

HISTORIC ROOTS

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Publication of this issue of *Historic Roots* was made possible
by a grant from The A.D. Henderson Foundation.

A Magazine of Vermont History

Vol. 1

August 1996

No. 2

THE FARMER IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Calvin Coolidge, the 30th president of the United States, was not the usual kind of politician. For one thing he was the son of a Vermont farmer. For another he was shy and uncomfortable around people he didn't know. He was also very thrifty. He lived most of his life in a two-family house. But Calvin Coolidge loved politics and was a good public speaker.

When Coolidge, a Republican, became president in 1923, there were scandals in the Republican party. People thought that the Vermont farmer in the White House would make government honest again. Pictures of him on the farm filled the newspapers.

He was not a Vermont farmer, though. He was a powerful politician. He had been Governor of Massachusetts and was now President of the United States. The farm pictures were supposed to tell a story. They were supposed to show that Coolidge was a simple man, a man you could trust. The story is not a simple one, however. The pictures show more. They show a stiff, shy man who doesn't look like a farmer and looks uncomfortable posing as one. Other pictures show a man whose smiles look uncomfortable too.

Vermont Historical Society



One of the many pictures of Calvin Coolidge on his father's farm in Plymouth, Vermont.

A rare picture of Coolidge smiling, taken on the campaign trail in 1924. You should see the one of him wearing the hat!



Vermont Historical Society

What Coolidge did and what kind of a man he was doesn't really matter to us. We can look at pictures of him without much feeling. But many people in the 1920s had strong feelings about their president, and they didn't all agree.

Coolidge was as thrifty with government money as he was with his own. He did not like labor unions. He worked to defeat a plan that would have raised farmers' incomes. He also favored laws that helped businessmen make more money. So, many businessmen liked him and many farmers and workers didn't.

How people felt about Coolidge affected how they felt about the farm pictures. Those who liked him saw an honest and simple country man. Others saw a man who posed for the pictures to try to get people to like him better. Some just looked at the pictures and laughed.

Stories about Coolidge got different reactions too. One of his nicknames was "Silent Cal" because he never said very much. One night he went to a dinner party. "I bet my husband I could get you to say more than two words," the woman sitting next to him said. Coolidge answered, "You lose."

Another time he came home from church after hearing a sermon about sin. "What did the preacher say?" someone asked. "He was against it," said Coolidge.

It is clear from these stories that even though Coolidge was good at making speeches,

he was not good at making conversation. What did that mean? Some people thought it meant that he was a man who only spoke when he had something to say, which wasn't very often. Some thought he was funny. Some thought he was rude. What do you think?

In another story, one man says to another, "Did you hear that Calvin Coolidge died?" "Oh?" asks his friend, "How could they tell?"

Does this story mean that Coolidge was so quiet and did so little when he was alive that it was hard to tell he was not dead? Does it mean that he really did nothing as president? Is this a funny story? Was it good or bad to have a president who was so hard to read? People would have had different answers to these questions too.

People had different opinions about what Coolidge did as president. So did newspaper editors. One way they expressed their opinions was in political cartoons.

The cartoon on the next page, of Coolidge scrubbing the Republican elephant, was meant to show that the president was doing a good job. It shows a hard worker rolling up his sleeves and cleaning up the party. People who agreed might have nodded their heads and smiled when they saw the cartoon. People who thought nothing had really changed in government might have been angry to see Coolidge get credit for something he hadn't done.

The New York Tribune, February 1, 1924



The elephant is the symbol of the Republican Party. Coolidge is using plenty of hot water and elbow grease to clean away all the scandals.

“ATTA BOY, CAL!
IF YOU WANT IT DONE WELL
DO IT YOURSELF”

The cartoon of the rich, fat businessmen singing around the cash register was drawn by someone who didn't like Coolidge. He wanted to show that Coolidge favored rich people over farmers and workers. Most businessmen would not have liked this cartoon, but many farmers and workers

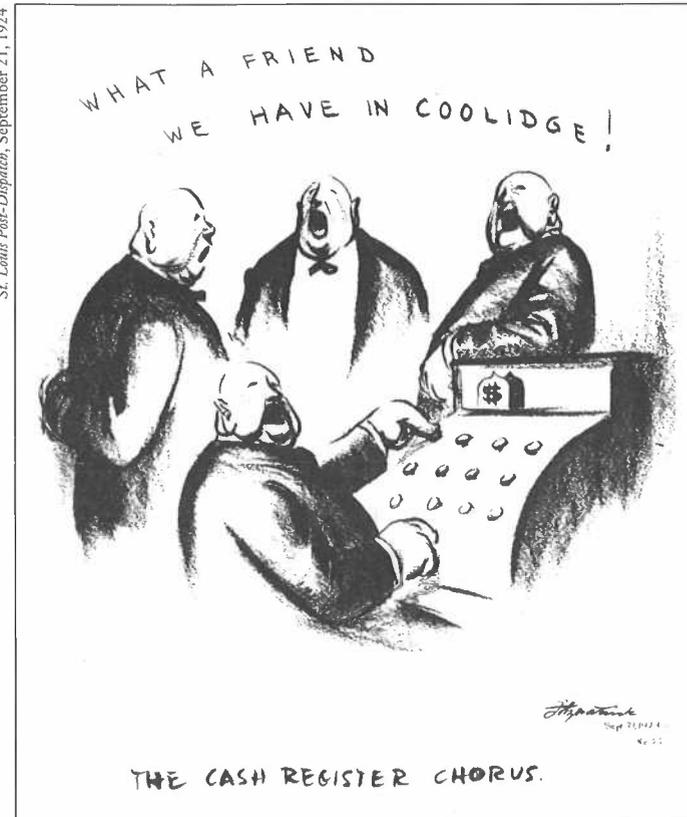
would have agreed with its point of view.

Coolidge had been elected vice president under Warren Harding in 1920. He became president in 1923 when Harding died. In 1924, after only a little over a year in office, he ran for re-election. He hadn't had time to do very much as president, so how did people make up their minds whether or not to vote for him? They thought about the stories and pictures and articles they had seen and read. They thought about what they liked and what they didn't like about what Coolidge had said and

done. Probably no one liked everything about him, but most people thought Coolidge would do a better job than the men who were running against him. He was re-elected.

Was Coolidge a good president? To some he was, to others he wasn't. Some people may have been sorry they voted for him. Others may have been glad. There is no easy answer to the question. And no right one either.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 21, 1924



Political cartoons use a kind of shorthand to show you what's going on. How can you tell who these people are?



This portrait of Calvin Coolidge as president is at the Vermont State House in Montpelier.

Vermont State House

There are no right or easy answers about politics today either. It is just as hard now for people to make up their minds about candidates. Maybe it's harder because there is so much more information about what is going on than there was in the 1920s.

November 5, 1996 is election day. It is the day to elect the governor, the state legislators, and Vermont's representative in Congress. It is also the day to elect the president. There will be ads, speeches, cartoons, and news stories about the election. The candidates will all give their own versions of what is going on, the versions that will make them look good.

When Election Day comes, no matter how much people read and listen and know (and no

matter what they may tell you), no one will know everything about every candidate and every issue. No one will like everything about any candidate. Voters as well as candidates will disagree about what is important.

How will people decide who to vote for? They'll do what people did in 1924 when Coolidge was running for re-election: they'll pay attention to what they see and hear. They'll think about what matters to them and decide what they like and what they don't like about the candidates and their programs. In the end they'll vote for the candidates they think will do the best job.

After the winners have been in office for a while, voters may decide whether or not they chose wisely. Even then they won't all agree.

ANN E. COOPER, *Editor*

Rooting Around

There are lots of political cartoons in the papers these days. Sometimes you can tell just by looking at the pictures which side they're on. When you see them, think about what they're saying. Do you agree? There will be a lot of political ads on television too. They will also tell you only one side. If you compare ads you may be able to figure out what they are telling you and what they are leaving out.