

A PRESIDENTS DAY STORY

Coolidge became an angler in the Adirondacks

By DOUGLAS GLADSTONE

Special to the Enterprise

PAUL SMITHS — For some, Presidents Day, which is this Monday, has long been associated with computer, furniture and television sales. As the first federal holiday to honor an American citizen, the holiday was celebrated on George Washington's actual birthday, on Feb. 22, for many years.

While we traditionally now honor both Washington and Abraham Lincoln on the day, the holiday theoretically is supposed to pay respect to all the other men who have served as president as well. Like Calvin Coolidge, for instance.

"Silent Cal?" If you're shaking your head in stunned disbelief, you're not alone. According to Ellyn R. Kern, the editor of The Presidents' Journal quarterly, Coolidge, who served as president from August 1923 to March 1929, has never been rated high in presidential polls and has long been dismissed as quiet and passive. In actuality, the case can be made that he was one of this country's greatest presidents — especially since he cut taxes four times in six years and produced a budget surplus each year of his presidency.

At this time of high unemployment and skyrocketing debt, maybe we could all learn a thing or two from Coolidge — the only president to be born on Independence Day.

Amity Shlaes certainly makes an excellent case for just that. In her new biography of the 30th president titled, appropriately enough, "Coolidge," Shlaes — who is a syndicated columnist for Bloomberg and director of the George W. Bush Institute's 4% Growth Project, as well as a trustee of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation — produces a painstakingly researched work that offers ample proof why Coolidge serves as a model of what a great elected official can accomplish. The book was released by Harper Collins just four days ago, on Tuesday, Feb. 12. This year marks the 90th anniversary of Coolidge taking the presidential oath of office, which was administered by his notary father by the light of a kerosene lamp at 2:47 a.m. on Aug. 3, 1923.

Coolidge, as Shlaes notes, pared a \$28 billion national debt, which he inherited when Warren Harding died, down to \$17.65 billion by the time he left office. In July 1921, there had been 5.7 million Americans out of work; when he left office, that figure was 1.8 million. Under Coolidge, the top income tax rate came down by half, to 25 percent. Under Coolidge, the rich came to pay a greater share of the income tax.

As evidence of this last point, Amsterdam, N.Y., historian David Pietrusza, who in June 2012 co-authored with Shlaes a column on Coolidge for Bloomberg, reports that in 1920, the last year of Woodrow Wilson's administration, 15.4 percent of all income taxes were paid by those earning \$5,000 a year or less. When Coolidge left office, continued Pietrusza, that figure had shrunk to 0.4 percent. Those earning \$100,000 or more, he added, had paid 29.9 percent of all income taxes in 1920; by 1929, the figure had climbed to 65.2 percent.

So why isn't Coolidge thought of as one of the most important and influential presidents? Of the 43 men who have been president of the United States, there are some clear choices; like Lincoln, Washington and Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

But Coolidge? On most lists, he typically ranks between No. 25 and No. 31, though he once was ranked as high as No. 23 by Arthur Schlesinger Sr. in a November 1948 poll conducted for Life magazine.

Shlaes has her own thoughts on the matter.

"Coolidge is overlooked as a great president," she told the Enterprise in an exclusive interview, "in part because we Americans like a visibly strong president who uses the 'bully pulpit,' in Theodore Roosevelt's phrase. Coolidge's strength lay in his inaction, long misinterpreted as laziness. Every president recalls a sport, even if he lived before the

sport was popular. Coolidge is like a windsurfer — what he does looks easy, but requires tremendous strength."

Windsurfing aside, it was the president's attempts as an angler while vacationing in this area during the summer of 1926 that Adirondack residents still remember him for 87 years later.

"He wasn't an outdoorsman," says Dick George, a co-owner and custodian of White Pine Camp, where Coolidge and his wife, Grace, stayed from July 7 through Sept. 18, 1926. "His Secret Service man, Col. Edmund William Starling, was a fisherman, and helped him develop his interest in it. When he finally caught something, probably a bass, in Osgood Lake, he supposedly ran back to his wife, the First Lady, screaming, 'Mama, Mama, look what I caught!'"

In "The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency" (John Hopkins University Press, 2006), author John Sayle Watterson notes that the fish Coolidge caught that day alongside Starling wasn't a bass but rather "a handsome northern pike, weighing about six pounds."

According to George, a photo was taken of Coolidge's catch which subsequently appeared in the New York Times.

Because of its minuscule size, George continued, "White Pine Camp was later deluged with mail. People from all across the country were sending the president pictures of bigger fish that they themselves had caught. Apparently, they wanted to show him up."

Watterson adds that Coolidge was so enthusiastic about his first catch that, when then-New York Gov. Al Smith and his wife later decided to visit, "he took him on a boat ride around the lake. Proudly, he pointed out the spot where he had caught his first fish — he had only been fishing for a week. He then invited Smith to try his own hand at trolling, but the New York City native declined."

Howard Kirschenbaum, who was one of the founders of White Pine Camp Associates LLC, claims that Coolidge was resentful of Smith, "a firebrand Democrat" who knew how to hog the media spotlight.

"But out of courtesy for Smith being the governor of New York, he and the First Lady invited the couple to join them for lunch," explains Kirschenbaum. "And Coolidge allegedly caught a pike while they were out on the lake and decided that's what would be served. There's this photo showing Smith holding up the pike, but it was never cooked. I hear Smith donated it to the State Museum and it's on exhibit behind some bookcase somewhere."

What Coolidge caught was, in actuality, a trout, according to The Associated Press. In a July 17, 1926, AP story chronicling how the president and Mrs. Coolidge entertained Smith and his wife at White Pine, the article details how the foursome ate trout that Coolidge had hooked.

"The principal course (at the luncheon) was brook trout caught yesterday by Mr. Coolidge himself," the article notes.

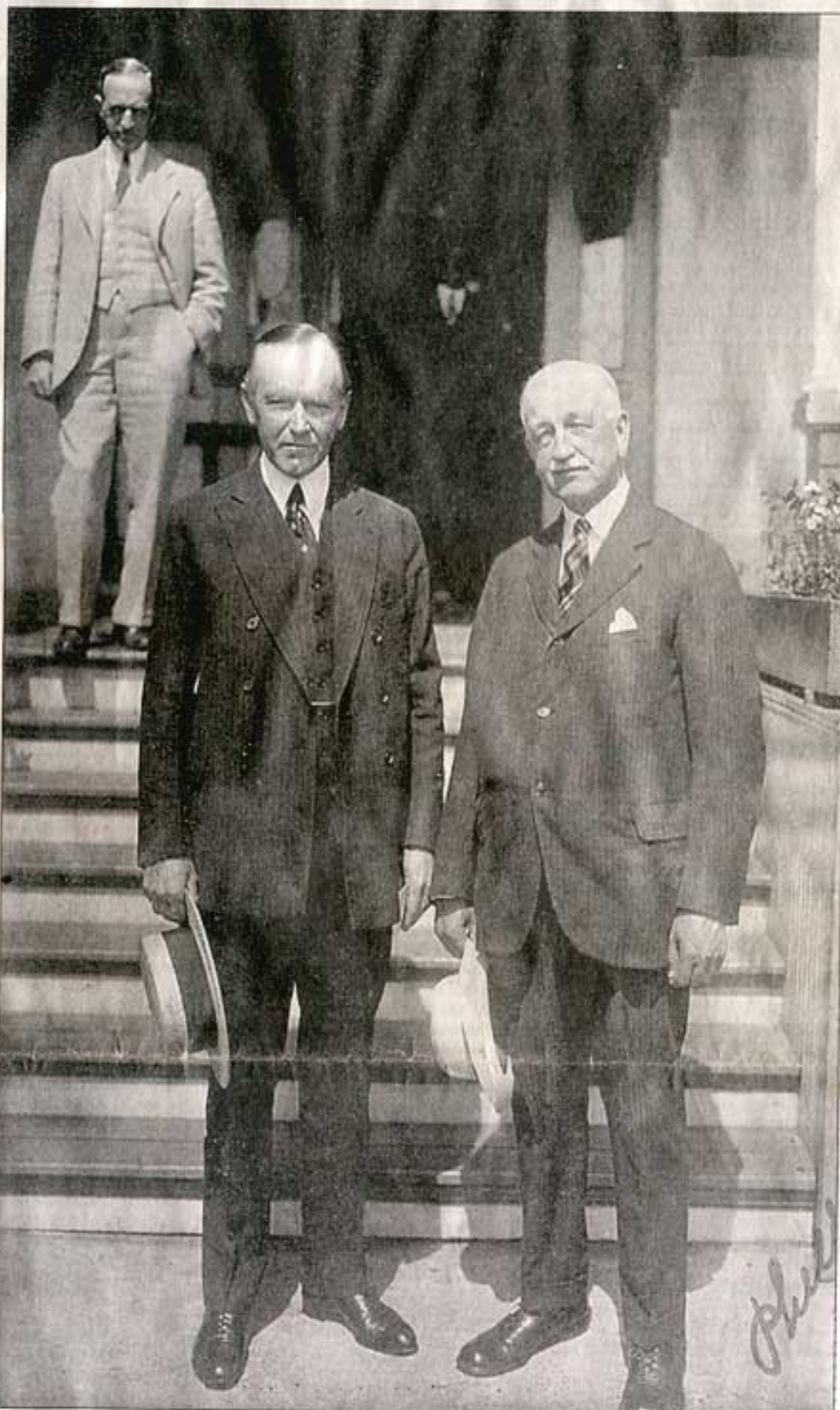
The AP story then helps improve on the bona fides of the First Fisherman by pointing out that, just as he was showing Smith all the spots where he had been successful at catching fish, "one leaped high out of the water right into the boat."

Watterson's own reporting adds some credence to Kirschenbaum's fish tale.

"As Smith was leaving," he wrote, "the president gave him a six-pound northern pike, very possibly the same fish he had caught with Starling. In the aftermath of their meeting, Smith reportedly had it stuffed and mounted as a souvenir; more likely, he ate it for dinner."

However, a communications assistant for the New York State Museum, Albert Gnidica, told the Enterprise that no such memento is exhibited at the museum.

Then there's the 46-pound cherry pie that TIME reported was brought 86.5 miles to be given to the Coolidges. Thirty inches in diameter, the pie, containing 5,000 cherries, was sent via crate by the Grand Traverse Cherry Growers of Michigan and carried to the White Pine Camp by a former classmate



President Calvin Coolidge, left, and Paul Smith's Hotel owner Phelps Smith stand in front of the hotel's Glover Cottage, where the president set up his Executive Summer White House for 10 weeks while vacationing in the Adirondacks in 1926.

(Photo courtesy of the Adirondack Collection, Saranac Lake Free Library)



Boat House, Summer White House, Osgood Lake, Paul Smiths, N. Y.

The Osgood Lake boathouse is where the presidential party left from to do fishing in the summer of 1926.

(Photo courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation)

of Coolidge's at Amherst, Wallace H. Keep.

"The smell of the shellac permeated the crate that the pie came in, and they never ate it," said George.

At the time, White Pine Camp was owned by Irwin Kirkwood, the publisher of the Kansas City Star newspaper. Ruth Butler manages the property today.

A leading preservationist who received an award from the Preservation League of New York State in May 2011, Kirschenbaum envisioned the camp as a unique historic site when he purchased it in 1993.

"I originally put together a partnership to operate the camp as a museum," he says. However, Kirschenbaum acknowledges that

the camp didn't make much money as a museum. Now billed as a vacation and wedding venue, he says visitors always get a chuckle upon learning that the Coolidges slept there.

"Mind you, you're not actually SLEEPING ON THE SAME BED the Coolidges used," he said. "We've changed the furniture some since then."

Stories like George's and Kirschenbaum's belie the fact that Coolidge actually did some important work while in the Adirondacks.

"Well, White Pine was his residence for those 10 weeks, and that's where the more colorful stories were," explained George.

White Pine Camp may have been

where the president and first lady stayed, but the Summer Executive Mansion was operated out of Glover Cottage at what was then the Paul Smith's Hotel. According to local historian Mary Hotaling, "during his 10 weeks there, the president had many visitors, including American Ambassador to Mexico James R. Sheffield. As a result of discussions at Glover Cottage, Chicago was established as the nation's east-west airport hub, paving the way for O'Hare Airport eventually to become the nation's busiest airport, and a series of meetings on Latin American policy led to the decision to send the Marines into Nicaragua, which resulted in putting Anastasio Somoza" into power.