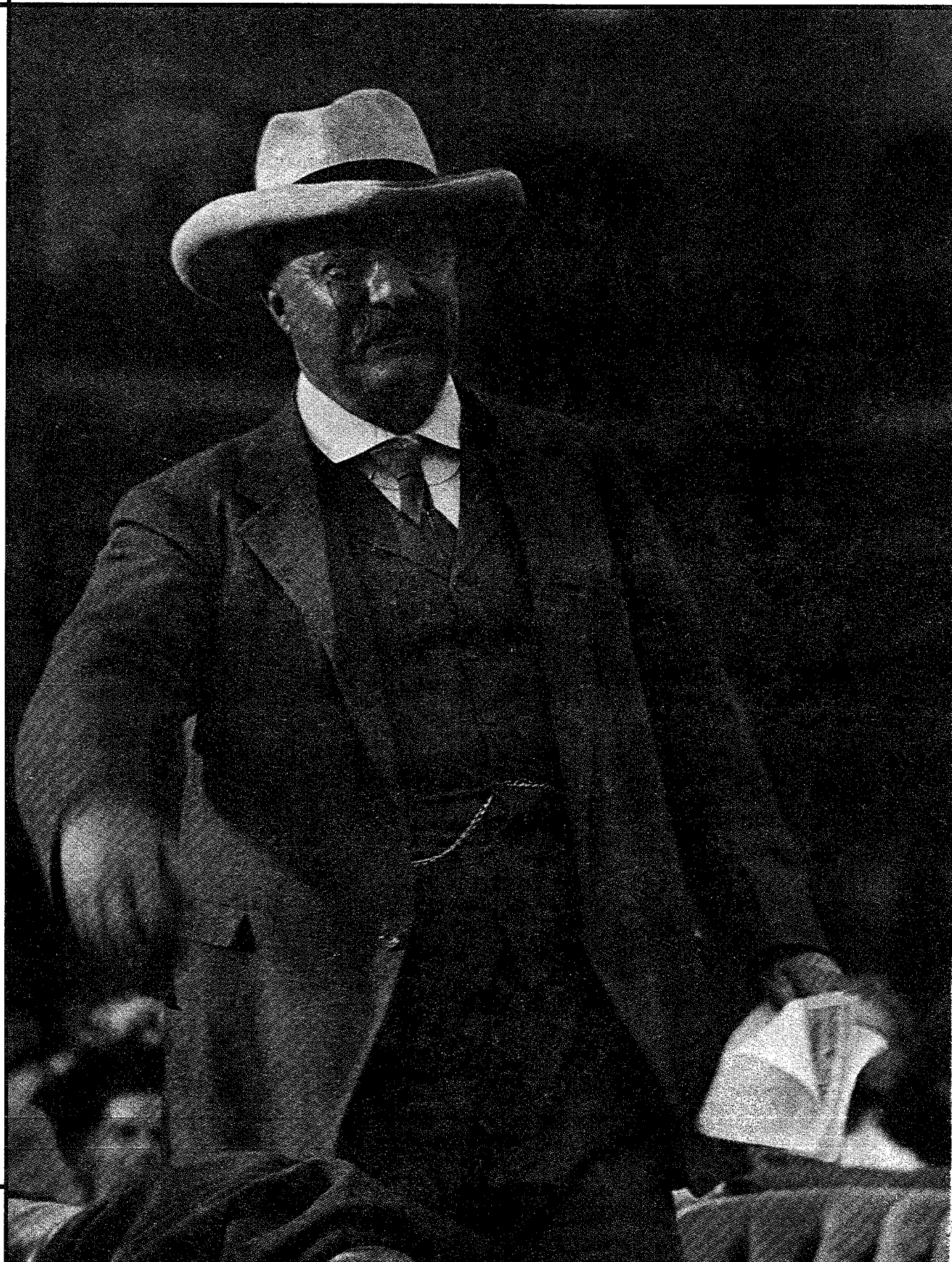




# *Theodore Roosevelt Association*

## J O U R N A L



Summer, 1984

Vol. X, no. 2

# *John M. Parker's Confrontation with Woodrow Wilson*

edited with an introduction

by

GARY M. LAVERGNE

*Note:* Mr. Gary M. Laverne is an instructor and Chairman of the Department of Social Studies at Rayne High School, Rayne, Louisiana. He received B.A. and M.Ed. degrees from the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He resides in Church Point, Louisiana. The confrontation between John M. Parker and Woodrow Wilson is referred to in the essay on the Roosevelt division by Professor Joe F. Decker in this issue of the *Journal*. The Association thanks Mr. Laverne for locating and presenting this previously unpublished and important manuscript.

—John A. Gable

\*\*\*\*\*

## Introduction

Louisiana history from Reconstruction to Huey Long is dominated by the rule of Bourbon politicians, patricians, and members of the noblesse oblige. The purge of everything Republican that followed Reconstruction brought on bi-factional Democratic machine politics. This bi-factionalism flourished for a hundred years.

John Milliken Parker (1863-1939), it seems, always proved to be the exception. He was indeed a true progressive reformer and an independent in a state dominated by machine and Democratic Party politics. A prominent New Orleans businessman, cotton broker, and reformer, in 1912 Parker joined Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party. He was considered one of the most prominent Southern and Democratic converts to the new party, which attracted few Southerners or Democrats. As a member of the Progressive Party, any success by Parker in Louisiana would have been unusual at best. And yet Parker made a respectable showing as the Progressive or "Bull Moose" candidate for Governor of Louisiana in the spring of 1916. Later that same year, in 1916, Parker was nominated for Vice President to run with Theodore Roosevelt at the meeting of the second and last Bull Moose national convention. The Roosevelt-Parker ticket never materialized, however, because TR declined the second Progressive presidential nomination and backed the Republican candidate Charles Evans Hughes, believing that the defeat of President Woodrow Wilson was more important than the perpetuation of the remnants of the Progressive Party, which had been badly defeated and lost many leaders in the 1914 state and Congressional elections. John M. Parker returned to the Democratic Party, and in 1916 endorsed and campaigned for the reelection of Woodrow Wilson. Four years later, as a Democrat, Parker was elected Governor of Louisiana,

serving 1920-1924. He is considered one of the great governors in Louisiana history.

Parker's connections with both TR and Wilson put him in a position enjoyed by few Americans. He had impressive credentials in Democratic circles and in the Roosevelt camp. The Roosevelt-Wilson rivalry reached an emotional climax during World War I. When the United States entered the war, Roosevelt offered to lead a combat division overseas. But TR's request was denied by the Commander-in-Chief, Wilson, who refused to entertain any notion of giving a position at the front in France to either TR or TR's close friend General Leonard Wood, the original Colonel of the Rough Riders in 1898 before promotion to brigade commander. John M. Parker's role in the issue has been largely ignored.

Working on his doctoral dissertation on Parker, Matthew Schott uncovered a treasure of John M. Parker papers covering Parker's entire political career. The Parker Papers are housed in the Louisiana Room of the Dupre Library at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette. While completing a Master's program in Education at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, I worked with the Parker Papers, and found Parker's own reminiscence of the proposed Roosevelt division and his dramatic confrontation with Wilson in the White House. Parker speaks of the meeting taking place on May 18, 1917, although other sources indicate it took place on May 17. The reference to President Herbert Hoover seems to date this manuscript as after 1928, although it could of course be based on earlier notes made by Parker. This appears to be the written recollection made available to Hermann Hagedorn for Hagedorn's study *Leonard Wood: A Biography* (2 volumes: New York, 1931). This account, published in full for the first time, constitutes an important contribution to the record of the Roosevelt-Wilson relations and the history of the World War I period.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the evening of May 11th, 1917, I received the following telegram:

"Col. John M. Parker,  
816 Union Street, New Orleans, La.

I have called a meeting of those most interested in proposed division to be held here Saturday, May nineteenth. If you possibly can I wish you would arrange to be here. Answer seven fifty three Fifth Avenue. [Signed] Theodore Roosevelt."

*John M. Parker — Cont.*

to which I promptly answered: "Will meet you May nineteenth as requested."

I left here early in order to stop over in Washington and confer there with some of my friends as to general conditions. While there I saw my friends, Congressman Whit Martin, Victor Murdock, Hiram W. Johnson, and discussed matters very freely and frankly with each of them, in addition to meeting a large number of men during the two days, the major part of which I spent at the Capitol, meeting both members of the House and Senate. To the best of my ability, I was a very close observer of conditions, making an earnest effort to ascertain and learn, at first hands, everything which could, by any possibility, be of importance or even remotely connected with the work of going abroad.

Dating as far back as June 1912, that patriotic American, Roosevelt, had taken me implicitly into his confidence, and repeatedly wrote me letters of a most confidential nature, entirely in his own handwriting. It had been his very earnest desire to serve his country, and he was earnestly hopeful that the President would appoint a division to be commanded by General Leonard Wood, in which Theodore Roosevelt would have been the lowest Brigadier-General. He had offered me a Colonelship in a regiment, which I accepted, and had nearly double the number of men ready for enrollment, but instead of going as a Colonel, I had already gotten in touch with Captain Ogden Fuqua, a Louisianian who had made a distinguished record, and had intended to serve as a Lieutenant-Colonel under him, with the very distinct understanding with Roosevelt that if mentally or physically I was unable to handle men or for any other cause I should feel that I would not be a real asset, that I would instantly resign in order that a more capable man would be appointed.

After spending four days in Washington, listening at first hand to a great deal of very interesting information, I felt it my duty to have a very brief talk with President Wilson, and if possible, to find out from him if he would permit the division to be organized, and at the same time, to be very frank in regard to many statements which I had heard, and which had never been conveyed to his ears. To that end, early on the morning of the 18th, I wrote the following note to Mr. Jos. P. Tumulty, Private Secretary, White House:

"Dear Mr. Tumulty:

I should like very much, if possible, to see the President not exceeding ten minutes on what, to my mind, are matters of a great deal of importance.

Respectfully,

John M. Parker of Louisiana."

No written answer came to this message, but a telephone call notified me to come to the White House,

and not the offices, at 3:45 P.M. Promptly at the appointed hour, I appeared at the White House gates, walked up to the policeman inside and told him that I had received a telephone message, but that I had no credentials authorizing me to pass. He asked my name, and as I gave it to him, he said "Walk right in," which I did, going to the White House promptly on time. In a few minutes President Wilson came in. We exchanged greetings, and before taking my seat, I said "Mr. President, I have come on a very unusual and very embarrassing mission. I have never in writing or verbally, asked or requested any favor of you. I ask none now, but would like, as a matter of national importance to stir American enthusiasm, to urge you permit the raising of a division by Colonel Roosevelt, with General Leonard Wood to be the commanding general. I further ask the privilege of telling you some things that others do not tell you, and which would be both extremely discourteous and impertinent unless stated with your permission. If you do not care to hear the statement I wish to make, I will not detain you at all, and thank you simply for the courtesy of allowing me to call at the White House." He instantly replied: "I am thoroughly aware of the fact that you have made no requests of any kind or character. After you have made your statement, I will tell you in regard to my decision under no circumstances, to permit the division, to which you refer, to go abroad. I am ready and willing to listen to what you have to say. Proceed." I replied:

"Mr. President, you preach against autocracy, and today in all the civilized world there is no greater autocrat or more arbitrary ruler than Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States. It has been your boast that you yourself have carried your own messages, some of which have been presented to joint sessions of the Congress without even your Secretary or Cabinet knowing the contents. I have spent four days in Washington, constantly busy and associating with men of nearly every political faith, and deeply regret to state that you have alienated the friendship and assistance of those of your own party who would like to be of real service, and have practically brought none of the support of those who opposed you. The almost unanimous support that you are today receiving is simply the loyal support of loyal Americans in the American cause, Americans big enough to forget politics. Without having treasure of your own, or your own blood on the other side, you are arbitrarily directing the expenditures of billions of dollars and sending millions of the best young men who gladly go to fight for world freedom. You should realize that you are simply an American citizen exalted for the time being, by the rights of your people to the Presidential chair. I tried to go over, all my sons have gone and as a man who gladly gave his own time and his own money touring the country to support you, I feel I have the right to criticize because you are my hired man, just as you are the hired man of the people. I appeal to you wherever you can possibly do so, take the American people into your confidence. Tell them

John M. Parker — *Cont.*



*TR Collection, Harvard*

John M. Parker and Theodore Roosevelt in 1915 visited one of the bird preserves, in the Gulf of Mexico, set aside by TR as President. Parker also accompanied TR on the famous Mississippi bear hunt in 1902 that led to the "birth" of the "Teddy Bear."

whatever you can without interfering with National efficiency or the plans of the army and navy. Remember it is their money and their sons who are making this fight, and I appeal to you as a Democratic President of a Democratic people, to take the people absolutely into your confidence wherever you can do so.

"Mr. President, I asked you for ten minutes. I have used nearly nine, and thank you for listening to me." He instantly rose and said: "Mr. Parker, you have been more than generously frank," and talked to me something over thirty-five minutes.

I feel I have a perfect right to say what I stated to the President, but have no right to quote him without his authority unless in an emergency. His concluding words were however, "I shall issue a statement tomorrow," which he did as shown by all papers of May 19th, 1917.

At the meeting held between President Woodrow Wilson and myself in the White House on the afternoon of May 18th, 1917, there were no people or witnesses present, and no public information was ever given by either party as to what actually took place at that meeting.

I have previously dictated the incidents leading to the meeting, as well as a synopsis of my remarks made on that occasion, and feel now that it is due myself, and as a matter of record, to write out what President Wilson had to say in reply. Life is very uncertain at best, and in the event of the death of one or both of us, the whole matter would form an interesting chapter, coming as it did, at a period of intense interest and excitement, and where the President himself showed by his action on May 19th, as well as afterwards, that no matter how much he might have been angered at what I had to say, he at least realized the sincerity of my remarks feeling it incumbent upon him to take the American people more into his confidence than he ever had before.

Most of the people knew that I had been nominated for Vice-President on the Progressive ticket, and that after Colonel Roosevelt declined to run and supported Mr. Hughes, that I took the other side, loyally supported President Wilson, devoted my time, energy and money to secure his re-election and without ever either embarrassing him or making a request or wishing anything pertaining to public office. My stand was simply my sincere conviction as a man, as to what in my judgment, was best for national welfare, and any help rendered by me was strictly in accordance with that view.



*John M. Parker — Cont.*

At my interview with the President, my strong impression was that he was not only irritated at the frankness with which I spoke, but the flash of color in his cheeks and the glint in his eye satisfied me that he was thoroughly angered when he made his response. Of course, I had no stenographic report of what he said, and at the time, late that afternoon, repeated the conversation to two very intimate friends and then put it in writing to the best of my ability.

He started out by stating that criticism was extremely easy to make; that he had courteously listened to what I had to say and desired to answer a number of the questions. I courteously asked "Mr. President, before you start making this statement, I feel in honor bound to repeat what may be necessary to Colonel Roosevelt and the other gentlemen with whom I am closely and intimately associated, at our meeting tomorrow." He hesitated just a moment and then stated, "I trust to your judgment and discretion, sir, as a gentleman." He then started out by saying "You make your first reference to General Leonard Wood. No man can gainsay the fact that he has made a splendid officer in the United States Army, and that he has made a magnificent record wherever he has been placed, but I call your attention to the fact that Earl Kitchener, easily recorded as the ablest and most brilliant of all the British Generals, instead of being sent to the front, was kept in his own country where his services were invaluable in the line of efficiency, preparedness and thorough mobilization, as he was much more important to England in that capacity than he possibly could have been in general command on the front lines."

I stated to the President that I understood there was considerable bitterness against General Leonard Wood because of a speech he made in Pennsylvania, at which Theodore Roosevelt happened to be present and for which, if I mistake not, he was reprimanded, and that in addition to that fact, there was considerable friction rumored between Mr. Vance McCormick, who had been Chairman of the National Democratic Committee, and General Wood, that that together with many thousands of other patriotic Americans, I felt that even if these statements were so, that in a great national crisis, all personality and all bitterness could be put aside, and men everywhere rise above politics; reward those who were clearly entitled to it, and really show the bigness of America. He stated that he declined to discuss or argue any outside comments or outside reports, but that while he fully realized the ability and the worth of General Leonard Wood, he endorsed the attitude of the Secretary of War, and under no circumstances, intended to permit him to go abroad in command of a division. I accepted this statement as final, and then referred to Colonel Roosevelt, qualifying my statement by the fact that for a great many years I had been his warm friend and admirer, and believed he was the greatest of all Americans, because no matter

how many errors he made, they were errors of the head and not of the heart, and that during my long life time, I had never seen or met any man who appealed to me as more sincerely and devotedly patriotic, or more willing to go the limit to do what he believed best for national welfare than was Roosevelt; that his voluntary offer of himself and all of his sons was characteristic of the man, and permission to organize that volunteer force would stir an enthusiasm all over the United States that would be greater than could possibly be stirred up by posters or by orators. I added that if this division were to go to the other side, become engaged and a large number of prominent men killed off, the sentiment aroused in America would mean the greatest energy and activity ever known in history, and would do more to stir American patriotism than everything else combined, and that I earnestly hoped that he, as head of the Democratic Party, at this crisis would not play politics. He instantly remarked: "Sir, I am not playing politics. Nothing could be more advantageous than to follow the course that you suggest. I have made my mind up in regard to these conditions very thoroughly. General Wood is needed here. Colonel Roosevelt is a splendid man and patriotic citizen, as you say, but is not a military leader. His experience in military life has been extremely short. He and many of the men with him are too old to render efficient service, and in addition to that fact, he as well as others, have shown intolerance of discipline, and the Round Robin issued against General Shafter during the Spanish-American war should have been sufficient cause for his court-martial and dismissal from the Army. The belief of the ablest and best men in the army and navy is that the hardships of war can best be withstood by the able, vigorous and capable young men; that physically, they can stand hardships which would mean death or suffering to the older men, and that with their enthusiasm and energy, they will make easily the finest soldiers that could be sent abroad. I repeat, sir, that I do not propose to have politics, in any manner, shape or form, influence me in my judgment. I intend to be guided not by personal consideration, but by what I conceive to be the highest national consideration and based upon conclusions reached by me after conference and consultation with the ablest and best posted men in each of the various branches of the United States Government, and again repeat that, under no circumstances, will I permit or authorize the division to go to the other side."

He then touched upon my reference to the comparison with other nations and to the intimation that he was a czar and a dictator. He stated that no man who occupied the President's chair, could fail to be misunderstood and misquoted, and that instead of his playing politics, the Republicans and others were playing politics all the time, and constantly doing everything that lay in their power to surreptitiously embarrass the Administration by charges and indirect interference; that he felt strongly, as he stated

*John M. Parker — Cont.*

above, that neither Senators nor Congressmen could give him the information which he could get from both the Army and the Navy and the Air service, and that he had made up his mind to continue to accept the advice of those who knew, and not to accept the advice of those who owed their office purely to politics.

He referred to my comments as to his secretiveness, and stated that some of this was absolutely necessary, because America was absolutely honey-combed with men who promptly and cheerfully gave information to the other side, and while the United States Secret Service, the Department of Justice and other departments were doing magnificent work, that he felt he cannot be too reserved or too reticent in regard to matters which might mean the lives of thousands of our young men. He further stated, however, that he believed he could do so without injury, and that he had made up his mind beforehand to issue regular statements where possible, and to that end, would issue one the next day, May 19th.

Of course, there were some other details commented upon, which I feel should not be referred to in any manner.

I have been to the White House repeatedly during President Roosevelt's term, and there on a number of occasions during Mr. Taft's term, but during all of Mr. Wilson's term, this was the first time I had ever been there either on a social or business call and incidentally have been there but once since and that was with Mr. Hoover just for a few minutes.

No public statement has ever been made by me in reference to this meeting, but I talked the matter over with Congressman Whit Martin and Senator Hiram W. Johnson, and later on a trip from Alexandria to New Orleans on a private car with General Leonard Wood, discussed the matter with him at length, but from the time of that visit, with the single exception of the meeting with Mr. Hoover, have had no further communication of any kind or character with the White House.

## *A Word About the Theodore Roosevelt Association*



The Theodore Roosevelt Association is a national historical society and public service organization chartered by Congress on May 31, 1920 "to perpetuate the memory of Theodore Roosevelt for the benefit of the people of the United States of America and the world." For the benefit of the people of the United States and the world, the TR Association has established several major memorials, museums, and historical collections. The house where TR was born in Manhattan was reconstructed by the Association in 1923. Theodore Roosevelt Island in Washington, D.C., was given by the Association to the federal government in 1932. Sagamore Hill, TR's Oyster Bay, Long Island home, was opened to the public by the TRA in 1953. On July 27, 1962, President John F. Kennedy signed an act establishing TR Birthplace in New York City and Sagamore Hill as National Historic Sites, and the TRA then donated both houses to the National Park Service together with an endowment of \$500,000. for the support of both museums. For a period of over twenty years, the Association worked to assemble the definitive collection on TR. The resulting Theodore Roosevelt Collection was donated to Harvard in 1943. The Association also donated an extensive film archive on TR and his times to the Library of Congress. Today the TRA publishes books and a quarterly magazine; provides support for TR sites around the nation; and serves as a research resource for writers, historians, the media, and the public. The TRA sponsors student contests and awards, and sends speakers to schools and organizations. The TRA is administered by the Executive Committee, which meets regularly throughout the year. Mr. William Davison Johnston was elected President of the TRA in 1980, and Dr. John Allen Gable became the Association's Executive Director in 1974. The TRA has members in all fifty states, and membership is open to all.