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When FDR Met GGB

Introduction

The clip we chose to investigate, entitled "FDR on prison reform ca. 1929," featured then-Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt being awarded a medal by an initially unknown presenter (George Gordon Battle), then Roosevelt speaking a few sentences on prison conditions. The clip was deemed to have a great potential for a high level of social significance because there was the possibility that it was the earliest sound footage of the future president. We would discover this to be untrue. The entire transcript reads as follows:

Battle: "It is all together fitting, that you governor Roosevelt, still a young man, with greater responsibilities now in hand and with still graver responsibilities possibly before you, should have your name added to the laurel of those who have contributed to the great cause of prison betterment."

Roosevelt: "A prison to us is no longer merely a Bastille to keep people in indiscriminately with the object solely of punishment. We have realized for some years past that the criminal is after all a human being and is entitled as such to certain and certain amount of the rights and privileges of civilization. Light and air, cleanly surroundings, and a certain amount of exercise and even of recreation."¹

There are a few key clues in the clip that indicate the potential for significance and served as the jumping off point for our research. We knew the clip was from Roosevelt's gubernatorial terms; therefore it had to have recorded sometime between 1928 and 1932. We knew prison reform was the main subject of the award, so determining what FDR had actually accomplished with regards to reforming prison conditions would most likely provide some clues. As we explain later in our research methods, we determined the clip was from May 13, 1931. In order to have a better understanding of the social significance of the clip, we first needed to familiarize ourselves with what exactly were the issues in prisons in the 1920's, FDR's career up until that point, and who the other man in the clip was.

Prison Riots of 1929

In New York State alone in 1929 there were three significant prison riots that brought the need for prison reform to the forefront of the public eye. The first occurred at the Clinton Correctional Facility,

¹ *FDR on prison reform ca. 1929.*

more commonly referred to as Dannemora.² It is the largest correctional facility in the state. On July 22, 1929, 1,300 inmates attempted a mass rush of the prison walls, forming human ladders and setting fire to the building and lumber.³ State Troopers, customs officers from the nearby Canadian border, and the 20th infantry arrived and overwhelmed the prisoners with greater weapons. Only two inmates perished in the conflict.⁴

Less than a week later on July 28, 1929, at the Auburn Correctional facility, there was another uprising. Auburn was severely overcrowded, holding 1,772 inmates but having only 1,200 cells. Many inmates slept in the corridors. General tensions, combined with the midsummer heat, and the previous riot at Dannemora, sparked another conflict.⁵ A group of prisoners overpowered the guards, threw acid in a guard's face, got a set of keys, and gained access to the armory. Four inmates took a guard as a human shield and managed to escape. All were subsequently caught and returned to prison. The State Troopers were once again called in to subdue the uprising.⁶

Less than six months later, on December 11, 1929, there was another major conflict at Auburn, the worst of the three in terms of body count. This time, twenty long-term sentence violent inmates organized themselves, killed the Principal Keeper, and took the warden as well as seven other guards hostage. The Army National Guard were called in immediately.⁷ The inmates demanded safe passage out, or else they would begin to execute the hostages. They had barricaded themselves with the hostages in the main hall of the prison, waiting to see if their demands were met. Corrections Commissioner Dr. Raymond Kleb ordered the infantryman to shoot the inmates if the hostages came out, and if they didn't to go in and get them.⁸ When no hostages were released, Troopers raided the hall with tear gas and a barrage of bullets. Eight of the inmates were killed.⁹

In Texas, a state notorious for its prison horror stories, overcrowding led to a breakdown in discipline. Prisoners staged hunger strikes and threatened to riot. In June of 1929, 44 men escaped from the Clemens farm simply by walking off the job. In September of 1929, 18 men tunneled out of Wynne farm, the facility that housed inmates with tuberculosis and other disabilities. All in all, 302 men escaped—a full 6 percent of the prison population.¹⁰

These, coupled with other events around the country, created yet another situation FDR had to address, and would make prison reform a pertinent issue throughout the state.

² Guynap.

³ Kurek, 89.

⁴ Guynap.

⁵ McHugh.

⁶ "Governor asks for full inquiry."

⁷ Long.

⁸ Kurek, 89.

⁹ Ibid, 90.

¹⁰ *Fear, force, and leather: The Texas prison system's first hundred year: 1848-1948.*

FDR, Up Until 1931

The more significant events from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's lifetime occurred after his election to the presidency of the United States in 1932. It was his leadership through the Great Depression and the Second World War that made him without exaggeration one of the most influential people in the history of the world. While his political career and accomplishments after 1932 are almost common knowledge, that is not the man in the clip from 1931. In order to put the clip in proper context, we looked at Roosevelt's biography and career up until that point.

Born on January 30, 1882 to wealthy parents, Roosevelt's privileged life provided him with a prestigious education and worldly travels. His father's family wealth came from real estate, and his mother's family wealth from trade with china (opium, tea). Both sides descended from European aristocracy. This allowed him to travel abroad much in his youth.¹¹

After being tutored for his early education, he was enrolled at the Groton School from 1896-1900, before receiving his BA in History from Harvard. He attended law school at Columbia from 1904-1907, but quit before receiving his degree because he had already passed the bar. While at Columbia, he married Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, a distant cousin who was the niece of Teddy Roosevelt, another cousin whom FDR greatly admired. Eleanor bore him five children that survived into adulthood.¹²

He practiced law for three years in New York City before moving into politics, getting elected Senator as a Democrat in 1910. Reelected in 1912, he took up the cause against Tammany Hall political machine. He also managed to successfully pass several farm and labor bills, precursors to the type he would implement under his New Deal Presidency. Among other things, he was adamant about social welfare programs for women and children.¹³

In 1913, his political career continued to rise after he was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy by Warren Harding, ostensibly for supporting him during his presidential campaign.¹⁴ He would hold the position through the duration of World War I, until 1920, when he was nominated for Vice President on James M. Cox's platform in 1920.

The summer of 1921 brought on one of the major turning points in his life. While vacationing at Campobello Island in New Brunswick, he contracted polio.¹⁵ Upon being diagnosed, he slipped out of politics for a bit, using this time to teach himself to walk, believing it necessary for his public image if he ever wanted to hold office again. Through the use of leg braces, a cane, and the support of his aides and

¹¹ Brands.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ **Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt.**

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brands.

sons, he perseveringly taught himself to walk again, albeit only for short distances. He would essentially balance on his legs, cane, and aid, and then swivel his torso back and forth so he could move from the stage to the podium, or the car to inside whatever hotel he was staying at, etc.¹⁶

After mastering this, he re-entered the public sphere in 1924, delivering the presidential nomination speech for Alfred E. Smith, Governor of New York, at the Democratic National Convention. Smith lost the bid then, but won it in 1928. Roosevelt again gave the nomination speech, and Smith asked him to succeed him as Governor of New York. Smith lost presidential bid, but Roosevelt would win the gubernatorial bid. This time around, he was less antagonistic towards Tammany Hall, as he realized he would need their backing if he was to succeed.¹⁷ His views became even more forgiving once the Depression hit. He was reelected in 1930, and made a concerted effort to minimize effects of Depression in the state through social welfare programs before launching himself for the presidency in 1932. One of the social welfare programs he worked closely with was the NCPPL.

The National Committee on Prisons and Prison Labor

The NCPL, National Committee on Prison Labor, was a prison-reform organization that operated in the 1920's. The National Headquarters were located in New York City. It was formed in response to a complaint lodged by the Industrial Committee of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1911 at the recommendation of John Williams, the NY Commissioner of Labor.¹⁸ The New York State Department of Labor Investigation determined that over \$10,000 of prison-made goods were found in New York markets. It is of note that the issue of prison reform arose not because of actual concern for the prisoners, but due to certain parties believing the cheap labor was cutting into their market share. The committee expanded beyond the labor issue to become the National Committee on Prisons and Prison Labor.¹⁹

A particularly active chapter was that of the Texas CPPL, established in 1920 when Elizabeth F. Ring, Ina Caddell Marrs, Jessie Daniel Ames, and Florence Floore of the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs sought assistance from national penal reformers.²⁰ They were frustrated with the misconduct and inefficient state legislative responses to prison issues.

The state legislature permitted the Texas CPPL to conduct a scientific survey of the prison system in 1923. Because the legislature refused to fund the study, the CPPL raised money through national CPPL

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ **Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt.**

¹⁸ *Report by the new york state advisory committee on prison industries to the commission to investigate prison administration and construction. presented to the legislature of the state of new york.*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Fear, Force, and Leather.*

assistance. The study reported that the majority of prisoners suffered from mental and physical deficiencies, and determined that the Texas Penal System failed to rehabilitate prisoners.²¹

The report's most controversial proposal called for the sale of all existing prison properties and the construction of a central penal colony near Austin.²² The Texas CPPL achieved its greatest success in 1926 by sponsoring an amendment to the Texas Constitution that reorganized the governing body of the Texas prison system. CPPL members campaigned vigorously for voter ratification by providing speakers and writers for civic associations, writing articles and editorials for state newspapers, preparing announcements for ministers to deliver to congregations, and printing materials for radio stations and motion-picture theaters. The legislature enacted the CPPL management plan in 1927 by dissolving the Board of Prison.²³

The same plan of a concentration of institutions was worked out in Westchester County, New York. Just before the outbreak of the War, Mr. V. Everitt Macy, a man with wide experience both in business and philanthropic work, was appointed Commissioner of Charities and Correction for Westchester County and created a new system of institutions for the county.²⁴ After thorough study and consultation with the best authorities available, Macy developed the Westchester County institutional colony in which are located all the adult penal and correctional institutions of the county, yet no institution is less than two miles from another institution. The system has been in operation since 1919 and has proved its practicability.²⁵

One of the future chairmen of the organization was the unidentified man from our clip, George Gordon Battle.

George Gordon Battle (1868-1949)

We discovered the identity of the unknown presenter at the ceremony in the clip to be that of George Gordon Battle, a successful and socially conscious New York attorney. Since he is a lesser known historical figure, we have included a more comprehensive biography.

Born in North Carolina in 1868 to a prominent plantation family, young George was sent to the University of North Carolina at the age of thirteen; by twenty-one he had obtained both his undergraduate degree and an M.A. from the University of Virginia.²⁶ He moved to New York City to study law at

²¹ Report on Proposed Texas Penal Colony.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Wilkinson.

Columbia, almost immediately winning a post with a renowned District Attorney, De Lancey Nicoll.²⁷ After five years in the DA's office, he co-founded his own private firm (a company that survived him for fifty years, only closing in 2000).²⁸

Battle threw himself headlong into the social reform movement of the era, tackling not just issues of prison reform but labor disputes, anti-Semitism, political corruption and the judicial system's treatment of the mentally ill. Twice (1911, 1919) he was brought in by the city of New York as a special assistant district attorney to investigate internal corruption and graft in local government.²⁹ He served as counsel for the Pennsylvania Sugar Refining Company, in an anti-trust suit against the American Sugar Refining Company, better known today as Domino Sugar, which in 1907 controlled 98% of the sugar processing trade in the United States (the case finally ended in 1922, with the company's control of the so-called Sugar Trust drastically reduced).³⁰ Notably, though, Battle was a prominent member of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party political organization that controlled Democratic nominees and political patronage in New York City for much of the 19th century – he even ran for District Attorney on the Tammany ticket in 1909,³¹ although apparently unsuccessfully.

In any case, by that time Tammany's influence on politics had significantly waned, and the corruption that had marked the reign of “Boss” Tweed all but totally eradicated. Battle's record as a charitable and fiercely progressive reformer appears to have put him beyond reproach. Amongst other non-profit and activist causes, Battle served as executive chairman of the Community Council of National Defense for the City of New York, secretary of the Committee on Educational Publicity in Interests of World Peace, chairman of the Committee on Psychiatric Work for the Girls Service League of America, and president of New York City's Parks and Playground Association.³² He deliberately cultivated a reputation as a true Southern gentleman; a fawning 1933 profile of Battle in the *New Yorker* declared: “Courtesy and chivalry come as naturally to George Gordon Battle as his Southern accent, and forty-odd years in an impolite community have done little to eradicate either [...] On all appropriate occasions, he is the volunteer Southern ambassador in New York.”³³

It is unclear when Battle took up the specific cause of prison reform. It was clearly a topic that interested him throughout his legal career, starting at least with an article published in the *Virginia Law Review* on “The Problem of the Disposition of Insane Criminals” in 1913, in which he advocated for judicial reform to address cases of temporary insanity (those who could be proved to not be in total

27 Ibid.

28 Battle, H.B., 11.

29 Wilkinson.

30 Ibid.

31 “Tammany Names Its County Ticket.”

32 Wilkinson.

33 Hellman.

control of their actions, Battle argued, should be moved to sanitariums rather than prisons).³⁴ While he does not appear to have been an original member of the National Committee on Prisons and Prison Labor, by 1917 he was chairman of the NCPPL's sub-committee on the Federal Office of Prisons,³⁵ and by 1931, the date of the St. Regis Hotel meeting with Governor Roosevelt, was president of the entire organization, according to MIRC's catalog records. He was a major advisor to Roosevelt and the New York State legislature during their attempts to improve prison conditions and industry, serving as chairman of the New York State Advisory Committee on Prison Industries, a group of labor, manufacturing and civilian leaders appointed by Roosevelt to advise the New York State Commission to Investigate Prison Administration and Construction.³⁶ However their report, published in February of 1932, went generally unheard, as Roosevelt narrowed nearly all attention to his upcoming presidential campaign.

Later in life, Battle served as a defense attorney for Earl Browder, during the latter's time as general secretary of the Communist Party. In 1940, Browder was accused by the U.S. Government of passport fraud (in lieu of solid evidence of him being a Soviet spy); during the trial, the impetuous Browder took control of his own defense from Battle, and was promptly declared guilty and sentenced to four years in jail.³⁷

Legacy of FDR and the Media

While today it is common for government officials to appear in the media, FDR was the first president to truly embrace it and use it to his advantage, most notably through his famous Fireside Chats. Part of the significance of our clip is that it shows an early level of comfort between Roosevelt and broadcast technology.

As governor, he often held twice-daily press conferences. He also created a state news bureau in Albany, which distributed free information regarding state affairs.³⁸ Informal radio addresses he used to gain the necessary support for different legislative measures paved the way for his future Fireside Chats.

Historians credit much of the success of the New Deal during Roosevelt's presidency to those Fireside Chats and the new method of communicating with the public. The results are clearly visible to this day, as President Barack Obama has hosted live "fireside hangouts" using Google's video chat service. During the "hangouts" Obama takes questions on everything from gun control to climate change.³⁹ As media changes, so too do the methods that political leaders can use to interact with citizens.

34 Battle, George Gordon, "The Problem of the Disposition of Insane Criminals."

35 Jaffray, xi.

36 *Report by the New York State Advisory Committee on Prison Industries*, 11-12.

37 Ryan, 181.

38 Ralph

39 Ibid.

Modern Day Prison Situation

Currently, the prison population in the United States continues to decline. According to the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, the population declined by 1.7% in 2012, the third consecutive year of such a decline.⁴⁰ This is a drastic contrast compared to the years between 1978 and 2009, when the prison population increased every year. New York State in particular saw a decrease of over 1,000 prisoners.⁴¹

Also, the controversy behind prison labor still exists. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) pioneered some of the strict sentencing laws that led to the overcrowding over the past few decades, such as the three strikes laws and mandatory minimums for non-violent drug offenders. ALEC has in turn used different loopholes in its policies to exploit the trade of prison goods, with the rise in the overall population providing the cheap workforce being used to produce cheap goods that are then sold all over the country.⁴²

Conclusion:

Research

Identifying the events shown in our clip as belonging to the meeting of Governor Roosevelt and George Gordon Battle on May 13, 1931 did not prove as difficult as we had feared, given the brevity of the material and metadata available to us. Checking what we knew for sure (the presence of FDR, speaking about prison reform) against the catalog of University of South Carolina's Moving Image Research Collections immediately revealed that the archive already had in its Fox Movietone collection a more complete newsreel (approximately 5 minutes long) that appeared to describe the exact same event. Benjamin Singleton of the USC staff was able to confirm the identification for us, proving the date and location of the filming, as well as the identity of the second man featured in the film besides Roosevelt (Battle) and the organization he represented (the NCPPL). Mr. Singleton did note, however, that while the Fox Movietone reel captures the same events, it appears to be taken at a slightly different angle from our clip, indicating what we have may be unused or otherwise cut elements from a different film studio's newsreel (e.g. Paramount, Hearst Metrotone, Universal, British Pathé). At the time of the writing of this report, we were unable to see the 5-minute Fox Movietone reel for ourselves, but Mr. Singleton's suggestion seems logical, given that the meeting between Battle and Roosevelt was clearly a staged ceremony for the benefit of the press, and multiple cameras and companies were almost certainly present.

⁴⁰ Carson and Golinelli.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Elk and Sloan.

Unfortunately, attempts to find evidence of another newsreel came up short. The UCLA Film and Television Archive, British Pathé archives and National Archives and Records Administration do not appear to have any matching material in their collections. Efforts to contact the Library of Congress and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum about their newsreel collections were rendered impossible by the federal government shutdown of October 2013; as of this writing, our requests to those institutions have gone unanswered. For our presentation and report, as seen, we could only further investigate the historical context and significance of the event pictured.

Significance

It is somewhat difficult, being unsure of this clip's exact origin, to calculate its significance as an artifact. If these brief shots are all that remain of a Universal or Paramount newsreel, or contain footage from the Roosevelt/Battle ceremony not found in any distributed newsreel, period (the Fox Movietone reel included), their unique value would obviously increase. However, even if this footage is the same as that contained on the Fox Movietone newsreel, it remains significant as a possible research tool, particularly to scholars and students interested in the political career of FDR or the history of prison reform. Given the 1931 date, this is certainly not the first film featuring Roosevelt speaking (as the MIRC staff had speculated might be true); there are records of sound footage of the future president from at least two years earlier. But Roosevelt's career was largely built on his savvy ability to manipulate the mass media, radio and film in particular, to his advantage. The press conferences and ceremonies he held as governor of New York, such as the one featured here, were something of a precursor to his famed "fireside chats," and even in this brief footage his talent for public speaking is clearly evident. There is also the consideration of Roosevelt's physical struggles with the aftermath of polio. Like essentially all other films or photographs of Roosevelt from the time, this clip does not show any obvious signs of the man's weakness (though a watchful observer will notice the way he is actually supporting himself on a chair while Battle is speaking, and how he gestures with his head rather than his hands in close-up). In essence, this is potentially very useful evidence to anyone interested in demonstrating the remarkable way FDR was able to craft and control his public image.

Furthermore, from what we can determine, this meeting was the only time that George Gordon Battle was ever filmed. This footage is quite significant, then, for helping to bring attention to a generally overlooked historical figure who was nonetheless quite prominent and respected in his own time. The same goes for his organization, the NCPPL, and the New York State prison reform movement as a whole; even if very little legislation actually passed into New York law at the time on the issue of prison reform, it was a much-debated topic of the time, part of the tremendous shifts occurring in political and social thought in the early 20th century, and this film is evidence of that.

Preservation Suggestions

With that in mind, we have a few suggestions regarding the further preservation of this film sample. The film has obviously already been digitized in order to create access copies; this should be sufficient quality for research purposes, as it seems doubtful that projection of the original would be necessary or desired at any foreseeable point. Since the original appears to be in relatively good condition (some fading of the emulsion is present, but not drastic), it should simply be moved immediately to storage to prevent degradation, an especially dangerous possibility since it was made on nitrate film stock. Given the strict NFPA guidelines regarding the handling and storage of nitrate-based prints, we will assume that at least close-to-ideal conditions are being met at MIRC's storage facilities (a max. temperature of 36°F and relative humidity between 20% and 30%, sprinkler system, outside venting, compartmentalized vaults away from safety film).

More importantly, moving forward, there are a few steps to ensure easy virtual and intellectual access for scholars and researchers to the access copies of this film. First, further efforts should be made to contact the Library of Congress and the FDR Presidential Library once they are once again available to requests, to see if they may be of any assistance in positively identifying the origin of this film. This would be useful for the purposes of both cataloging and rights identification. The copyright status on this film could vary greatly depending on which company originally filmed it, whether it is composed of unpublished outtakes or duplicate prints of published material, etc. The factual content, age and relative obscurity of the clip would suggest that scholars can confidently use this material for educational or research purposes under fair use, but it is also possible that the rights are held by MIRC as a result of their acquisition of the Feltner Collection, or that the film is simply in the public domain. Identifying the original camera that took the film would help determine that more precisely. Knowing whether this footage should be paired with the Fox Movietone reel or stand on its own in the Feltner Collection as part of a different company's material would also assist with accurate cataloging. In any case, these two slightly altered versions of the same event should be cross-referenced as much as possible in the MIRC catalog, allowing researchers to easily find one item through the other. The metadata listed for "Date" and "Place" should obviously be the same (May 13, 1931; New York, New York), and the "Content Summary" should also essentially match. That way, keyword searching in the online catalog for relevant phrases like "Roosevelt," "prison," "speeches," etc. would return both items. Generally speaking though, this clip has already been identified (thanks to the already-present Fox Movietone reel) and should require minimal effort to process from this point on.

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