

Miller Commander's White House Connection

By Denny Emerson



In 1957, when my parents bought an old farm in South Reading, Vermont, they were not aware that most of the surrounding 1,000 acres were owned by Mrs. Ethel Derby, a daughter of former President Theodore Roosevelt. Part of Mrs. Derby's sprawling acreage had a separate farmhouse, and for many summers she rented that property to her late husband's best friend, retired White House physician Vice Admiral Joel T. Boone and Mrs. Helen Boone.

Admiral Boone loved Morgan horses, and he and my father became driving companions behind dad's Morgan, Miller

Commander (nicknamed "Bongo"). Like two little kids, they would pack picnic lunches and head out for hours exploring the little-traveled back roads that connected to Grasshopper Lane and Pucker Street.

Admiral Boone had been a young doctor during World War I, and, after treating wounded soldiers under desperate battlefield conditions, he became a highly-decorated hero who was awarded six Silver Star Medals and the nation's highest award for gallantry, The Congressional Medal of Honor.

Admiral Boone was a wonderful storyteller, and I would listen

ABOVE: An Admiral and a Commander: Admiral Joel Boone, and Mrs. Boone, driving Miller Commander at the Emerson house in South Reading, Vermont, in the early 1960s.

by the hour as he regaled my brother and me about the three presidents that he'd served under, Warren Harding, Herbert Hoover, and Calvin Coolidge.

"I was sitting by President Harding's bedside after he'd had a heart attack. We had rented the top floor of the Palace Hotel in San Francisco to use as a temporary hospital. Mrs. Harding told me that she would read to her husband and suggested that I go outside and get some fresh air, as I had hardly slept in four days. I got down to the lobby but had a sudden sense of doom. I took the elevator back upstairs, and when I got to the President's room, Mrs. Harding was crying. 'Dr. Boone,' she said, 'You have to save the President.' I felt his pulse. 'Mrs. Harding,' I replied, 'No one can save the President now.'"

On a lighter note, one day Admiral Boone was out on the Potomac on the presidential yacht with Harding's former Vice President, now President, Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge was a notoriously frugal Vermonter, and it surprised Admiral Boone when Coolidge offered to give him a new pair of shoes.

"These pinch my feet, Boone,' Coolidge said. 'Try them on, and if they fit you, take them.'

They fit perfectly, so I started to put the custom-made shoe trees, made specifically for those two shoes, back into my new pair," Boone told me.

"No, Boone,' President Coolidge said. 'I don't intend for you to take the trees with the shoes.'"

Another story Admiral Boone shared later went like this: "I would travel with President Hoover when he would give speeches. The President would write these speeches out longhand, and then give them to his secretary to type. President Hoover spoke in a somewhat colloquial fashion, and he would usually split his

infinitives. The secretary would correct those in the typed draft. So, often I would see President Hoover take out his fountain pen and carefully re-split the sentence structure into technically incorrect but more naturally-sounding English speech."



Ethel Roosevelt, the youngest daughter of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, September 1912 (unknown author, United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID cph.3c34884).

One day my father, with one of my young cousins as passenger, was driving Bongo up to the Boone's farmhouse when the round ring of Bongo's bit broke, the bit slid through his mouth and started swinging, hitting him in the side of his face. Bongo took off, the carriage tipped over around a turn, Dad and my cousin got flung out, uninjured, the harness broke, and Bongo stopped.

Mrs. Derby had been driving her car, saw and followed the runaway, and was first on the scene to comfort my terrified and crying cousin. Mrs. Derby, like her famous father, was larger than life, full of high-spirited adventure which she revealed when she said to my cousin, "What a marvelous thing to be able to tell your friends. No one else had a horse run away with them, and just think what a story to tell in school this fall!" In minutes, Mrs. Derby took my cousin from crying to laughing, making her happy she'd had that close call.

Another day, I got home from riding Lippitt Raymond on a trail ride, and in our backyard were my parents, Admiral and Mrs. Boone, Mrs. Derby, and John Coolidge and his wife—two children of U.S. Presidents and a former White

House physician—with Bongo turned out in his field after taking them all for buggy rides.

For my dad, having a Morgan driving horse was akin to possessing a rolling candy store—everybody wanted some. And that was our Morgan-based connection to the White House, tenuous in some ways, direct and immediate in others. ■