

Pastimes and Recreations of the Presidents

By Paul Leland Haworth

"President Roosevelt played three sets of tennis with Secretary Garfield," "President Taft spent the afternoon at Chevy Chase golfing with Captain Archie Butt."—how often of late years we have read such dispatches from Washington! Other presidents have recognized the value of recreation. George Washington and most of his successors were firm believers in the adage about all work and no play.

Though usually grave and staid, Washington was a social being like the other Virginians of his time. He was fond of dinners and company, and had a decided weakness for dancing. He was a frequent subscriber to public balls, and while president was constant attendant at the regular "Dancing Assemblies" at New York and Philadelphia. He and Mrs. Washington often rode ten miles to Alexandria to attend a dance. Of one such he wrote in the following humorous strain:

"Went to a ball at Alexandria, where Music and dancing was the chief entertainments, however, in a convenient room detached for the purposes abounded great plenty of bread and butter some biscuits, with tea, and coffee, which the drinkers of could not distinguish from hot water sweet'ned. Be it remembered that pocket handkerchiefs served the purpose of table cloths and Napkins and that no apologies were made for either. I shall therefore distinguish this ball by the title and title of the Bread & Butter Ball."

"We had a little dance at my quarters a few evenings past," wrote General Greene from the winterquarters at Morrisstown in 1780. "His Excellency and Mrs. Greene danced upwards of three hours without once sitting down." Washington still danced in 1795, and led many a stately minuet during his two administrations. In 1799, only a short time before his death, in declining an invitation to an Alexandria assembly, he wrote regretfully: "Alas! our dancing days are no more!"

Washington's Fondness for Cards. Washington was also fond of cards. The entry for a bad day in his carefully kept diary was not infrequently: "At home all day over cards." Numerous purchases of "dozen packs playing cards" are noted in his ledger. In accordance with the usual custom of the time (in which the Anglican clergy of Virginia concurred), he was not averse to enlivening interest in a game by playing for a stake, though never for a heavy one. His greatest known gain was three pounds, his largest loss nine pounds, fourteen shillings, and ninepence. He lost oftener than he won.

He enjoyed the theater, and went to circuses, cock fights and to see dancing bears and menageries. In the main, however, he was an outdoor man. His greatest passions were for horse racing and riding to the hounds. "The best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback," testifies Jefferson. "Being fond of horses, he naturally enjoyed racing and attended meets whenever possible. He kept up riding until a day or two before his death, but in 1794, through the fall of his horse, his back was wrenched so severely that he had to give up fox-hunting."

Thomas Jefferson enjoyed many of the diversions affected by his fellow Virginian of Mount Vernon, though his tastes ran more nearly to the purely intellectual.

Fiddler President. In his youth, Jefferson was passionately fond of the fiddle, and usually carried one about with him when traveling. He often played duets with Patrick Henry, and he so coveted a valuable instrument owned by John Randolph that he entered into a queer written agreement that if he survived Ran-

dolph he was to have the fiddle upon paying \$300 dollars. In case Randolph lived longest, he was to have \$400 worth of Jefferson's books.

It is related that when Jefferson was courting the rich young widow Martha Skelton, who he ultimately married, he entered into an agreement with two other admirers that each should ascertain first, and the other suitors were so eager to learn the result that they walked past the lady's home. As they drew near they heard such joyous and triumphant sounds issuing from Jefferson's fiddle and the widow's spinet that without more ado they gave up hope and sadly wended their way homeward.

After his marriage Jefferson took lessons from an Italian artist named Alberte and attained such proficiency that a paroled British officer who visited Monticello during the revolution says that he was the finest amateur performer he ever heard. There were some of Jefferson's neighbors, however, who were so much wedded to "breakdown" that they did not enjoy his classical performances and considered him "the poorest fiddler in Virginia." While minister to France he fell and broke his right wrist and quit fiddling forever.

Like Washington, Jefferson was a splendid horseman. His granddaughter says that at one time it was his habit to ride a pack of "the devil's picture cards" in his house. Yet he sometimes played not only cards but also other games of chance for small stakes. When an old man, he won \$2 at one sitting at cards and 14 cents at backgammon, but lost nearly \$5 at lotto.

His matured judgment was that "gambling corrupts all dispositions, and creates a habit of hostility against all mankind."

In his later years Jefferson's recreations were more than ever intellectual. He was an omnivorous reader, and only one other president has approached him in versatility. In fact, he was a sort of Virginia edition of Benjamin Franklin. He was a statesman, an inventor, an author, a scientist, a philanthropist, and a philosopher. He corresponded with many of the chief European scientists and literary men and was constantly making scientific experiments.

He invented the mold-board plow and the copying press, and he made a collection of Indian vocabularies. In one of the crises of his administration visitors at the White House found his floors covered with the bones of mammoths and megatheriums from Big Bone Licks.

About the Poet President. Another learned and versatile president was John Quincy Adams. He had perhaps the strangest diversion of all, for he spent many of his spare hours, as his voluminous journal bears witness, in composing poetry. Luckily he was never forced to depend upon this talent for a livelihood, for his productions lacked imagination, delicate imagery, and other essential merits. He realized his own limitations. In writing of a poem entitled "Dermot" in which he was engaged in 1831, he said: "My style is the mock-heroic, but it wants vivacity, humor, poetical invention, and a large command of language." He displayed wonderful interest in the pastime, however, and perhaps secretly hoped that by persistently

he might compose a great poem. On the 17th of March, 1831, he wrote in his journal: "I have composed five stanzas of a poem."

"My occupation of idleness encroaches upon the slumbers of the night. A pressure of uneasiness at the failure of invention waked me between two and three o'clock. From that time till five I lay and composed five stanzas of digression; then rose; wrote one stanza of paraphrase from Isaiah; walked round the capitol square, and in the walk composed six stanzas more of Dermot—one or two frequently swam the best yet written—two upon the national character of the Irish, especially suited to the day."

How many statesmen of the present generation thus employ their early morning hours? Of his many productions his poem on the death of young children is perhaps the most creditable. One stanza runs thus:

No passion fierce, no low desire,
He quenched the radiance of the flame;
Back to its God the living fire
Returns, unscathed, as it came.

In the way of athletics, John Quincy Adams was notable as a swimmer. Even in old age he was frequently seen in the Potomac in the early morning. On one occasion a boat in which he was embarked upset in the middle of the Potomac, but he managed to swim ashore in his own shoes.

"Old Hickory's" Diversions. Andrew Jackson was more of a sportsman than his predecessor. In his youth he was as rollicking, fun-loving, horse-racing, game-cocking, mischievous a fellow as could be found on the border. While still in his teens he staked a fine horse, his sole earthly possession, on a throw of the dice. Parton says that Jackson "played cards, fought cocks, ran horses, threw the 'long bullet' (a cannon ball slung in a strap and thrown with a feat of strength), carried off gates, moved outhouses to remote fields, and occasionally indulged in a downright drunken debauch. But he was not licentious nor particularly quarrelsome."

Sixty years ago there were old gentlemen still living who remembered seeing him at the cockpit in the public square adjoining the old Nashville inn cheering on his fighting cocks with such words as: "Hurrah! my 'Dominica'! Ten dollars on my 'Dominica'!" or "Hurrah! my 'Bernadotte'! Twenty dollars on my 'Bernadotte'! Who'll take me up? Well done, my 'Bernadotte'! My 'Bernadotte' forever!"

As he grew older Jackson abandoned the more questionable of such sports, though his interest in horses endured to the end. During his terms as president he was too old and infirm for any very violent exercise, but he had his fast horses, descended from his famous Truxton, brought to Washington, and took delight in watching them perform on the race course. He also usually took a daily walk or ride, and occasionally paid a visit to the Blue Ridge, a resort near the mouth of the Potomac.

He was abstemious in the use of liquors, but was extraordinarily attached to smoking. He had a great collection of costly pipes sent him from all over the world by admirers. "But I still smoke my corncob, Sam," he said to Samuel Dale, a famous scout and Indian fighter. "It is the sweetest and best pipe."

Lincoln's Pride. Abraham Lincoln was exceedingly proud of his stature and strength. He stood six feet four inches in his stockings, and could "outlift, outwork, outrun and outstride every man of his acquaintance." While attending a state fair at Milwaukee in 1859 he was much chagrined on finding that he could not toss cannon balls as well as a professional in one of the sideshows. As they pushed the remark drolly, he said: "Well, friend, you can outlift me, but I could lick salt off the top of your hat."

While president he frequently astonished visitors by asking them to measure his height with him, and was always greatly pleased when he found that he was the taller. On one occasion he sorely shocked the patrician instincts of Senator Sumner by asking him to stand back to back with him while some one measured them.

He occasionally entertained the attaches of the war department by feats of strength, but he had few amusements. He enjoyed the theater, and also found diversion in reading the works of Burns, Petroleum V. Nasby, Artemus Ward, Josh Billings and other comic writers who appealed to his sense of the ridiculous and diverted his attention. He cared little for games, but occasionally played backgammon with his boys. He also practiced basketball a little for exercise but did not enjoy it. His outdoor life was practically limited to a daily drive to the Soldiers' home or some other destination. Probably his health and spirits would have been better had he found time for more physical exercise. He was a good rider, but always wore a tall silk hat and long-tailed coat and presented a most grotesque figure on horseback. He had little taste for hunting or fishing, never smoked, and was very temperate in his habits. Despite his great strength, the labors of his office wore heavily upon him, and he once remarked:

"I wish that George Washington or some other old patriot were here to take my place for a while so that I could have a little rest."

Doubtless he secured much relaxation from telling the stories for which he was renowned. "His sense of humor was his salvation." When attacked by varioloid, he said to his usher: "Tell all the office-seekers to come and see me, for now I have something that I can give them."

General Grant had two passions—fast horses and cards. "Cards had a singular fascination for him," says his biographer Baden. "He was extremely fond of all games in which skill and chance are combined; perhaps they suggested war; and when a man whom he liked in other affairs or for other reasons played with him, that man was very intimate." Whist and poker seem to have been his favorites.

Grant's Love of Horses. Grant was one of the finest riders who ever lived. In 1841, mounted on a chestnut sorrel named York, he established the West Point record for the high jump by clearing a bar six feet five inches high. This skill with horses he retained even after his retirement from the presidency, and numerous stories are told of his feat of horsemanship on his trip around the world. When president, he spent several weeks each summer at Long Beach. He took his horses there, and his chief amusement was driving about the country. Political opponents endeavored to make capital for their party by alleging that he was addicted not only to fast horses but also to fast living. His turnouts were described as the most magnificent ever seen. Cartoonists showed him as a heavy-faced, sullen man with two equally heavy-faced, sultry bull-dogs. He was called "the dog fancier," though he never owned a dog in his life, and could not bear them around. A great deal was said about "seaside lettering" and "absentee-

ism." In the campaign of 1872 a Democratic speaker alluded to Grant, with sneer as "the dummy driving his horse along the Jersey beach." To this a Republican orator made the following withering reply:

"Who was the matchless hero of Donelson, Shiloh, Chattanooga and Vicksburg?"

"The dummy who drives his horse along the Jersey beach."

"Who was it that led a hundred thousand heroes to victory over Lee and his before-unconquered army from the Rapidan to the Wilderness, to the James, to Petersburg, to Richmond, and the old apple tree at Appomattox?"

"The dummy who drives his horse along the Jersey beach."

Grant refused to take dancing lessons at West Point, but later learned after a fashion. He never enjoyed it much, however. One evening at Long Branch he said to a lady: "Madam, I had rather storm a fort than attempt another dance."

Grant was utterly unesthetic. Of painting, sculpture, and other forms of art he knew nothing. He read merely for information, not for culture or relaxation. He did not cultivate the society of writers and scholars and was ill at ease with them. In fact, he was a clam when in the company of any one he did not know intimately. He would sit and listen and listen, without saying a word in a way that was most disconcerting. But when with a few intimates, he often thawed out and did most of the talking.

He was the most appalling smoker of his time, with Edwin Booth a close second," says a biographer. His cigars were black, rank, and poisonous, and he consumed great quantities. He fairly reeked of tobacco. He liked young people, and the boys playing ball behind the White House sometimes had him for an umpire. Occasionally he would take a hand at the bat himself.

Grover Cleveland was as true a sportsman as any of the presidents. Hunting, fishing, billiards and cards were some of his diversions. His hunting was confined to small game such as ducks and quail; he never sought grizzlies, lions, and bonos in their native hairs. After his retirement he once contributed to a leading magazine a ponderous, polysyllabic article on shooting rabbits. His most famous fishing trip was one taken on Decoration day—an incident that provoked a loud outcry from political opponents. It is said on good authority that the trip was taken primarily not for sport but to enable the president to get away from turmoil and consider calmly a grave international complication.

He was such an ardent card player that on bad days at the duck blinds he always insisted on playing "high, low, jack and the game" from breakfast to bedtime. Knowing his insatiate proclivities in this direction, his comrades, in self-defense, sometimes secretly arranged to take turns with him to avoid being worn out.

Cribbage was one of his favorite games. A famous opponent was Commodore Benedict. For years they kept a score of their games together. When death came to the ex-president, Benedict was slightly ahead. Going to the Cleveland home, the commodore first looked at his dead friend's face. Presently he got out the well-worn board

and asked another of the ex-president's opponents to play a propitiatory game.

"I think he would have wanted to do it," said the commodore. Gravely they played the game. And the commodore lost.

Other presidents besides those mentioned have indulged in pastimes more or less characteristic. In fact, a study of their careers will show that nearly all of the twenty-six have been good sportsmen and that the better sportsmen they were the greater presidents they were apt to be. Their recreations formed a humanizing link between them and the rest of their kind and revived them for the grinding labors inseparable from administering the affairs of a great nation.

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