

Theodore Roosevelt at the Oneonta

Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), the twenty-sixth president of the United States, visited the Wyoming Valley three times between 1905 and 1912. Roosevelt, as Vice-President, succeeded to the White House upon the assassination of President William McKinley in September 1901 and served as President until March 1909 (later presidential offices expired in January).



In 1902 the Great Anthracite Strike of coal miners occurred in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Led by mine union leader John Mitchell, the miners also had the vocal support of Father John J. Curran (1859-1936) then of Holy Savior Church in the East End of Wilkes-Barre. (In 1919 Father Curran was transferred to St. Mary's Church of the Immaculate Conception in central Wilkes-Barre.) Impressed by the vigor of Curran's plea for the miners' cause, Roosevelt intervened and created a commission which resulted in settlement of the Great Strike and certain concessions to the miners.

In August 1905, at Curran's invitation, Roosevelt travelled by train to the Valley to address a national convention of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union, held in Wilkes-Barre.

In 1909 Roosevelt left office, succeeded by fellow Republican William H. Taft. He returned to the Valley on a private tour in August 1910 as a guest of Father Curran and dined at the Albert Lewis estate at Bear Creek.

In August 1912 Roosevelt, who broke with the politics of Taft, was running a third-party campaign, as the Bull Moose Party, to regain the White House.

On August 21, 1912, Roosevelt arrived by train to a crowd of 10,000. The occasion also celebrated Father Curran's twenty-fifth anniversary as a priest. Roosevelt was fully-booked including a major speech at the Armory on South Main Street, Wilkes-Barre, in addition to Curran's jubilee events at Holy Savior.

On Thursday, August 22, 1912, at the close of the jubilee events, the Roosevelt party motored to the Oneonta Hotel at Harvey's Lake for a banquet. An edited report of the Oneonta banquet, which appeared in the Wilkes-Barre Record, the following day, follows:

At the close of the jubilee mass in the church and the reception which followed at the parochial residence yesterday morning, Father Curran, accompanied by Col. Roosevelt, Bishop Hoban visiting priests and a large number of guests autoed to Harvey's Lake. The autos obtainable were not sufficient to carry all of the guests and two special cars were engaged from the traction company and conveyed the remaining number to the resort.

At the lake a banquet was served to about 225 people, including the altar boys and the church choir. Hundreds of cottagers at the summer resort crowded the porches of the Oneonta endeavoring to obtain a glimpse of the distinguished assemblage. The dinner was served in the main dining room. Seated at the

table of honor were Theodore Roosevelt, Right Rev. Bishop M.J. Hoban, Monsignor Coffey, Rev. J.J. Curran, Hon. Peter A. O'Boyle, P.H. Morrissey and Hon. S.J. Strauss. Roger O'Donnell of this city presided as toastmaster, and in his witty, humorous introductions, drew the plaudits of everyone and continual glimpses of the colonel's teeth.

He reviewed the jubilarian's rise from the mines to the position of unsurpassed prominence in the diocese. He stated that there was no one in the valley with more friends, and that no one had done more to break down religious barriers between neighbors. He characterized Father Curran's school of education as one in which merit is the only key to success and intellect the only aristocracy. He introduced as the first speaker Bishop Hoban.

The bishop spoke of the brotherhood which has characterized Father Curran's ministry, the affection for all people of all creeds, the closeness of the relationship between him and the members of his flock, and the fellowship which he entertained for his fellow priests. He recalled the similar relationship especially prevailing in Ireland, where the priest forms the medium between the rich and the poor, between trouble and the home, between affliction and the family. He closed with the poem, "Soggarth Aroon," illustrative of that

feeling of love and respect with which the Irish parishioner regards his priest.

MONSIGNOR EXTENDS GREETINGS

Monsignor Coffee, under whom Father Curran began his priesthood twenty-five years ago at St. Rose Church in Carbondale, then spoke expressing his appreciation of his subordinate's work as a priest. He stated that he had been watching over him for a quarter of a century and the impression formed from the results of this observation was that Father Curran had made good. He extended the greetings of his parish.

Father Fagin of Hazleton, representing the priests of the Scranton diocese, was then presented, and with reference to Father Curran's activity in the cause of total abstinence stated that "whether he is Prohibitionist, Keystoner or Bull Moose – we love him still." The remark invoked a hearty laugh from Col. Roosevelt. Father Louis Haas of St. Vincent's College the jubilarian's alma mater, recalled a friendship which has extended over thirty years, from the time that he first knew him as a pupil until the present occasion, when he was celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination. He stated that even as a boy Father Curran had shown signs of a leadership and mastery of men. He brought the felicitations from the president and

faculty of the college, expressing their pride in what had been achieved by the host in religion and humanity.

Father Trainor, vicar general of Philadelphia, followed and brought tears of laughter to every eye when he stated that in representing Philadelphia he might be considered as being slow, but (turning to Col. Roosevelt) he remarked: "I leave it to you whether Philadelphia is not more 'progressive' than New York." And the colonel nodded assent. He extended the greetings of the priests of the archbishopric of Philadelphia.

JUDGE STRAUSS SPEAKS

The tribute of S.J. Strauss was to the man who had brought a part of the city from a state of inefficiency to a place where its people now make themselves felt on the right side of every public question. He characterized this citizenship as representative of the influence wrought by Father Curran. The reputation of this priest he said, was not local, for no matter how confined his sphere may have been, the fact that he had done his duty fearlessly, making other people's distresses his own, had won for him recognition in places far away. When he stated that the judges of Luzerne County behaved in fear lest Father Curran advocate the recall of judges, Col. Roosevelt whose position upon this matter is a political

issue, smiled inscrutably and applauded with his hands. He closed by saying that Wilkes-Barre might well be proud of the man whose influence had achieved so much for temperance, with his only weapon a plea for temperance on the basis of manhood and self government.

RIGHT KIND OF AMERICANISM

Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, the guest of honor, was then introduced amid a thunderous applause that continued for several minutes. He arose smiling his acknowledgement. Turning to Bishop Hoban, he spoke of the bishop's reference to the relationship existing between the Irish priests and their parishioners. The verses of Sogarth Aroon, he termed old favorites, and expressed a belief that they fully described the feeling that must exist between Father Curran and his flock.

He was interested also in a reference made to the many nationalities represented not only in Luzerne County, but in the entire United States, and pointed out that it was well that all these people could come together, as they did yesterday, each respecting each other's habits and ways of thought – and yet all be straight Americans.

Then to Father Curran he said, that not only was the gathering one, the significance of which was a great testimony to his worth, but it

was significant in the fact that it was typically American in character. "Of course," he added, "we are aware that Americans have shortcomings. I am occasionally compelled to speak of them. Still there is no other country so well worthwhile to live in; none where this kind of gathering would be accepted as a matter of course; where Catholics, Protestants and Jews gather together to honor a Catholic priest. We can well be satisfied with Uncle Samuel's land." A gathering of this character he believes solves the problem of combining friendliest good feeling and tolerance with fervor; not a tolerance of indifference, but a toleration that is accompanied with love for those of different faith. This, he said, was the lesson taught in the gathering. Then turning to Mr. Morrissey and to Judge Strauss, he remarked, "When you, as a layman representing the lowly people, and you as a Jew, and myself as a Protestant, are asked to join in a celebration like this, it is an object lesson in the right kind of Americanism.

Following the dinner some guests took the Lake trolley back to Wilkes-Barre. But the trolley jumped the tracks near Luzerne and nearly tumbled into Toby's Creek.

Roosevelt returned to his home in New York. At the time he was embroiled in a congressional inquiry whether Big Oil had provided him campaign funds in his 1904 election – a charge Roosevelt denied.

Roosevelt lost the 1912 election, but also spoiled the re-election of W.H. Taft. Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, was elected President. In 1918 Roosevelt's youngest son, Quentin

Roosevelt, an American pilot, was shot down during World War I. Roosevelt's health was broken due to the loss and he died on January 6, 1919.



Father Curran served as pastorate of St. Mary's Church from 1919 to 1936. He built St. Mary's impressive Rectory and established three new parishes: St. Patrick's in 1920; St. John's in 1927; and St. Therese's in 1929. Pope Pius XI named Father Curran a Monsignor. He died on November 7, 1936. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission approved a State

historical marker to Father Curran at the Holy Savior site in 1995.

President Roosevelt's son, General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., received the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism during the 1944 Utah Beach D-Day landing of the Battle of Normandy but died of a heart attack during the War. President Roosevelt had been nominated for the Medal of Honor for his own bravery in Cuba (the charge up San Juan Hill) during the Spanish-American War, but he was denied its award – largely for political reasons. On January 16, 2001, President Bill Clinton posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor to President Theodore Roosevelt.