

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 14, 2012

American History in Perspective: It can be argued that no other democratic government in the world has lasted as long as our country's, now 225 years old since the Constitution was adopted. In that sense, we are an old country, but in contrast to many in the Eastern Hemisphere, it is easy to prove how young we are.

Sometimes it is proved like this: When the aged John Quincy Adams was serving in Congress following his single term as president, a discussion ensued on the House floor in which members claimed to know something about the founding of the country. Adams told them they knew nothing about it, that he observed the smoke from the Battle of Bunker Hill, along with his mother, Abigail, from a hilltop on their farm at Quincy, Massachusetts, probably 10 miles away. That was in 1775, when John Quincy was eight years old. When Adams chided his younger House members about 1847, the beloved Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (son of the poet Oliver Wendell Holmes who penned "Old Ironsides" and "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay") was six years of age. When Holmes died in 1935, I was 11. When I pass on, it is entirely likely that the 55th president of the United States may have been born (Obama is #44). So, indeed, ours is a young country.

Not trying to prove anything, here are some more interesting facts. Our first nine presidents had been born before the Constitution became the law of the land in 1787, and 14 of the first 15 were born in the 18th century. Presidential births in the 19th century numbered 20, starting with Franklin Pierce in 1804 and ending with Dwight Eisenhower in 1890. To date, 10 have been born in the 20th century.

Of more interest, perhaps, is something not recorded in the history books. It is almost certain that the first 34 presidents could ride horseback, not for enjoyment but of necessity. Most of them could certainly handle a horse-pulled buggy or a small carriage as well. William McKinley is recorded as the first president to ride in an automobile, when F. O. Stanley visited the White House with his tiny steam buggy in 1899 (or 1900). There are mixed reports on the success of this ride. Some said the president was uncomfortable and did not like his experience. Others indicated that McKinley was impressed and felt the self-propelled road vehicle would soon take over in America. We do know that McKinley's successor, Teddy Roosevelt, did not want the government to own automobiles and apparently did not enjoy riding in them, although he was photographed during his presidency near his home in Oyster Bay, New York, in the back seat of a big Model G 1907 White steamer.

It is not known how many (if any) presidents before our 32nd, Franklin D. Roosevelt, knew how to drive a car. In the 1930s, Roosevelt kept a Model A Ford touring car at Hyde Park equipped with hand controls, so he could enjoy driving despite his paralysis. It is likely that all our presidents since have had a driver's license, but most have not driven many miles. Ronald Reagan and at least two of our three Texas presidents could certainly ride horseback but not out of necessity.