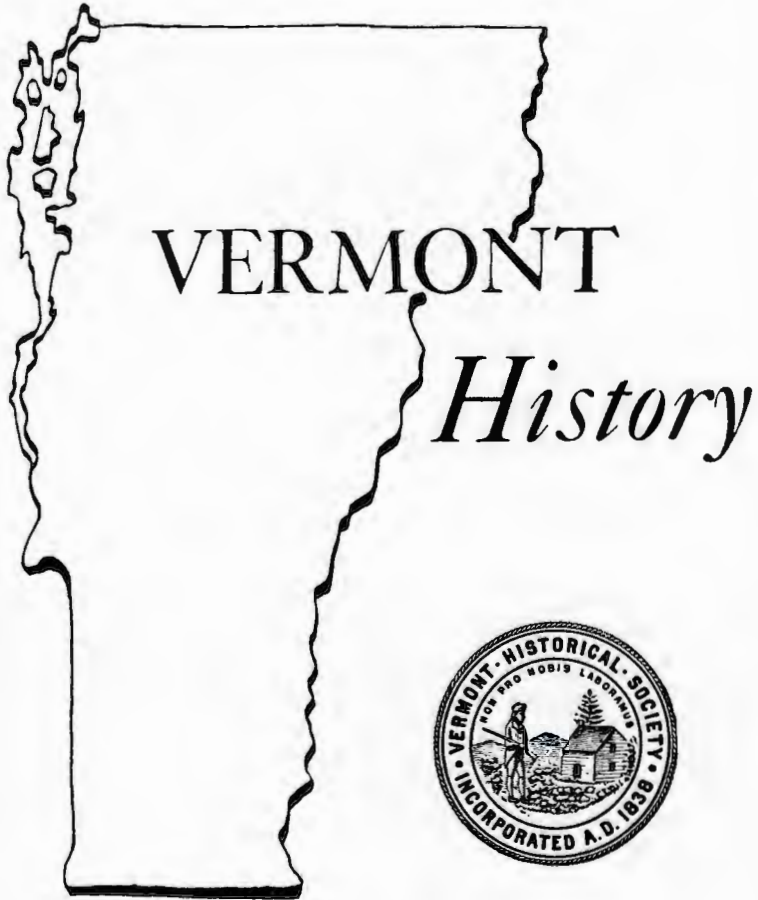
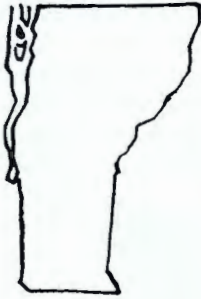


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“His wit partook of the economy of Vermont—he doled it out sparingly, always with a straight face.”

Retorts and Ripostes: President Coolidge’s Cabinet Room Humor

Edited by HOWARD F. McMAINS

Harry Stewart New, an old Indiana politico with an ear for political gossip and the entertaining story, served as Postmaster General in President Coolidge’s cabinet. New had been a newspaper publisher and a former old-guard senator when his friend, Warren G. Harding, appointed him to the cabinet in 1923. New made occasional notes about his political experiences including those with Coolidge. His papers contain four brief sketches which illustrate Coolidge’s much maligned sense of humor.¹

President Coolidge projected “Yankee gravity,” stiff rectitude, and a severe public dignity. The man from Vermont considered this pattern of behavior appropriate to his high office, nor did he consider himself a humorous person.² Only a few photographs of the president reveal so much as a wispy smile.³ Coolidge delivered speeches in a solemn and dignified manner. Even when an occasion might have benefited from presidential levity, he could not free himself from silvery platitudes about the constitution and the republic. When he greeted the World Series-winning Washington Senators in 1924, his most mirthful moment came when he said he hoped that “with this happy result now assured it will be possible for the people of Washington gradually to resume interest in the ordinary concerns of life.”⁴ He quickly recovered from this flirtation with frivolity and solemnly lectured his audience about the place “both present and future in America for true, clean sport.” He concluded by saluting the victorious team awkwardly as “these armored knights of the bat and ball.”⁵

Coolidge did not indulge in public levity nor did he appreciate humor at his expense. When Will Rogers imitated the president’s Vermont twang

during a radio broadcast, Coolidge believed the humorist had made fun of his high office. Rogers offered an apology, and an unamused Coolidge refused it. Nonetheless, Rogers thought that Coolidge did have a wonderful wit which he wasted on the small circle of people around him.⁶ Harry New had an opportunity to observe Coolidge in these more intimate, relaxed moments out of the public eye in situations he controlled.



In public—and hence in his portraits—Calvin Coolidge maintained a serious demeanor, yet friends like Harry New saw him as a man with an amiable wit characterized by Vermont reticence. Vermont Historical Society Library, undated.

If Coolidge did not tell stories or jokes when he loosened up, he did make “tart” quips and comments based on the immediate situation. If he did not laugh heartily, he did smile thinly and genuinely. He enjoyed retorts and ripostes and appreciated those of others, so long as not directed at him.⁷ The editors of his press conferences thought, “His wit partook of the economy of Vermont—he doled it out sparingly, always with a

straight face.”⁸ At his periodic meetings with a dozen or so reporters he could be at ease, friendly, and humorous because he kept control of those gatherings by allowing himself to be quoted as “a White House source.”⁹

The following anecdotes occurred during cabinet meetings in 1926 or thereabouts. Coolidge felt at ease with his cabinet. Among such hail-fellows well-met as Postmaster General Harry New, Coolidge relaxed and became more the friendly Vermonter rather than the dignified president. More so than with the reporters, he could retort, quip, and poke gentle fun with confidence that his comments would remain within the cabinet room. Fortunately, Harry New not only recognized good anecdotes but jotted down a few of them.

ANECDOTES THAT ARE ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE PRESIDENT'S SENSE OF HUMOR

On one occasion at a meeting of the Cabinet, May 21, 1926, Secretary Kellogg appeared very much annoyed over a statement given out at Philadelphia, and evidently quite generally circulated, to the effect that he (Kellogg) was to deliver an address at the opening of the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition, May 31. He said he'd never been invited to make such a speech — never heard of it — all of which led to statements by two or three members to the effect that the exposition could not be made ready for opening at that time and that an attempt to start it off at that date would be a complete failure through lack of readiness.

Kellogg continued to growl about it when the President put it in his dry way, — “You have a perfect alibi for that date anyhow.”

Kellogg said — “Why?”

The President, who was under engagement to deliver a Memorial Day address at Arlington on May 31 (Declaration Day [sic] having fallen on Sunday, the 30th) said, — “You will have to be at Arlington with the President.”

Two or three other members, who were dodging invitations to speak on the same day, chimed in with some eagerness to ask if that applied to all the members of the Cabinet.

The President dryly replied, — “It does for alibi purposes.”

* * *

On the same occasion the lack of completion of preparations for the Sesqui-Centennial was dwelt upon in some detail by Secretary Hoover, who was deprecating any attempt to open it at the date announced — June 1 — for the reason that, as he explained, it would “be a mess.”

The President said, — “Well, the Continental Congress met there under somewhat distressing circumstances and chaotic conditions and the exposition is opened at this time to exemplify that fact.”

* * *

On another occasion a proposal to make a holiday of Armistice Day (November 11) led to references to the frequency with which holidays were asked for in Washington and by some of the labor organizations, which in turn brought out the fact that much objection was made to them particularly by some of the manufacturing interests, particularly the managers of the steel industry whose furnaces cool and who objected to the loss of time.

The President said, — "It seems that people engaged in making steel and pulp and holding office don't want a holiday."

* * *

On a certain occasion, Attorney General Stone and Secretary Hoover had slipped away to the Florida Keys for a week, at the end of which they came back wonderfully tanned but without having had very good luck.

When the President entered his first query on looking at the two sunburned members was, — "Fish bitin'?"

Hoover said, — "No, Mr. President, not very well but we were out of touch with the world for a week and that was worth a good deal." "To the world?" queried Coolidge.

NOTES

¹ Harry S. New Papers, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis. See also Howard F. McMains, ed., "Harry New's Secret Visit to Calvin Coolidge: A 1932 Election Memoir," *Vermont History*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Fall, 1985), 221-230.

² Charles Willis Thompson, *Presidents I've Known and Two Near Presidents* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1929), p. 377; and Claude M. Feuss, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little Brown, 1940), p. 327.

³ "On Our Cover," *Vermont History*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), 66.

⁴ Calvin Coolidge, *Foundations of the Republic* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

⁶ Feuss, *Coolidge*, pp. 327 and 476; and Will Rogers, "A Subtle Humorist," in Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *Meet Calvin Coolidge: The Man Behind the Myth* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1960), pp. 145-146.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 476; Howard H. Quint and Robert H. Ferrell, eds., *The Talkative President: The Off-The-Record Press Conferences of Calvin Coolidge* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), p. 7.

⁸ Quint and Ferrell, *Talkative President*, p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.