

Finding Facts to Support a Family Tradition

by Phyllis Matthews Ziller, M.L.I.S.

The Tradition



Herbert Rorer

My grandfather, Herbert Francis Rorer, died when I was just four-and-a-half years old. My few memories of him are derived more from the family stories told through the years than from my actual memories. I've heard my mother speak often about her father's years as a boy scout. She enjoyed recounting the story that his Boy Scout troop in Princeton, New Jersey, accompanied the newly-elected president Woodrow Wilson from Princeton to Washington, D. C., for the inauguration. This event must have made a large impression on my grandfather if my mother was still sharing the story decades later. There haven't been many details passed down other than the group went by train, the same train Woodrow Wilson took to Washington, and that they had some official duties to perform there.

This tale has always intrigued me. Being the collector and keeper of all things family, I inherited a box of photographs and papers belonging to my grandparents. This box contained photographs of Herbert in his scout uniform, a photo of scouts lined up and standing at attention along a street, and two original photographs of President Woodrow Wilson at his inauguration. My curiosity was piqued.

The box of papers that belonged to my grandparents also contained an issue of the "Princeton Recollector," a weekly newspaper published for a short time in the 1970s. The paper was filled with reminiscences by the townspeople about days gone by. The featured article in this saved issue was about Woodrow Wilson's inauguration day in 1913. What a day that was for these Princetonians. The article contained quotes from Herbert's sister, Sarah Rorer Hoffman, about the Boy Scouts' involvement that day. Other details about the day's events were gleaned from the many personal recollections in this paper.

There was never any doubt in my mind the tale was true. Because it was evidently a cherished time, my goal was to build a story around that tale, to find details about the day and document it so it would not be lost.

Beginning with a family tradition, finding clues in memorabilia inherited from my grandparents, and adding background information found on the Internet, I was able to create a written story thereby ensuring this family tradition will not be lost.

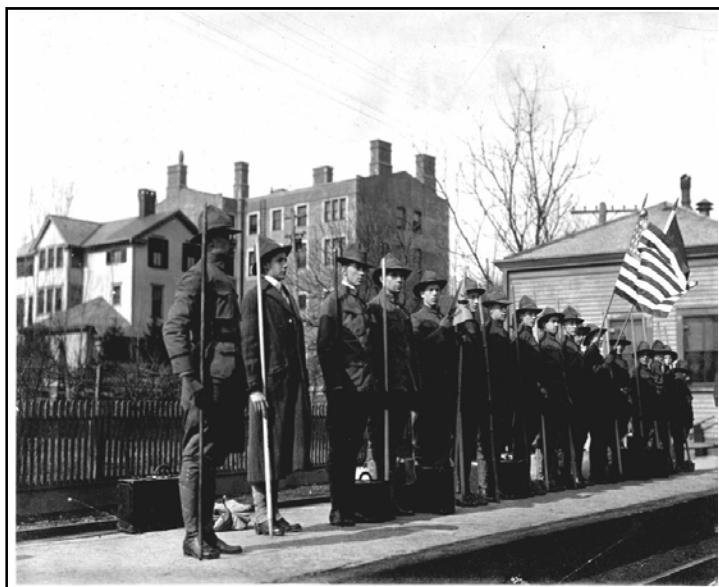
The Boy Scouts and the President

Undoubtedly the high point during Herbert Rorer's scouting career was the escort Woodrow Wilson received to his presidential inauguration from Boy Scout Troop No. 3. But just how did

this newly-formed scout troop achieve the honor of escorting the president-elect from his home in Princeton, New Jersey, to Washington, D. C.?

The Boy Scouts of America organization began in 1910 and quickly spread throughout the country. Troop No. 3 was formed in Princeton, New Jersey, not long afterward. The troop's scoutmaster, John Traeger,¹ was a friend of the Rorer family and had lodged with them at 41 Vandeventer Avenue in Princeton for several years.² He was a single man who worked as an architect at nearby Princeton University. This rookie boy scout troop included Herb, his childhood friends Ed Snook and Harold Hinkson, as well as a couple dozen other Princeton boys.³

When Woodrow Wilson, then governor of New Jersey and resident of Princeton, was elected president in 1912, he chose this local troop of boy scouts to escort him to the inauguration in Washington. Tradition was begun when the Boy Scouts of America named Wilson's predecessor, President Taft, as honorary president of the organization.⁴ This honor would be bestowed on all future presidents through and including our 43rd president, George W. Bush. Woodrow Wilson chose to include the local boy scout troop as a part of his inauguration.



Boy Scout Troop #3 in formation. Herbert Rorer is 7th from the left.

On the morning of 3 March 1913, the boys of Troop No. 3 donned their new uniforms and assembled in front of President-elect Wilson's home on Cleveland Avenue in Princeton. The route from his house to the train station was lined with well-wishers and school children who serenaded him with "Old Nassau."⁵ The scouts boarded the train with Mr. Wilson and set off for the trip to Washington.⁶

Inauguration day 4 March 1913 dawned in Washington, D. C. An overcast but mild day for the beginning of March, it would be a pleasantly warm fifty-five degrees by

¹ Boy Scouts of America membership certificate, Troop No. 3, Herbert F. Rorer, dated 1 March 1912, privately held by Phyllis Matthews Ziller, Wake Forest, North Carolina, 2008.

² 1910 U. S. census, Mercer County, New Jersey, population schedule, Princeton Borough, sheet 9B, dwelling 224, family 226, John H. Traeger; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 9 October 2008); citing NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 896.

³ "Princeton Recalls Woodrow Wilson," *Princeton Recollector*, November 1976, p. 17, col. 1.

⁴ "The Final Journey of President Harding," The Boy Scouts of America, *Scouting Magazine*, October 2000, <http://www.scoutingmagazine.org/issues/0010/d-wwas.html>: 8 August 2002.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16, col. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17, col. 1.

⁷ "Presidential Inaugural Weather," National Weather Service, 20 January 2005. http://www.erh.noaa.gov/lwx/Historic_Events/Inauguration/Inauguration.html: accessed 8 June 2005.

early afternoon.⁷ Woodrow Wilson arrived at the steps of the capital—he would be the last man to ride to his presidential inauguration in a horse-drawn carriage.⁸ The boys of Boy Scout Troop No. 3 from Princeton took their places at the viewing stands and proudly performed their duties. Herb’s sister, Sarah Hoffman, reminisced many years later: “That was Woodrow Wilson’s bodyguard when he was inaugurated in Washington.



President-elect Wilson on the way to his inauguration, 4 March 1913

They stood guard at the stands and they were all Princeton boys. My brother was one, and Ed Snook and Harold Hinkson.”⁹

After the inauguration, the boys, surely exhausted from their trip, made their way to the train station for the return trip to New Jersey. Confusion reigned as scores of visitors jammed the trains leaving the city.¹⁰ As the train pulled from the station to begin the journey home, no doubt the excitement of this unique experience was churning amongst the boys from Princeton. The thrill and honor of being chosen to be a part of a presidential inauguration provided memories that would last a lifetime, and beyond.

⁸ “Inauguration Celebrates 225 Years of Freedom,” The United States Army - Military District of Washington, http://www.mdw.army.mil/news/Inauguration_celebrates_225_years_of_freedom.html: accessed 8 June 2005.

⁹ “Princeton Recalls Woodrow Wilson,” *Princeton Recollector*, November 1976, p. 17, col. 1.

¹⁰ “Princeton Recalls Woodrow Wilson,” *Princeton Recollector*, November 1976, p. 17, col. 1.

All photos are from the author’s private collection.