

Theodore Roosevelt, President

Written by Ansley Wilcox in October, 1902 and Revised by Theodore Roosevelt

The people of Buffalo will always have a special interest in the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, because it was in this city that the awful tragedy occurred which made him President, and it was here that he was sworn in, made his first proclamation, and from here he followed the body of his former chief to its last resting place.

But Col. Roosevelt was well known to Buffalonians, and he knew the city and its people well, before that memorable week in September, 1901, when he unwillingly became the central figure of the world's gaze. His last previous visit was on May 20th of the same year, when he came here as Vice-president to open formally the Pan-American Exposition, around which all our hopes were clustering. At that time, he met many of our people and made as many friends by his simple, hearty and well souled manner. It was then that he, as well as Senator Lodge, in their speeches, developing the Pan-American idea which was the underlying motive of the exposition, gave utterance to thoughts which have been seen proved pathetic, as outlining some phrases of the foreign policy of the new administration, and especially the new and more energetic hegemony of the United States on this continent - the revived Monroe Doctrine.

Only a little more than a year before this, on Washington's birthday, in 1900, Col. Roosevelt, then Governor, had come to Buffalo and delivered an address on the higher duties of citizenship at the Saturn Club, and with his usual energy, he gave another address the same evening before the Daughters of the American Revolution, and still another before the Sixty-fifth Regiment, after a review.

So when on Friday, the sixth of September (1901), he heard of the shooting of President McKinley at the Pan-American Exposition, and instantly started for the side of his chief, he knew he was not going among strangers but to the house of friends. He hardly stopped to consult anyone of his movements, but simply came to where the trouble was fast as a special train could bring him.

It was almost by chance that I met him on Saturday noon, as he drove up to the Iroquois Hotel, and a brief conversation resulted in his coming to stay at my house and stopping there until the following Tuesday. The house was then partly dismantled, the family and most of the household were in the country, but he was offered a quiet place to sleep and eat, and accepted it.

Those were terribly anxious days, but on the whole not gloomy. From the first moment of his arrival, and the favorable answers which were made to his questions about the condition of the President - especially after his first hasty call on the family and physicians of the wounded man, at Mr. (John) Milburn's house, the Vice-president

seemed possessed with an abiding faith that the wound would not be fatal. His sanguine temperament, his own rugged strength and consciousness of ability to combat disease, and his eager desire, yes, longed for recovery of another, with all his might, that did Theodore Roosevelt, when he stood in the shadow of President McKinley's threatened death. Apart from all other consideration, he did not want to have the presidency thrust upon him in that terrible way. He would not believe it possible.

So when, on Tuesday, the fourth day after the shooting, everything seemed to be going well, and even the Secretary of War, Mr. (Elihu) Root, and other members of the cabinet, and Dr. Burney, who had come here from New York, felt justified in leaving, it was thought best that the Vice-president also should go away in order to impress the public with that confidence in the outcome which everyone felt. He went to join his family at a remote spot in the Adirondacks, the Tahawus Club, where he expected to stop only for a day, and then take them back to his home at Oyster Bay. His itinerary and addresses for reaching him, if he should be needed here, were left with me but no one thought that he would be needed.

In the middle of the night between Thursday and Friday, I was aroused by a messenger asking me to send instantly for the Vice-president, as the President had suddenly become worse and was in great danger. Then began a vigorous effort to annihilate time and space. A telephone message to Albany, put me, within two hours, in direct communication with Mr. Loeb, the Vice-president's secretary. He informed me that the club where Col. Roosevelt probably was at that moment, was some hours beyond the end of the rail and telegraph lines, but that he was probably coming out that day; that he (Mr. Loeb) would try to reach him quickly by a telegram, to be forwarded by special messenger, and would also go after him on a special train as early in the morning as one could start.

It turned out that Col. Roosevelt and his family were staying a day longer in the Adirondacks than he had expected, owing in part, as I understand, to a storm which had washed out the roads and made them very bad. Being thus detained, on this Friday, the Vice-president had started for a tramp up Mt. Marcy with a guide, before the telegram from Mr. Loeb arrived. The message was sent after him and found him on his way down the mountain, just below the summit.

He hurried back; as soon as possible got a wagon and drove out over the rough roads to the nearest railway station, in the dark of Friday night. It is safe to say he lost no time on that drive.

Saturday, September 14th, about 1:30 pm, he arrived in Buffalo again and left the train at the Terrace Station. President McKinley had died early Saturday morning, and he was then the constitutional President of the United States. Naturally, there was great excitement in the city, and all precautions were taken for his safety. He was met at the station by a single private carriage (Mr. George L. Williams) and by Mr. Williams and myself and was driven rapidly up to my house again, followed by a small escort of cavalry, which had been stationed off at some distance in order not to attract a crowd.

No definite plans had been made for the swearing him in, and it had not even been settled where this should be done. The first suggestion had been to take him directly to Mr. Milburn's house, there to be sworn in, but this had been objected to as unsuitable, while the body of the President was lying in the house. So he was asked to go to my house to get lunch, and immediately at arriving and being equipped with borrowed clothes, more appropriate than his traveling suit, he insisted on starting for Mr. Milburn's house, to make a call of sympathy and respect on the family of the dead President. This was done, and by three o'clock he was at my house again.

Then without any preparation, and almost without announcement, the members of the cabinet came down to administer the oath of office.

They were the Secretary of War, Mr. (Elihu) Root; the Secretary of the Navy, Mr. (John) Long; the Attorney General, Mr. (Philander) Knox; the Secretary of the Interior, Mr. (Ethan) Hitchcock; the Postmaster General, Mr. (Charles Emory) Smith; and the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. (James) Wilson. With them were Judge (John) Hazel, of the United States District Court, and Judge Haight, of the New York Court of Appeals, Senator Depew, and a few friends who happened to know of it.

President Roosevelt met with them informally in the Library as they came in. The room, not a large one, was far from full, and at the last moment, the newspaper men, who were eager for admission, were all let in, but were prohibited from taking any photographs. Therefore the newspaper accounts of what was said and done in the brief ceremony which followed are generally correct, but all professed pictures of the scene are shams, except as they may have been sketched from memory.

The Secretary of War, Mr. Root, was head of the cabinet, among the six who were present - the Secretaries of State and of the Treasury not being there. He was also an old and intimate friend of Col. Roosevelt, and his chief advisor at this trying time. Without any preliminaries, he addressed the new President, calling him "Mr. Vice-president," and on behalf of the cabinet requested him to take the oath of office.

President Roosevelt answered simply, but with great solemnity: "Mr. Secretary - I will take the oath. And in this hour of deep and terrible national bereavement, I wish to state that it shall be my aim to continue, absolutely without variance, the policy of President McKinley, for the peace and honor of our beloved country."

It is characteristic of the man that when, the next day, some newspapers published this statement without the word "honor" - referring only to "peace and prosperity" - he was concerned about it, and asked earnestly whether he possibly could have omitted a word to which he intended to give special emphasis.

The new President was standing in front of the bay window on the south side of the room. Others had fallen back a little when Mr. Root spoke. After his response, Judge Hazel advanced and administered the oath to support the constitution and laws. It was

taken with uplifted hand. The written oath, which Judge Hazel produced, in typewritten form, on a sheet of ordinary legal cap, was then signed.

Then President Roosevelt made the announcement of his request to the cabinet to remain in office. The whole ceremony was over within half an hour after the cabinet had entered the house, and the small company dispersed, leaving only the six cabinet officers with the President, who at once held an informal session in the library.

I was asked to produce the "Messages and Papers of the President" - the volume containing the proclamation by President (Chester) Arthur of the death of President (James) Garfield, and did so. This was considered in the cabinet meeting, which only lasted a few minutes.

After this meeting the President took a walk with Mr. Root, and then returning to the house, drafted his proclamation of the death of President McKinley, and appointing Thursday, September 19th, a day of national mourning. This was issued to the press that evening.

So began President Roosevelt's term of office. The next day, Sunday, came the local funeral ceremonies over his predecessor, and early Monday morning he started with the funeral train for Washington.

It takes less in the way of ceremony to make a President in this country, than it does to make a King in England or any monarchy, but the significance of the event is no less great.