

HISTORY

When Grant came to town

ANTHONY DOMINIC | Copy Editor

In the posterior of Chautauqua Institution's Oliver Archives Center is a worn, maroon tome. Its cover, thick and self-effacing, reveals little. Inside is the inscription "Chautauqua Scrapbook, Volume I: From 1874 to 1887 Inclusive," as prepared by a Mrs. Adelaide L. Westcott.

Therein, among a number of old records and photos beyond counting, are the writings of Theodore L. Flood.

In August 1875, Flood — who would become the first editor of *The Chautauqua Assembly Herald* the following year — was serving as co-founder John Heyl Vincent's personal assistant. In an attempt to make the second New York Chautauqua Assembly greater than the first, Vincent sought to invite a high-profile guest to the grounds.

This guest would be President Ulysses S. Grant.

As his writings reveal, it was Flood who brokered the historic visit. For posterity, he recorded every detail of the arduous process.

Flood is vulnerable in his writing, almost apologetic. A keen observer, he captures the nuance of a crowded room and the spirit of a conversation in ways that would seldom occur to most writers. Timid yet self-aware, Flood put words to a page as if they were never going to be read by another.

Flood's account begins with two titles — "The First Offshoot About Chautauqua" and "Old Chautauqua Days" — as if he couldn't decide which he liked more.

He depicts a scene in which he is meeting with Vincent to discuss the summer guest. At first, Vincent appears to be set on Henry Ward Beecher; however, he suddenly changes his mind and suggests the president.

Vincent had been Grant's pastor in Galena, Ill., before either man gained fame, said Jon Schmitz, Institution archivist and historian. The two remained in touch; Vincent once visited the president at the White House.

Flood recounts their conversation. Vincent noted that

while Beecher "is known to be on the side of Christianity," Grant "is not a member of any church." Therefore, Vincent believed, the Assembly had more to gain from Grant's visit.

At the time, Grant was troubled by several highly publicized scandals within his administration. With Congress in recess, he would be taking vacation in Long Branch, N.J., which was then considered the Hollywood of the East Coast. (Seven presidents made visits to Long Branch, after which its Seven Presidents Park and Church of the Presidents are named.)

Vincent told Flood to travel to Long Branch to meet Grant in person.

And with that, Vincent began drafting a formal invitation.

The Meeting

Upon arriving in Long Branch, Flood met with Gen. Orville E. Babcock, Grant's private secretary, or chief of staff. (Babcock is the great-grandfather of Jim Babcock, husband of Sherra Babcock, Chautauqua Institution vice president and Emily and Richard Smucker Chair for Education.)

Babcock said the president would be arriving at his cottage around 11 a.m. Following lunch, he anticipated Grant would "take his smoke" around 2 p.m. This, Babcock said, would be the best time to extend Vincent's invitation.

At 1:45 p.m., Flood and Babcock left in a carriage and "promptly ... were at the door of Grant's cottage."

"It was a simple ceremony," Flood writes. "I sent in my card and letter of introduction written by Dr. Vincent. That was enough. The President remembered his old pastor and immediately

I was ushered into his smoking room."

Flood said the president inquired with great interest about Vincent and his family. He was then presented with Vincent's written invitation.

"The president kept me talking while he smoked two cigars," Flood writes. "His manner was easy; he talked freely expressing himself with the utmost frankness on many subjects of vital interest at that time; it was pleasing to find him in real life so different from the pictures given of him in the press of the country as 'the silent man.'"

"When he asked, 'Where is Chautauqua located? What is the distance from Long Branch? What kind of meeting is held there?' I answered the questions briefly, finding that to each of them it was easier to make reply than to the last one."

Flood then asked the president, frankly, if he would be part of the Assembly, adding that Chautauquans would be pleased to receive him Sunday.

"He replied, 'I might go out on Friday night and arrive there on Saturday and be with you for the Sabbath.'"

Flood asked if he could assist in making any travel arrangements. Grant declined and said Babcock would handle his arrangements.

Flood added that the Assembly would also be pleased to receive the president's wife, as well as any of his other friends or relatives.

"General Babcock will go with me, and perhaps one of my sons," Grant said.

After it was decided that Grant would arrive in Jamestown, N.Y., Saturday, Aug. 14, Flood asked, "Will you take lunch at ex-Governor [Reuben] Fenton's house, or will you pass on up the Lake?"

"Pass on up the Lake, pass on up the Lake," was the prompt reply.

"This embarrassed me exceedingly," Flood writes, "but I covered my disappointment and proceeded with the conversation."

Fenton, the 22nd governor

of New York and a former senator and congressman, was, as Flood suggested, "the most prominent political man at this time in Western New York."

"The lines were drawn between the Liberals and the Stalwarts," Flood writes of the divided Republican party. While the Stalwarts were supportive of Grant, Flood said that Fenton, "with a large number of influential men," led the opposing liberal faction.

"My suggestion that ex-Governor Fenton's hospitality would be extended to the President was, I saw, an embarrassment that would confront us in the days to come, unless it was settled at this interview."

It was established that Grant, Fenton and a small party of politicians would join Republican supporter Alonzo Kent for lunch at his home in Jamestown. Kent was the president of Jamestown's First National Bank.

Flood reveals that he had reservations about this gathering.

"How could I get around this lunch at Jamestown and preserve peace in social circles and perpetuate harmony between political factions, had grown to be even a larger question with me than getting the President to Chautauqua."

Upon leaving Grant's cottage, Flood immediately sent a one-line telegram to Chautauqua.

"Long Branch, Dr. J. H. Vincent. — Jonathan says he will come. T.L. Flood."

One is left to presume "Jonathan" was Flood's code name for Grant (see sidebar).

"My mission was ended," he writes, "and I went home, pleased with myself."

The Arrival

On "a bright morning of August," Flood went to Salamanca, N.Y., to meet Grant, who would be arriving by train.

When the train arrived, Flood was immediately confronted by Babcock. By the look on the general's face, Flood knew something was wrong.

Noticeably flustered, Babcock said "'a Newspaper man'" had boarded the train and told everyone that former governor Fenton would be hosting the day's lunch.

"It vexes the President," Babcock said, before ordering Flood to enter the president's special car and resolve the matter.

As Flood made his way inside, he noticed the president's entire party was in a "state of anxiety." When he found Grant in the back of the car, though, the president was "perfectly agreeable."

Upon learning the reporter's rumor was false, the president was ready to depart for Jamestown. Flood notes that he was in good spirit.

"The President was an interested observer," he writes. "He inquired about the Indians on the Reservation in Cattaraugus County, which joined Chautauqua, their habits, their religious customs, and how they adapted themselves to the civilization of the white people around them; the prices of the land and of horses and the dairy interests of the country interested him greatly."

"Of politics he had nothing to say," Flood writes. "No question of government was mentioned."

Flood had little to say of the lunch in Jamestown — which, likely to his surprise, suggests it was uneventful. He did write that it was "el-

THE PRE-EMPTED VISIT OF VICE PRESIDENT WILSON

Before inviting President Ulysses S. Grant to Chautauqua, Theodore L. Flood also invited Vice President Henry Wilson.

The day after Flood met with John Heyl Vincent to discuss the New York Chautauqua Assembly's summer guest, he left for Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where Wilson "was resting from annoyances of political life at Washington."

Upon entering Wilson's den, Flood writes, "He was surrounded with books and papers and looked like a student in his den."

Wilson was patient and showed interest in the Assembly. When asked if he would visit, Wilson promptly said, "Yes, I will come."

The vice president's travel expenses were to be paid, but Flood said Wilson would allow nothing more.

Shortly after, Flood sent a telegraph to Vincent, in which he used a code name to refer to Wilson.

"Dr. J. H. Vincent, Mayville, N.Y.:—Jackson will come. T.L. Flood."

"We had arranged that I should telegraph, in cipher, the result of my visit," Flood writes, "therefore I called the Vice-President 'Jackson.'"

After learning that Grant had also accepted an invitation to Chautauqua, Wilson changed his mind and decided not to come. Flood speculated that this was a security decision.

"Hence, I made up my mind to this, —if the President goes, the Vice-President will not go; but if the President does not go, the Vice-President will."

Wilson died from a stroke three months later in November 1875. He was 63.

—Anthony Dominic

egant" and consisted of 12 courses.

As Babcock had arranged, the president would travel to the Assembly on the steam yacht *Josie Bell*.

"The yacht looked like a fairy ship," Flood writes. "So beautifully was she draped and festooned with the stars and stripes."

Upon boarding, Grant immediately took a chair on the yacht's bow to have a perfect view of Chautauqua Lake.

"Other steamers, large and small, sailed on either side and in the rear of the *Josie Bell*," Flood writes. "The great stern wheeler *Jamestown* with three thousand souls on board, was far on the right. *The Griffith*, with eight hundred people on board, sailed half a mile to the left. *The Moulton*, the *Vincent*, and a numerous fleet sailed near by, like so many ships of war, laden with loyal people, in whom party spirit seemed to vanish, for the present, amid a sweeping wave of popular enthusiasm.

"The weather was fair, the Lake was calm, and the sail was delightful."

When the Assembly grounds came into view, Flood said it looked as if "there was not enough room ... for any more people, so dense was the crowd that had gathered to receive the President."

The police cleared a path as the *Josie Bell* docked. Vincent was the first to greet Grant as he stepped onto the pier.

The Sabbath

Flood wrote little about Grant's time on the grounds. However, while his insight is missed, an anonymous reporter of the now defunct *Buffalo Express* captured the historic weekend in great detail.

"The assembly of 1875 was in every respect an improvement upon that of 1874," he begins, noting that the president's visit gave Chautauqua "a distinctively patriotic air."

"It was a season of the year when Congress was not in session," he writes, "the public mind was at rest, and no exciting questions monopolized the columns of the daily press, so that more than usual space was given to the accounts of the scenes enacted at Chautauqua Lake."

Though he was invited by Vincent, the president spent Saturday night in Assembly co-founder Lewis Miller's cottage. Grant's cohort included: one of his sons; Babcock; Babcock's son; Rep. Oliver Hoyt of Connecticut; and "staff correspondents from great daily papers in the chief cities." During the day, they occupied a tent erected in Miller Park.

The reporter recalls a moment when an old Civil War veteran spotted Grant on the veranda of the tent, and his eyes began to swell with tears.

"By Jove, [the veteran] said, 'the old boy looks just as he did in his tent down at [the Battle of] Shiloh; I'm going to speak to him,' and with an enthusiasm ... he pressed through the crowd up to the veranda and called out, 'How are you, General? I fought with you at Shiloh and Vicksburg.'"

"The president met him cordially," the reporter writes, "and seemed to enjoy the liberty of the welcome."

On Sunday, Grant occupied the platform in Miller Park and "listened very attentively" to the morning and afternoon lectures. Later, Vincent presented Grant with an English (or "Bagster") edition of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible.

"No speech, not a word did Grant utter," the reporter writes, "but, with a graceful bow, received the book and sat down. It was intended as a souvenir of his visit, and he carried it home and was heard to refer to it several times in after years, as a peculiarly pleasing episode in his visit to the Assembly."

The reporter recalls another scene that transpired outside Grant's tent before his departure.

"While the services have been going on at the stand today, a group of admiring friends stood in front of the president's tent, calmly surveying the scene," he writes. "Passing there this morning, I saw one young gent from the country, with stripped pants, cowhide boot, and open eyes and mouth, looking at the President of the United States probably for the first and last time."

The reporter ended his reflection of the scene with one word.

"Remarkable!"

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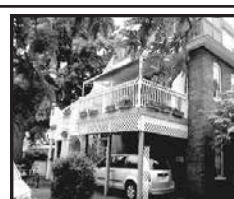
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