded in any line."¹⁷ The idea of a political figure in the United States failing to promise every manner of change and benefit for the voters appealed to Rogers and his readers. Both Rogers and Coolidge came from rural backgrounds where simplicity of expression remained an important quality. A subtle wit or dry humor proved a strong link between the President and Rogers, as they both used exaggeration and understatement to make their points, saying more than their words denoted.

In 1926 Will Rogers announced he would travel to Europe for the *Saturday Evening Post*, but in addition he explained that "I am really going to represent President Coolidge. You see, he hasn't a Colonel House to run over and fix up things, so that is what I am to be."¹⁸ Establishing this humorous relationship in the media, Rogers reflected not only the European situation, but also the President and the current issues with a penetrating insight for the ridiculous.¹⁹

During this period, Rogers often turned his attention to the issue of farm relief. Unlike White, Rogers chose to question the position of the farm agitators rather than that of the President. While in Britain, he noted:

And by the way there is no Farm relief problem over here. This is only a suggestion and I doubt if it could be carried out, but I think some

14. Will Rogers, "Weekly Exposure, Dishes Up the News," [typescript of January 27, 1924 column], Rogers Papers.

15. Will Rogers, "Could Have Nominated Coolidge by Postcard," *New York Times*, June 9, 1924.

16. Will Rogers, "Rogers Writes Confession, Admits He Left Cleveland to Avoid Being Nominated," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 13, 1924.

17. Will Rogers, "Rogers Makes Political Autopsy," [typescript of November 26, 1924 column], Rogers Papers.

18. Will Rogers, *Autobiography*, edited by Donald Day (Boston, 1949), p. 127.

19. Will Rogers, *Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President* (New York, 1926); Will Rogers, *There's Not a Bathing Suit in Russia and Other Bare Facts* (New York, 1927); Will Rogers, "More Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President," *Saturday Evening Post* (May 12, 1928); *ibid.* (May 19, 1928); *ibid.* (May 26, 1928); *ibid.* (June 2, 1928); *ibid.* (June 9, 1928).

work on those Farms over home wouldn't be a bad solution to their problems. These fellows looked like they had solved their Farm problems by working on them. I won't be certain, but I think that's it.²⁰

Catching a more modern theme, Rogers added: "If you help the Farmer, remember what I tell you. Be careful at who's expense you help him."²¹ The frontier in North America was closed and to give to one meant to take from another. The idea of perpetuating an antiquated system by penalizing the new seemed ludicrous.²²

Rogers took a common-sense approach on tax revision and the tariff. On the issue of lowering taxes Rogers wrote:

President Coolidge says that we are approaching an era of prosperity. Everybody generally admits that we are better off than we ever were in our lives, yet we owe a National debt of almost 30 billions of dollars.

We owe more money than any Nation in the world, and WE ARE LOWERING TAXES. When is the time to pay off a debt if it is not when you are doing well?²³

Andrew Mellon's financial approach to the nation's economic problems seemed rather at odds with the President's frugality. Rogers made pointed reference to this apparent difference not only in the case of tax reform, but with tariff revision as well. In a sharp rebuff to the President's action on the tariff bill of 1926, Rogers wrote:

The papers over here had an awful lot about you and that signing of that paper of Andrew's. Course the Republican alibi over here for you was that you didnt know what you was signing.²⁴

Although the Coolidge Administration was considered one in a chain of isolationist governments after World War I, Rogers continually turned his attention to America's foreign posture. Not only on the European trip, but also when Coolidge and Dwight Morrow sent Rogers to Mexico in 1927, he paid particular attention to three themes— isolation, disarmament, and war debts. Rogers portrayed in the media the widely held sentiment best summarized this way: "It will take America 15 years steady taking care of our own business and letting everybody else's alone to get us back to where everybody speaks to us again."²⁵ America under Coolidge's Administration wisely rejected the idea of trying to replace Great Britain as the world's policeman.

20. Rogers, *Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat*, p. 49.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

22. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston, 1952), p. 159.

23. Rogers, *Autobiography*, p. 124.

24. Rogers, *Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat*, pp. 183-184.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

Disarmament remained a recurring topic of discussion, because of disillusionment after the war. To many people, it seemed realistic to do away with the means of war which they equated with the causes of war. The absurdity of it all was not lost on Rogers as he interpreted the issues for his readers. He constantly referred to the folly of disarmament conferences, noting at one point that: "I see you [Calvin Coolidge] say if Europe doesn't disarm you will build another airship. Just as well start it for nobody here is going to do any disarming. The way to make them disarm is to start building and quit begging them to disarm."²⁶

More realistically, Rogers pointed out that:

Between you and I, there ain't any of them got any use for the other one, and you can't blame 'em for looking out after themselves. Say, you give them as much ocean on each side of them as we have, and then on the other two ends a Mexico and a Canada, they might start talking some disarming with you too. There is a lot of things that go in a speech, but you come to working it out when you are up against hundreds of years of previous wars and hatreds, they don't pan out.²⁷

Often, Rogers put forth the thesis that Coolidge did not take the disarmament proposals seriously. Rogers felt that only military preparedness would deter any future war. Coolidge was in fact following the will of the people, rather than leading the nation in a manner more acceptable to his critics. In a democratic country, Coolidge's sense of participatory responsibility seemed a weakness to those who enjoyed the planning of the World War I period.²⁸

Although much of Rogers' treatment of Coolidge was in printed words, Rogers made several broadcasts during the last year of Coolidge's tenure, spreading his oral humor through the new media of radio. The most notable of these came on January 4, 1928. Rogers chose the occasion to imitate the President and speak out on a number of issues. Wide confusion arose when many listeners believed it was the President speaking to the nation, indicating how carefully Rogers mimicked Coolidge.²⁹ Betty Rogers, his wife, wrote that "Will and the Coolidges had always been good friends. He had visited them often at the White House and he immediately sent the President a note."³⁰

26. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 145-146.

29. Radio Transcript of the Dodge Victory Hour Broadcast, January 4, 1928, Rogers Papers; Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers, His Wife's Story* (Indianapolis, 1941), p. 170.

30. Rogers, *Will Rogers*, p. 170.

Shortly thereafter, President Coolidge replied to Rogers that he had taken no offense and that he hoped Rogers "would not give the affair another troubled thought."³¹ But Rogers had become the President to large numbers of people in his depiction of Coolidge.

Rogers throughout the twenties projected Coolidge as a man and a President based on an understanding that he gained over a long connection with public affairs and commentary. Rogers seemed genuinely impressed with the qualities of Coolidge. Those same qualities he at times distorted to caricature the man, but not stopping with the stereotyped image of Coolidge with which many others were satisfied. After a 1925 visit to the White House, Rogers emphasized the President's subtle sense of humor which he believed always remained Coolidge's greatest asset. But this remained lost on many less discerning reporters and critics.³²

Caustic at times and even-handed at others, Rogers formed a public image of the President that differed noticeably from that put forth by White and those sympathetic to the Farm Bloc.³³ In addition to this sense of humor, Rogers believed that Coolidge listened his way to greatness just as Colonel Edward M. House had done during the Woodrow Wilson Administration.³⁴ Rogers felt that Coolidge offered the nation the capability of quiet judgment, knowing when institutions and people needed leaving alone as well as when they needed interference.³⁵ Rogers reflected Coolidge's understanding that the nation needed less intrusion from the central government and more initiative from local and state governmental levels. In this sense Coolidge "knew that over half the things just needed leaving alone."³⁶

Rogers exemplified a deeper comprehension of Coolidge than many others in the 1920's, yet his judgments remain largely ignored by scholars of the period. Insights once gained can be easily lost.

31. Calvin Coolidge to Will Rogers, January 11, 1928, Rogers Papers.

32. *San Diego Union*, May 3, 1925.

33. Will Rogers' niece recalled: "Through his eyes we saw a different Calvin Coolidge than that portrayed by the news media." Mrs. W. Walker Milam, Chelsea, Oklahoma, to H. L. Meredith, May 25, 1970.

34. Rogers, *Autobiography*, p. 147.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 279; also see Isabel Ross, *Grace Coolidge and Her Era* (New York, 1962), p. 191.

36. *Tulsa Daily World*, January 9, 1933.