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7-30-2007

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Recommended Citation
Cooke, Jim, "I Do Solemnly Swear ..." (2007). *Features*. Paper 20.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/20

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I Do Solemnly Swear ...

Calvin Coolidge Takes the Presidential Oath of Office

By Jim Cooke

Jim Cooke, an actor and historian from Vermont, has studied and portrayed Calvin Coolidge for three decades. Below is his account, from our 30th president's perspective, of Coolidge's accedence to the presidency of the United States.*

After serving two terms as mayor I returned to Boston as a member of the state senate and then, in 1914, I was Lt. Governor. We had the Great War, which took a great deal of the attention and the energy of the people in my state and in all the states across the union. In 1919, I was governor of Massachusetts and handled the Boston Police Strike. Of course, when I sent off the telegram to Samuel Gompers I thought I had destroyed any possible political future I had in Massachusetts, but it would seem that I was not gifted with intuition for I was returned to office by a margin of votes that I don't think has been exceeded since.

Calvin Coolidge took the oath of office 84 years ago this week, following the death of Warren G. Harding.

Very soon people began to speak of me as a possible candidate for president in 1920, but as governor of Massachusetts I couldn't see how I could possibly prosecute a campaign for the presidency without bringing some disgrace upon the office. So I urged any money that had been raised for that purpose to be sent back, any headquarters that had been opened to be shut down. Later if they wished to put my name forward at the convention that would've been a different matter, but the senior senator from Massachusetts Henry Cabot Lodge said, "No man who lives in a two family house is going to be president of the United States. Massachusetts is not for him."

Well, it is perhaps possible that Senator Lodge was lacking in intuition on that occasion. The convention was largely under the domination of a covey of United States senators who maneuvered it into adopting a platform and nominating a candidate in ways that were not agreeable to a majority of the delegates. When they tried to pursue the same course in naming their vice president the delegates broke away and they literally stampeded to me. I did not wish to be vice president but my name was placed in nomination.

I was at the Adams's house in Boston and it was the weekend Mrs. Coolidge was there with me. I received a telephone call informing me I had been nominated and Grace said, "You're not going to accept are you?"

I said "Well, mother, I suppose I'll have to."

It was agreeable to me to be associated with Senator Warren G. Harding whom I knew well and I liked. I went campaigning across the country -- well, really mainly just into the South -- and I would address a gathering in a large hall in the evening and often speak from a rear platform of a train. It was a most interesting experience. Then I was back at home in North Hampton to cast my ballot in November and in another letter to my father I said:

> *Dear Father, I'm home, home today, came home yesterday in fact. Grace and the boys are well. Your dog is growing well. She has bitten the milkman, the grocer, and the egg man. It is good to have some way to get even with them for the high prices they charge for everything. I wonder if anyone has sent you the* Boston Globe. *They are running the life of me just now, most of it is fiction of course, but you might like to read it.*

Well the time soon came for us to go on down to Washington. We were met at the Union Station by Vice President and Mrs. Marshall and they escorted us over to the new Willard Hotel. The next day we were back at the Union Station to welcome Senator and Mrs. Harding to Washington.

The day of the inauguration was the last time I had an opportunity to visit briefly with President Woodrow Wilson. I recall it was the first time that the presidential party traveled in automobiles and I remember watching Senator Harding and President Wilson. Senator Harding would try to acknowledge the cheers of the people by raising his hat and, of course, President Wilson tried to do the same thing but he lacked the ability to do it so. After a time Harding just rode with his hat in his hand. Later when I became President of the United States I got a telegram of condolence from President Wilson.

My inaugural address was the shortest on record. When President Harding delivered his address, it was the first time with the system of loud speakers -- of amplifiers, where the people in the far range of the crowd heard every word he said. Someone said to me, "Isn't that amplifier Harding is using a marvelous thing?"

I said, "Yes, indeed it is, but what he most needs is a condenser."

Vice President Marshall had given me some advice. We took over the same suite of rooms at the new Willard Hotel that he had occupied, and we were very comfortable there. He had told me, "You know, Coolidge, what's going to happen as vice president? You'll sit in your office and people will come down the hall and they'll stop at your doorway and they'll look in and they perhaps will exchange a word or two and they'll go off." He said, "Every once in a while, I would look up from my desk and say, 'You know if you're not going to come in, would you at least throw me a peanut?' "

Well, as I say, we were at the new Willard Hotel and that was a very comfortable place to stay in Washington. One time there was a bit of a fire and we were all sent down to the sidewalk. It became apparent that there was no danger and I wanted to go back up to our room. I started to go on my way and one of the firemen called out and said, "Wait a minute, where are you going?"

I said "I am going upstairs."

And he said, "Well who are you?"

I said, "I am the vice president."

He said, "Oh, all right," and I started on my way again. But then he called out yet again, "Wait a minute, you come right down here. I thought you were the Vice President of the hotel."

In August of 1923 we left President and Ms. Harding in Washington. I do not know what had impaired his health. Later it was revealed that some of his friends had betrayed him and this was a great grief to him. This knowledge, this grief was very heavy for him to bear. Perhaps it was ever more than he could bear -- I never saw him again. Come June he started on a journey for Alaska and eternity.

I was home with my father in Plymouth, Vermont, on the night of August 2nd, 1923. I was awakened by my father coming up the stairs calling my name. His voice trembled and I knew something of the gravest nature had occurred. He placed in my hand an official report. He was the first to address me as president of the United States, for President Harding had died. The oath of office was taken in what we always called the sitting room by the light of the kerosene lamp. The Bible that had belonged to my mother laid on the table at hand. I know of no other case in history where succession has come by election where the qualified oath of office has been administered by a father to his son. Father, then as always, was a notary and it seemed a simple and natural thing to do at the time. I can now understand something of the dramatic force of the event.

When we learned that President Harding had died, Mrs. Coolidge and I got down on our knees and I asked God to bless the American people and give me the power to serve them. The reporters asked me, what was my first thought when I became president. Well, I thought I could swing it. They asked my father, they asked him what made him think, as a notary, that he could administer the presidential oath of office. He said there was nothing that made him think he couldn't. That morning, when we set out for Washington, I made a short visit to the grave of my mother. It had always been a comfort to me to be near her final resting place when I was a boy, sometimes even in the dead of night. Some way that morning she seemed very near to me.

** This account is excerpted from Jim Cooke's 2004 performance at the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies.*