

Plans for the 1939 American Legion Convention In Chicago's Famed Coliseum Brings to Light a New Chapter in Nation's Presidential History



Interior of the Chicago Coliseum, where the American Legion 1939 national convention will open September 25. The view was taken during the Republican national convention of 1912 when a plan to stampede the delegates with the appearance of Theodore Roosevelt, who was later named as the National Progressive candidate, was abandoned. The plan to smuggle "Teddy" to the speakers' platform is told here for the first time.

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON
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THE work of preparing for the 1939 national convention of the American Legion, which meets for the first time in Chicago's Coliseum, scene of the nomination of three Presidents of the United States, has brought to light a new chapter in American presidential history. It is the story of a plan to smuggle "Teddy" Roosevelt into the regular Republican convention back in 1912, which, if it had succeeded, might well have changed the course of events in this country during the last 25 years.

The story was told for the first time recently by Charles R. Hall, veteran manager of the Coliseum, while he and Philip W. Collins, executive vice president of the Legion convention corporation, were making arrangements for the big gathering of thousands of Legionnaires from all parts of the country in that historic convention hall on September 25. The incident has additional interest because of the fact that a prominent figure at the 1939 session will be "Teddy's" son, Col. Theodore Roosevelt, who helped organize the Legion just 20 years ago. Bearing his credentials as a delegate he will walk, unhampered, into the very hall which his father was kept from entering by the use of barbed wire!

But, let Charles R. Hall, who was one of the 1912 "plotters," tell the story himself: "The Democratic party at Baltimore already had nominated Woodrow Wilson and Thomas R. Marshall when the regular Republican convention opened in the Coliseum on June 18. Although the logical thing for the Republicans to do was to renominate William Howard Taft, who was just completing his term as President, there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the record which Taft had made in the White House. And there was repeated talk of 'Teddy' Roosevelt—still a magic name for vote-getting. So the sessions dragged along while the delegates debated in their minds whether or not to renominate Taft.

"While the convention marked time, I was approached by the late George W. Porter, a Chicago capitalist, who was a strong Roosevelt supporter.

"'Roosevelt is in Chicago,' he whispered to me. 'Could you get him into the convention unseen?'

"My answer was: 'Of course! I'll put him on the front of the platform, right beside the chairman of the convention.'

"'What'll you charge?' Porter wanted to know.

"'Hell's Bells!' I answered. 'You don't think I'd charge for giving those convention delegates the thrill of seeing Teddy, do you?'

"But the very next day I found out that news of our 'plot' had leaked out. The sergeant-at-arms of the convention ordered me to stretch rolls of barbed wire along the footlights in front of the speaker's platform. I guess they thought we were going to have 'Teddy' planted on the floor of the convention, start a demonstration and then rush him up the center aisle and on to the platform.

"They didn't know that their barbed wire wouldn't have stopped 'T. R.' if we had gone through with our plan. I was going to admit him through a secret outer door, rush him into a tunnel entrance a few feet away and then through the tunnel and up a short flight of steps. When he hit the top step, he would have been behind their barbed wire, directly facing every delegate in the building.

"If he had done that, it would have stamped the delegates,"

declared Phil Collins, to whom Mr. Hall was relating the incident. "I remember what happened at that convention—a woman delegate mentioned Roosevelt's name and it started a demonstration which lasted for two hours before it could be stopped."

"There's not a doubt about it," agreed Mr. Hall. "I've often wondered why the plan was never carried through. All I know is that George Porter and his friends dropped the matter. I never asked him why and he never volunteered the information. . . . But I wish they had gone ahead. I was ready for my part in it."

As the 73-year-old Coliseum manager fingered an old-fashioned scarf-pin in his tie, he continued: "Maybe if they had gone ahead I wouldn't have had this pin. You see, it was given to me by 'Teddy' himself. But that was six weeks later when the 'Bull Moos-



Charles R. Hall, veteran manager of the Coliseum, looks over the official badges of some of the national nominating conventions held in that building. He is wearing a scarfpin presented to him by Theodore Roosevelt after the National Progressive convention in 1912.

ers' met in the Coliseum and nominated Roosevelt and Sen. Hiram Johnson of California as their candidates on the Progressive party ticket.

In addition to contributing this "now-it-can-be-told" item to American political history, the veteran manager of the Coliseum is also an authority on another story which links this building with another historic structure. That was the famous Libby prison in Richmond, Va., of Civil War days which was moved to Chicago, piece by piece, 50 years ago, and rebuilt on the present site of the Coliseum.

During the Civil War Libby was known as the "Palace Prison of the Confederacy" where 40,000 Union soldiers, most of them officers, were confined. The main prison was originally a tobacco warehouse, made of 13-inch bricks which were brought to this country from England. While plans for the Chicago World's fair

of 1893 were under way, a movement was started to purchase Libby prison and move it to the city on the lake as a Civil War museum. Prominent in this movement was the Chicago historian and collector, C. F. Gunther.

The work of moving the prison from Richmond to Chicago began in December, 1888. Each board, beam, timber, and block of stone was numbered and lettered and the task of transporting these and the 800,000 bricks in the main structure required the use of 132 20-ton cars by the Chesapeake & Ohio railway. The prison was rebuilt on the site of the present Coliseum, and re-opened as a war museum on September 21, 1889 (just 50 years and four days before the opening of this year's Legion convention!) Appropriately enough, its first meeting was a G. A. R. reunion. Meanwhile a massive battlement, which was designed to provide a flashy "front" for the museum, was built along the Wabash avenue side of the transplanted prison from stone that was quarried within the Chicago city limits of that time.

Thousands of visitors, before and during the 1893 World's fair, were attracted to the museum and its historical relics. However, this old prison museum was torn down in 1900 to make way for the present Coliseum but the

This year the American Legion "comes of age"—in more respects than one. Not only is it the organization's twenty-first annual convention, but, according to National Commander Stephen F. Chadwick, the 1939 assembly of the veterans will have a more serious tone than ever before. It will be provided by "American Democracy," first convention keynote in Legion history. Moreover, convention program plans call for large-scale participation by the wives, sons and daughters of the Legionnaires who will accompany them to Chicago.

The history of the American Legion goes back to the year 1919 and to Paris, France. That story is told by Col. Theodore Roosevelt, one of its founders, thus:

"No one man can claim to be the founder of the American Legion. I got the idea from a wounded sergeant in a hospital. He said we should form an organization of veterans of the war, adding, 'we have stuck together in the bad times; let's stick together in the good ones.'"

"After that, I talked with numbers of people, many of whom had been thinking on these lines. The problem was to get the organization under way. The Armistice had been declared. I asked some regular army friends at G. H. Q. if soldiers from each of the American divisions then in France could be ordered to Paris to discuss the idea. They told me they could not do that directly, but that they could order such a group of men to meet in Paris and discuss the morale of the American troops.

"We held the meeting on morale. Afterwards, at a dinner, we discussed plans for a veterans' organization. All agreed on certain principles. The first was that no difference should be made



COL. THEODORE ROOSEVELT

between those who had served overseas and those who had not—as the desire to serve was what counted. The second, that the Legion was to be a democratic organization, in which there should be no question of rank, and privates would get a full chance to tell the generals what they thought of them. Third and last, the organization should concern itself with policies, not with partisan politics. Next an organization committee was appointed. Eric Fisher Wood was named secretary, Bennett Clark, today senator from Missouri, vice chairman, and I, chairman.

"We decided to hold two meetings, one in Paris and the other practically simultaneously in the United States. Bennett Clark, Eric Wood and a number of others took the responsibility for the Paris caucus. I had been ordered home, and agreed to arrange the caucus at home.

"The Paris meeting went off in splendid shape. Everyone was interested and enthusiastic. All units were represented, and privates as well as generals were delegates. Incidentally, there was no trouble in getting delegates to go. Paris was a lodestone. This group adopted the name, American Legion. The name had been used by my father before the war, when he formed a group of Americans who had experience which qualified them to serve in the army in case of need.

"Meanwhile, I returned to this country, and with some other veterans, arranged for a caucus. We rented an office in New York city and got in touch with ex-service men in every state, asking them to organize the soldiers and sailors in their community, elect delegates and come to St. Louis on May 8, 1919.

"The first order of business was the election of a permanent chairman. We selected Col. Henry D. Lindsay of Texas, a Southern Democrat, thereby giving the lie to those who said it was to be a Republican organization. Next, we confirmed the actions taken by the Paris caucus, such as the selection of the name, American Legion, and adopted a declaration of faith and a temporary constitution. We provided an organization to carry on until the fall, when the first real convention was called in Minneapolis. There representatives of both Paris and St. Louis meetings would be, and the American Legion could take final form.

"At Minneapolis on November 10 our convention assembled. We elected as commander Franklin K. D'Olier, of New Jersey, adopted a permanent constitution, and the Legion came into being."

A President's Attendance Caused Flurry of Excitement in Church

One Sunday during the summer of 1917 the President suggested that we drive quietly over to Virginia and attend the service at the Pohick church, which was the place of worship of George Washington. When we arrived, the little edifice was well filled. Mr. Wilson, my brother Randolph and I were escorted to the Washington pew, given prayer books and left to ourselves. The service over, we were accompanied to the door by a member of the vestry and permitted to depart without any of the crowding about which usually attends the appearance of a President in public. Also I was impressed by the large congregation, for it was raining.

Afterwards Mr. Jervis, one of the secret service men, asked:

"M" for Noon

According to the United States Naval Observatory 12:00 M is almost universally used to designate 12:00 o'clock noon. M in this connection is an abbreviation of the Latin "meridies," meaning mid-day.

"May I tell you a story?" This is the story:

Knowing our plans, Mr. Jervis had reached the church at 9:30, finding it closed and not a soul about. At the nearest house he inquired whether there was to be a service. The man did not know, but said that the preacher was holding Sunday school at his own home and that Jervis might inquire of him. At the minister's house Mr. Jervis found a young man instructing a group of bare-foot girls and boys. Jervis asked the man whether there would be a service at the church, because the President had intended to come. "The President of what?" asked the clergyman. "Of the United States," replied Jervis. The minister looked at his caller sorrowfully. "Young man, are you ill?" he asked.

Jervis showed his badge, adding that the President and Mrs. Wilson were due in an hour. The minister clasped his hands. "Children, Sunday school is dismissed. All of you run home and tell your fathers and mothers the President is coming to church and I want a good congregation to welcome him." Then he turned to Jervis.

Wise and Otherwise

If your garden is fooling you, give it a few digs in return.

Women can give everything with a smile and take everything back with a tear.

Every dog has his day, says the proverb. And, judging by the row in my back garden, every cat has her knight.

"Parents are often a hindrance to children in a career," says a judge. Perhaps—but the children could hardly start a career without them.

A seaside worker tells me he sets \$2.50 a day for picking up litter. A tidy sum?

Did the guy who said "honesty is the best policy" ever try telling that boss what he really thought of him?

Hank says his wife's new diet has fairly took her breath away!

"Young man, I must shave. You run over to the church and tell the sexton to ring the bell—vigorously." At the church Jervis found the old sexton opening the door. He gave the minister's message. The sexton's mouth stood open for a minute. Then he said: "Here, you ring that bell. It's just outside in a tree. I got to go home and shave."—Edith Bolling Wilson in The Saturday Evening Post.

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