Random Recollections of Campaigning With Colonel Roosevelt

John Proctor Clarke

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Mountain Meeting. From Two Years' Experience Among the Shakers by David Lamson. West Boylston: Published by the Author. 1848.
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Random Recollections of Campaigning
With Colonel Roosevelt

by John Proctor Clarke

Justice of the Supreme Court of New York John Proctor Clarke (1856-1932) wrote the following reminiscences of Theodore Roosevelt's New York gubernatorial and presidential campaigns many years after the events and expressly for the Roosevelt family. Clarke was a New York corporation attorney at the time of the campaigns and one of the company of Roosevelt supporters who traveled with the campaign trains.

The anecdotal memoirs give an interesting perspective to turn-of-the-century political campaigns. They are naturally favorable to Roosevelt and serve to add flavor to a man who already is known as one of our more human presidents. While the memoirs provide little-known stories written from the point of view of an admirer and close political associate, they provide little material of substantial research value. They were intended to amuse the Roosevelt relatives and are reprinted here with intent to amuse you.

Syracuse University Libraries has two Theodore Roosevelt collections, one of which includes the "Random Recollections" below but both of which contain many letters and documents that provide information of significant research importance. Competent scholars are urged to use these collections.

In the Gubernatorial Campaign of 1898, we started our first tour of the state with a trip up the west side of the Hudson River to Plattsburg and through the northern counties to Ogdensburg. The Colonel was accompanied by four of his Rough Riders in uniform: Cassi the bugler, an Italian, who had been a soldier of fortune and a wanderer over the earth; "Buck" Taylor with a soft black eye and a southern drawl, who was not at all the Buck Taylor of the Buffalo Bill outfit but who posed as such; "Big" Johnson who was a man and a soldier, every inch of him; and Sherman Bell who had a voice like a roaring bull of Bashan and who later became Adjutant General of the Colorado National Guard. "Billy" Youngs, subsequently the Governor's secretary and afterward United States Attorney for the Eastern District of
New York, was in general charge and pulled the bell rope when it was time to start the train after our five and ten minute stops when we gave car-end talks to wayside crowds. When the train stopped at such impromptu meetings, Cassi would execute a brilliant bugle call, the Colonel and the rest of us would make short speeches and the train would move on.

Buck Taylor grew very much excited with the speaking and becoming possessed of an irresistible desire to talk himself, pled for an opportunity. Finally Youngs gave way and just before time to pull out he would introduce Buck, who would begin, “Mah fellar citizens, this is the proudest moment of mah life.” Then Billy would pull the bell rope and the sudden starting of the train would put an end to the speech. After this had occurred four or five times I said to him, “Buck, it seems to me you are having a great many very proud moments on this trip.” Drawing himself up to his full height of 6’1”, his eyes snapping, he said, “Mr. Clarke, every time I talk for mah Colonel I am prouder than I was before.” I finally said to Billy, “Give Buck a chance to get off his whole speech.” So at the next stop Buck was given his chance and this was his speech in full:

“Mah fellow citizens: this is the proudest moment of mah life. I want to talk to you about mah Colonel. I want you to know him as we know him and if you do you will love him and follow him as we done. He kept ev’y promise he made to us and so he will to you. When he took us to Cuba he told us we would have to bury dead horses, and we done it. He told us we would have to lie out in the trenches with the rifle bullets climbing over us, and we done it. He told us we would have to drink dirty water, and we done it. He told us we might have to go with mighty little food, sometimes only hard-tack and dirty water, and we done it, but he had it just the same. He told us we might meet wounds and death and we done it, but he was thar in the midst of us, and when it came to the great day he led us up San Juan Hill like sheep to the slaughter and so he will lead you.”

At a little town on the northern tier, I think it was Malone, just before the train started Sherman Bell with his tremendous voice had started to make a talk when someone in the crowd made a disparaging remark about the Colonel. As Bell started to reply the bell cord was pulled and the train started; Bell’s voice rose above the clatter of the train swelling into a grand crescendo as we moved off: “I want to tell that blankety blank blank son of a blanket and make any remark like that, we will give him a decent burial before sun-down.”

At Ogdensburg Mason Mitchell, an actor who had served in the regiment and been wounded at the Battle of Kettle Hill and who had been delivering his story of the Rough Riders in vaudeville, joined us for one night and was given a place on the programme at the great meeting at the Opera House. In his peroration he said, “And then out of the woods darted the
Theodore Roosevelt in Rough Riders' uniform, circa 1901.
Photograph by Fabian Bachrach
Colonel with a revolver in each hand and waving his sword in the air he shouted, ‘Come on boys’ and led the charge up the hill.” When he got back into his seat beside me, I said, “Mason, if the Colonel had a revolver in each hand, how did he wave his sword, with his teeth?” Mason did not speak to me for the rest of the evening.

After the meeting Senator Maltbie took a crowd of us, including the four Rough Riders, into the bar-room of the hotel and ordered some champagne. We were all talking pretty earnestly together and I happened to be talking to Buck Taylor when the Senator rapped on the bar and, elevating his glass, said, “Come boys, let’s drink to the Colonel’s health.” Buck Taylor straightened up and, raising his glass, said, “I had rather drink . . .” “I believe you,” said Cassi, interrupting, and it was only the strenuous interposition of the crowd that prevented internecine strife right then and there.

To show how the rural reporter can get things twisted and bring chagrin and even the blush of shame to a speaker, at Binghamton I was put up for a short talk and having a white carnation in my buttonhole, a quotation flashed into my mind. I said that Colonel Roosevelt had “worn the white flower of a perfect life.” The intelligent reporter printed the next day that I had said that Colonel Roosevelt was a pure white flower!

One of the little affecting things in that campaign that I recall, of an entirely different character from the incidents I have narrated, occurred at Watertown. Our meeting was held at about eleven o’clock in the morning at the theatre. We went from the brilliant sunlight through the stage door upon a dark and gloomy stage with the curtain down. We had no idea whether there were fifty or a thousand people there when suddenly the curtain went up, disclosing an auditorium packed to the ceiling. In that campaign, by instructions of the Democratic State Committee, their speakers had made no allusion whatever to national affairs or the Spanish War but had devoted themselves entirely to state affairs and particularly to canal scandals. There was a reading desk on the stage from which was draped an American flag. Chauncey Depew said to the audience that he understood that his old friend (whose name has now escaped me) was running for an office on the Democratic State ticket, was a resident of Watertown and was to speak in that hall the next night at a Democratic meeting. He advised those present to go and hear him and to listen to him with great care and to compare the arguments advanced and the issues presented with those that they should hear that day. But he said, “I warn you that you will not hear a word of the great and vital issues of the hour. You will be dragged through the mud of the Erie Canal. Of the splendid and noble achievements of this great year in the life of the Republic you will hear not a word. Of the noble altruistic and successful effort of your country which has put an end for all time to Spanish despotism in the islands of the Eastern and Western oceans, you will not hear a syllable. Don’t you think that my old friend would give his good right arm for the privilege of waving this old flag for just one minute?”

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You will remember that at the time of the nomination of the Colonel a question was raised as to his eligibility, the Constitution providing that no person shall be eligible to the office of Governor except a citizen of the United States of the age of not less than thirty years and who shall have been five years next preceding his election a resident of this state. The Colonel had been in Washington holding the office of Assistant Secretary of the Navy for some two years and while he was in Cuba had been assessed for personal tax in the City of New York. His cousin John had been directed to attend to his affairs while he was gone and had submitted his own affidavit that the Colonel was a non-resident of the city. But instead of leaving it at that or stating, as was the fact, that he was a resident of Oyster Bay, he had gone further and said the Colonel was a resident of Washington, D. C. He had instituted, all in the absence of the Colonel, a certiorari proceeding to have that personal tax vacated upon the ground of such non-residence. But on the first day on which the tax could be paid under the law, which was also the first day of court when the certiorari proceeding could be brought on, the Colonel had paid the tax and the proceeding had been discontinued. In one of his speeches some fellow on the outside of the crowd bawled out, “How about that personal tax?” With that familiar set of the jaws which we all know so well and that inimitable grin which we also know so well, he snapped back, “I paid it.” And that was the end of that issue in that campaign.

Billy Youngs used to tell a good story on me. I don’t know whether it is true or not. But he told it so often that I came to think he believed it. You may have heard that I had a speech about your father in that campaign which came to be known as the “Only a Soldier” speech. It was a personal talk and for dramatic effect the Colonel insisted that I should immediately precede or immediately succeed him on the programme. It was a speech the kernel of which could be delivered in five minutes or it could be expanded to meet the exigencies of the situation to one-half to three-quarters of an hour. Of course when people are traveling together in such a combination and hearing each other talk a dozen times a day, they become quite familiar with what the others have to say. This was especially true in my case because my speech was considered, I may say with due modesty, so good a campaign talk that we got the newspaper boys to agree not to publish it so that in substance it could be repeated to every audience. In some places we had two meetings going at the same time and when a speaker was through at one place, he would be hurried to the other meeting. Now Billy Youngs’ story is that at Watertown we had two such meetings (and here is where I think he slipped up in his story because my recollection is that we had only one meeting in Watertown) and that at one hall he spoke first while I was speaking at the other and that he delivered my speech word for word and line for line. When I followed him after an interval and delivered the same speech to the same audience, it met with no response and he says that I said to him that night, “Billy, I cannot understand it. I have roused the whole state with that speech of mine and I
did not get a hand-clap at Watertown.” The story is a good one and a possible one and it may be true.

So much for the Gubernatorial Campaign.

In 1900 in the McKinley-Roosevelt campaign, we started from Saratoga and I was with the Colonel for four weeks winding up at Pueblo, Colorado. The one prevailing and distinctively funny thing about that trip was the introductory speech by the local chairman in each community and especially the rural communities. The local celebrity was usually picked out for chairman of the meeting and usually he was a man with no experience in public speaking, was somewhat overawed by the distinguished company of visiting statesmen and very much embarrassed by the novelty of the situation. With the exception of the Colonel and such men of national prominence as Governor Shaw of Iowa and Senator Nelson, he knew nothing about the rest of us and while the names and a short statement as to who we were were given to him, he almost invariably fumbled. An especial sufferer was Curtis Guild, subsequently Governor of Massachusetts and Ambassador to Russia, who was a very good speaker but was also very thin-skinned and sensitive and always desirous of having the limelight of purest ray serene turned fully on him. His name was a stumbling block to almost every local chairman. He had been an Adjutant General in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia and was Chief of Staff to General Fitzhugh Lee, accompanying him to Cuba after the fighting was over when Fitzhugh Lee commanded the Army of Occupation in Havana. Curtis used to take pains to inform the presiding officer as to his name and his personal achievement. He would say, “I am Curtis Guild, Adjutant General and Chief of Staff for General Lee of the Army of Occupation and was the first man in Massachusetts to volunteer when the President called for troops.” Then the chairman would get up and say, “My fellow citizens, I have the honor of introducing General Chester Gould, the first man who answered President Lincoln’s call for volunteers in the great Civil War,” and Curtis would say to me, “My Lord, when Lincoln called for troops, I was four years old.”

But the climax was reached at a South Dakota town. A spur from the main line of the road ran up to this place. Where the spur bifurcated from the main track there was a village where a meeting was held and Governor Shaw and Senator Nelson were left there. I dropped off with the General Manager of the Union Pacific and Billy Loeb to have some prairie chicken shooting while the rest of the party went on to this place. There the local chairman introduced Guild in the following manner: “My fellow citizens: The Committee of Arrangements have been greatly disappointed in not having the distinguished speakers which we hoped to welcome on this great occasion. We had expected to hear that brilliant governor of a neighboring state who made such a splendid campaign for sound money four years ago, the Hon. Leslie M. Shaw, but he is not here. We had also expected to have with us that great senator, the Hon. Knute Nelson, who though coming over to this country as a
poor Scandinavian boy and carrying a musket for four years in the Civil War, yet by the splendid powers of his intellect and character has achieved a seat in the greatest legislative body in the world, the Senate of the United States, and he is not here. But the Committee has done the best it could and I now introduce to you General Nelson A. Miles of the United States Army."

Col. Grigsby was our presiding officer through part of South Dakota. He had been put in command of the second regiment of Volunteer Cavalry authorized by Congress at the same time the Rough Riders were, but the Colonel had been so interested in matching-up horses for his different troops, a troop of bays, a troop of blacks, a troop of browns and so on, of which he was very proud, that he did not get fully organized until the war was over. Grigsby, permeated with military fervor, introduced everybody by a military title. After he had introduced me twice as Colonel Clarke I said to him, "See here, Colonel, I don’t want to parade under false colors. I am not a military man, I saw no service in the late war." He looked at me with unutterable scorn and said, "Who the hell are you anyway?" I said to him, "I am John Proctor Clarke, a lawyer in New York; was Assistant Corporation Counsel in Mayor Strong’s administration when the Colonel was President of the Board of Police." So he got up and said, "I now introduce a Mr. Clarke of New York," with the accent on the a, "a corporation lawyer." You can imagine how pleased an ordinary Western country man was to listen to a corporation lawyer!

The most embarrassing situation in which I ever was put as a public speaker occurred in Butte, Montana. Butte is the most unique city I have ever seen. Just about dark we came out of a tunnel high up on a mountain side and looked down upon a valley in the center of which rose a conical hill which was the city of Butte. It was surrounded and crowned with stacks from which poured steam and rolling black clouds of soft coal smoke, green and red and yellow sulphur flames. No blade of grass grows in the whole town. It is a mountain of slag and refuse from the mines, bare, horrid and awful in its appearance. It reminded me of Dore’s conception of Dante’s Inferno more than anything I ever saw in my life. There was no public hall in Butte large enough to hold a meeting but some miles out of the town, up on the side of the mountain, there was a stream and baths which made a green spot where a large pavilion had been erected; to this place we were conveyed by hacks to hold a public political meeting. To our surprise, when we got there we found a very large assembly. The local committee had said to us, “Now we understand that the Republican Party has adopted the gold standard in its platform and we understand that you stand upon that platform. We have accepted it, but this was the great center of the silver industry and while we have accepted the platform and we know your views, yet there are a great many old silver men in this community who feel tender and a little sore and it is not any use to harrow up old feelings, and while we don’t ask you to go back on your principles or be double-faced or anything of that kind, yet there
are plenty of issues in this campaign to talk about and we beg you out of consideration for our local conditions here to let the silver question alone.” As that was sound political judgment, of course we acquiesced. The local chairman was given to that idiosyncrasy which I have already alluded to and introduced me as “Dr. Proctor of New York.” I had a little fun with him and with the audience in straightening that out and gave one or two anecdotes showing the difficulties that we speakers had to struggle with in our introductions, and then I did the most foolish thing that a public speaker could do. I asked a question of the audience. I said, “Well now, gentlemen, after all the splendid orations to which you have listened tonight, in which the great issues of the campaign have been so admirably discussed, what is there left for me to talk about?” A big flannel-shirted man standing on a chair at the end of the big hall put his hands up to his mouth and bawled out, “Talk about silver.” The result upon the platform was as if an earthquake had struck it; you could feel it shake with the trembling of the knees of the local committee and for once I was almost stumped. But I said, “Silver? silver? why that’s a dead issue, chloroformed by prosperity; why even Bryan is not talking about it this year.” The episode was closed because the crowd rose and applauded and then I went on with the speech about the Army and the Philippines. But I give you my word, it was the most awful moment of my political career.

I recall an incident high up on the Colorado mountains where the train had stopped for a few minutes, the block signal being against it. A group of twenty or thirty men formed instantly around the rear car. The Colonel was shaking hands and chatting with them when, just as the train was leaving, a bearded, spectacled, narrow-faced, anarchistic looking fellow who had pushed himself into the front rank looked up at the Colonel standing right over him and said, “Mr. Roosevelt, why do you take credit that you know does not belong to you? Why do you claim to have been the hero of San Juan Hill when you know that you and your command were saved from utter annihilation by the black soldiers of the 9th Cavalry?” Just then the train started and all that the Colonel could do was to lean over and shake his fist in the man’s face and say, “That, sir, is a damnable lie.”

At Green River the Colonel had his best joke on me. I had been talking about the war in the Philippines and our army there and how we came to take the Philippines, and he said that putting my closed hands about four feet apart and leaning over to the audience I said, “We’ve got the bear by the tail and can not let go.” Whereupon, after I sat down, he handed me a card on which he had sketched in pencil an animal with a very long and bushy tail and had written upon it, “John’s conception of a bear; he has confused it with the common or garden skunk.” I have that card still among my cherished possessions.

I will wind up these desultory reminiscences of the delightful experiences of campaigning with the Colonel with the following. Of course
when men travel with one another for weeks in a political campaign where
the issues necessarily are limited, they get thoroughly familiar with each
other's line of argument and with the stories and anecdotes which serve to
illumine arguments and discussion. As we were a thoroughly harmonious
crowd working as a team for a common end, it happened gradually that all of
the arguments and stories and incidents came to be common property, out of
which we each carved for our several speeches that which was left after the
other fellow got through. We used to take special care of the Colonel when
making two or three speeches in the same place and would catch him in the
wings and tell him, "I used such and such a story and such and such an
argument and you have such and such that you can say," so that the whole
oratorical output became a reservoir from which each of us drew.

I left the Colonel at Pueblo, Colorado and came back east some three
weeks ahead of the party and I did not see him until the night of the great
mass meeting at Madison Square Garden which wound up the campaign.
There I had a seat immediately adjacent to the platform. The Colonel had a
magnificent reception and made a splendid speech. When he got through I
wrote on my card and had it sent up to him: "My dear Theodore: I am
delighted to see how well you have delivered Curtis's and my speech." He
read it, laughed, showed it to Senator Platt who sat next to him, shook his
fist at me and beckoned me to come up and sit beside him.