

Teddy Roosevelt in Iowa

Thrice within a period of four and a half years Iowa was visited by Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States. The first visit was in April, 1903. The President had been spending a vacation in Yellowstone Park and was on his way to St. Louis for the dedication of the site of the St. Louis World's Fair. His two-day route across Iowa included Shenandoah, Clarinda, Van Wert, Osceola, Des Moines, Oskaloosa, Ottumwa (where his train lay on a siding overnight), and Keokuk.

"The president comes to Iowa feeling 'bully,'" reported the *Des Moines Register*. An outdoor vacation, of the type he loved; successful prosecution of the "trust-busting" Northern Securities case; the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty; the success of Governor Taft in the Philippines — all this made 1903 a happy year for the President. His enthusiastic reception in Iowa added to that "bully" feeling.

On his trip the President was surrounded by secret service men, to guard him against any such tragedy as had befallen President McKinley in 1901. While the presidential train lay overnight at Ottumwa, sixteen men stood guard over the car,

four of them from the Rock Island Railroad's secret service force, eight from the Ottumwa police force, and four from the government secret service. Such restraint irked "T. R." and his independence was illustrated by an incident at Keokuk. Seeing a man in the crowd trying unsuccessfully to take pictures, the President called the photographer to his carriage and told him to "shoot all he wanted."

The reception of the President at Keokuk was typical of that of the other Iowa towns. Mayor Andrew J. Dimond and his reception committee met the President at the train and rode to Rand Park with him. Six companies of the Iowa National Guard, commanded by Major John A. Dunlap of Keokuk, marched in the long procession. In the speech delivered to a large throng at Rand Park, the President said, "When I come to Iowa I feel I can learn rather than teach, because in peace and war, you men and women have acted on these principles, a capacity for organization and recognition of individual initiative." So intent was the President on his address and so receptive was the crowd that the efforts of Howard Elliott, later president of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, to halt his speech in order to get back to the train were fruitless. T. R. continued to the end of his prepared talk, and delayed the departure of his special train eight minutes.

At the conclusion of the address hundreds

surged forward cheering and trying to reach the side of the speaker. Negro citizens of Keokuk pressed a huge bouquet into his hands; Dan Anderson, leading Republican, making the presentation address. Before he left the stand the President pressed a button which started the machinery rolling in the J. C. Hubinger Brothers large new starch factory and on the way out of the park the President's carriage stopped long enough to allow him to plant an elm tree in honor of the Civic Division of the Keokuk Woman's Club. A small stone with the date and a Rough Rider's hat carved in the center marks the tree which stands in the present Rand Park flower gardens.

Roosevelt's second visit to Iowa, in 1907, was on the occasion of a presidential cruise down the Mississippi in the interests of the development of the river as an avenue of commerce. Could "Teddy" make the trip today, one may be sure he would give vent to his pet word, "dee-lighted," at the sight of the commercial development which has all but obscured anything but the memory of the packet boats which plied the peaceful river fifty years ago.

On this occasion Keokuk was the President's only stop in Iowa. He came to the city to board the river steamboat, *Mississippi*, a newly-built steamer of the government fleet. He was greeted at the railroad station by wild cheering and the playing of "Hail to the Chief" by the National

Guard band. Governor Cummins and Mayor Strimback welcomed him both to Iowa and to Keokuk. The President was then driven to Rand Park, where he made a short address, ignoring the threatening financial worries of 1907, and stressing the importance of the development of Mississippi River commerce. He also took this occasion to express again the Roosevelt creed, "I believe the average American citizen will no more tolerate rule by the mob than by the plutocrat. He desires to see justice enacted from rich and poor alike."

After the address Roosevelt boarded the *Mississippi* for his trip down the Great River. He was accompanied by members of the Inland Waterways Commission and the governors of fourteen of the central western states. A large flotilla of river boats accompanied the *Mississippi* on its journey downstream from Keokuk to Memphis.

As the President's boat steamed out of the lock and through the Keokuk and Hamilton draw-bridge, it was joined by the other boats in the convoy, heading south to the accompaniment of whistles from the boats anchored at the Keokuk waterfront and from the factories of the city. A *Constitution Democrat* writer described the scene: "As soon as the *Mississippi* steamed out of the lock and through the draw, a naval display was given with hundreds of launches taking part, the little boats forming two lines in the middle of the river through which the President's boat passed."

This was a maneuver which the boat owners of Keokuk had practiced for weeks, and it made a big hit with the crowd which lined the shore and bluffs to watch the display.

President Roosevelt, in his letters to his children, has left a record of this trip from the point of view of the chief actor. In a letter to Kermit, he wrote: "After speaking at Keokuk this morning we got aboard this brand new stern-wheeler of the regular Mississippi type and started downstream. I went up on the texas and of course felt an irresistible desire to ask the pilot about Mark Twain." To Archie he wrote, "I am now on what I believe will be my last trip of any consequence while I am President. Until I got to Keokuk, Iowa, it was about like any other trip, but it is now pleasant going down the Mississippi. . . . At night the steamers are all lighted up, for there are a dozen of them in company with us." Describing the boat, he wrote, "There is no hold to the boat, just a flat bottom with a deck, and on this deck a foot or so above the water stands the engineroom, completely open at the sides and all the machinery visible as you come up on the boat. Both ends are blunt, and the gangways are drawn up by big cranes."

To his "dearest Ethel" he wrote on October 1, "The first part of my trip up to the time that we embarked on the river at Keokuk was just about the ordinary style. I had continually to rush out to wave at the people at the towns through which the

train passed. If the train stopped anywhere I had to make a very short speech to several hundred people who evidently thought they liked me, and whom I really liked, but to whom I had nothing in the world to say. At Canton [Ohio] and Keokuk I went through the usual solemn festivities — the committee of reception, and the guard of honor, with the open carriage, the lines of enthusiastic fellow-citizens to whom I bowed continually right and left, the speech which in each case I thought went off rather better than I had dared hope — for I felt as if I had spoken myself out. When I got on the boat, however, times grew easier. I still have to rush out continually, stand on the front part of the deck, and wave at groups of people on shore, and at stern-wheel steamboats draped with American flags and loaded with enthusiastic excursionists. But I have a great deal of time to myself, and by gentle firmness I think I have succeeded in impressing on my good hosts that I rather resent allopathic doses of information about shoals and dykes, the amount of sand per cubic foot of water, the quantity of manufactures supplied by each river town, etc.”

It is the picture of T. R. in a frock coat, waving to enthusiastic crowds from the front of the steamer *Mississippi*, that thousands who were in Keokuk that October day fifty-seven years ago, carry in their memory.

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