

Macon Resident Writes Of Presidents

Calvin Coolidge Namesake No 'Silent Cal' By Any Means

By KAY HORNER
Feature Editor

He was named for the 30th president of the United States, the one affectionately called "Silent Cal."

But the nickname is not one of the similarities between Calvin Coolidge and his namesake, Calvin Coolidge White. You see, Calvin Coolidge White is, by his own admission, a talker. A big talker.

Last week, he settled down in a booth in Fleming's Cafe, his favorite Warrenton haunt, to do what he does best—talk. The subject was one on which he talks with passion—United States presidents.

As he talked, a cup of steaming coffee grew cold. When talking about the presidents, White has

difficulty finding time to breathe, much less to sip.

A few minutes with White and one senses that he must be, without doubt, the presidential trivia king of these parts. And when it comes to presidents, there is literally no tidbit too trivial for White to commit to memory.

He knows which president had an artificial jaw made of rubber. He knows which president entertained friends by writing in Latin with one hand and, at the same time, writing in Greek with the other. And he knows, about as accurately as any detached observer can, which presidents fathered illegitimate children.

In 1976, to commemorate the country's bicentennial, White published "All the Things You Never Knew About Our Amer-

ican Presidents," a pocket-sized handbook of presidential facts from the sublime to the ridiculous.

The book, in question and answer format, was the compilation of a lifetime of reading and collecting facts about the men who have led our country.

A companion volume is mischievously titled "They Slept with the Presidents." It is a book about the country's first ladies.

These two publications were followed in 1980 by the publication of "Famous Presidential Election Facts." Look there to find the name of the president who cast his first vote at age 62.

The ship of state sails on, however, and White knows that his volumes need updating. One of his long-term projects calls for binding all three of his books into one volume with the addition of information about Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan.

But a series of strokes and heart surgery several years ago have forced White to take life a bit easier, if not always quieter.

These days, White spends much of his time in research in his library of more than 100 books on the presidents at Marlemetta in Macon. Marlemetta is the homeplace of his wife, Etta Harris White.

A substitute teacher in the Wake County School System, Mrs. White travels frequently to Raleigh, and White accompanies her to spend time in library research.

When his time and health permit, White lectures in area schools.

Although born in Brunswick County, Va., White was reared in Justice, a Franklin County community, and when not among Virginians, lays claim to Franklin as his native county. And it is in North Carolina that White devoted 37 years to education, as a teacher and administrator.

He is remembered locally for his term as assistant superintendent of Warren County Schools, from 1959-67. He later served as chairman of the English Department at Coastal Carolina College in Jacksonville and headmaster of Lawrence Academy in Murray Hill. At the time of his retirement, he was in his 10th year at King's College in Raleigh, having served as dean and then as president.

"I never met a student I didn't like," White noted. "And I believe that any failure can be turned into success if students will aim high and do right the first time...I stressed the three C's in education—competence, consideration and compassion," White said. It appeared that he might linger on the subject of education for awhile, but the presidents soon returned with this aside, "Truman combined those three C's."

A lifelong Democrat, White attests to having voted on a number of occasions "as he saw fit," namely, Republican.

"I'm a Democrat, but I vote as I damn well please," he said with a laugh. "And I do love those Democratic primaries."

He is not without political opinions, as would be expected from a man who lives and breathes presidential politics.

"If Truman had been faced with the Iran hostage situation, the Americans would have been out of there (Teheran) by the next morning or there would have been no Teheran," White asserted. "Without a doubt, Truman was the best decision-maker ever to occupy the White House."

His conversation, on whatever topic, is seasoned with presidential spice:



Calvin Coolidge White, compiler of all facts trivial and significant about American presidents, is shown above with two of his publications. Reared in Franklin County, White, a retired educator, now makes his home in Macon and is currently at work on a book about Lincoln's last day. (Staff Photo by Dianne T. Rodwell)

"Now, Theodore Roosevelt was known to say, 'Speak softly and carry a big stick.' I say, 'Speak softly and carry a little money.'"

"Do you know who was the first president to speak on jogging? Calvin Coolidge in 1927 when he said, 'I do not choose to run.'"

"Nixon will be considered a good president 50 years from now. People don't believe it now, but he will. Carter will be considered the weakest, except perhaps for Harding and Grant."

"Lyndon Johnson, I didn't like him at all, but I liked Lady Bird."

"My favorite presidents...well, let's see. There's Kennedy. He was one of my favorites. And, of course, Coolidge. And Truman, Jefferson, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt..."

It's difficult to cull the list. White cannot shake the urge to publish and two projects currently on the drawing board are a volume on Lincoln's last day ("I go to bed every night with Carl Sandburg's one-volume edition on Lincoln") and a book on famous presidential firsts.

"Do you know how many times Franklin Pierce qualifies for a 'first and only'?" White asked. Encountering this writer's blank look, White answered his question, as only he is qualified to do:

—Pierce was the first and only president who wouldn't say "I do solemnly swear." He affirmed.

—He was the first and only president to say his inaugural address from memory.

—He was the first and only president not renominated by his party.

And, according to White, he was also an alcoholic (not necessarily the first and only)

about whom it was said, "He fought and won many a bottle."

Listening to White, one wonders exactly how many volumes are yet to be published from information he has gathered about the presidents.

Although his volumes are out of print, Triangle-area libraries have copies.

But those who thirst for more presidential trivia will have to do one of two things: wait for White's next volume or drop by Fleming's Cafe one morning when White is holding forth.

The stories are yours if the asking.

By the way, in case you're still wondering, Cleveland the rubber jaw; Garfield was bilaterally ambidextrous; Jefferson, Cleveland and Harding fathered illegitimate children; and Zachary Taylor cast his first vote as a senior citizen.

Those interested in becoming presidential trivia buffs can begin with the basics, naming all the presidents.

And by the way, don't forget Millard Fillmore, the only president who married his former teacher.

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