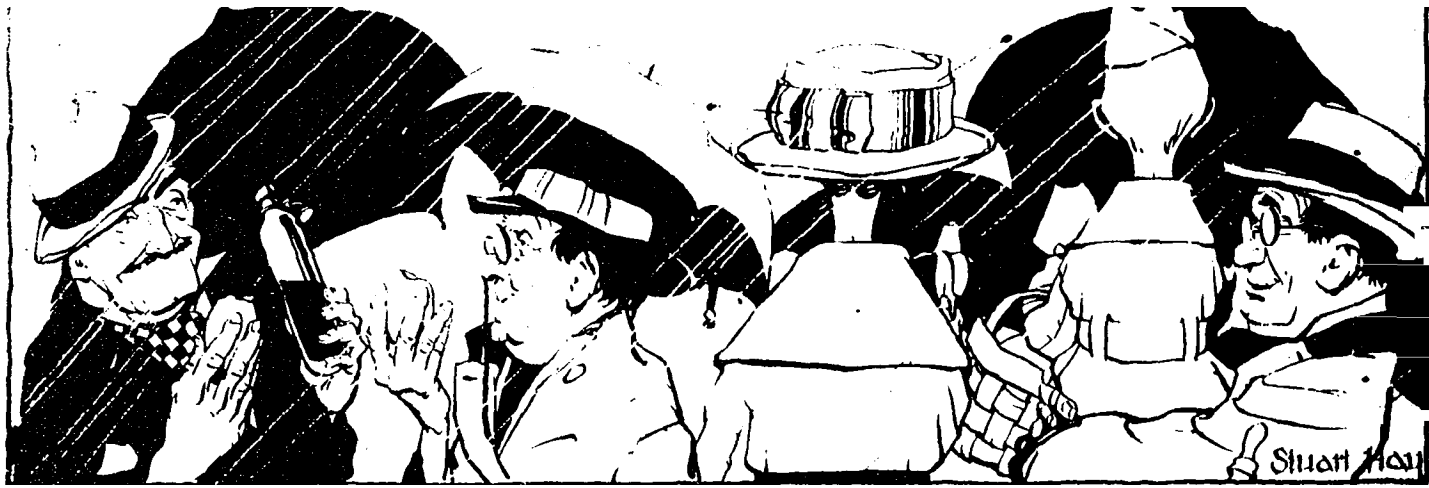


# False Splendor of Past Inaugurals

By A VETERAN POLITICAL OBSERVER

THE Congressional mutiny against the project to make President Harding's inauguration "the most dazzling celebration within the memory of the present generation" has had the bad luck to be the victim of President Harding's veto. At first he was reported to have vetoed everything in the inauguration ceremonies that generally make it an occasion of bad taste and costliness, but he has permitted a modest parade, and consented to make his speech on the east front of the Capitol. Most of the expense of the thing has been eliminated, and the citizens of Washington have bowed in a commendable spirit to the inevitable.

The mutiny began with a protest chiefly against the turning over of the Pension Office to the inaugural ball. Senator Borah rather savagely intimated, too, that his idea of an appropriation was the amount covering a street car ride to the Capitol and back. Such potent voices as Senator Nelson's were raised against



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they had put up, and of making it possible for visiting citizens to boast at home that they had taken some part in the inaugural ceremonies, which, as a matter of fact, they hadn't. But the ball was only a part of the inaugural doings, subject to frequent criticism, including the custom of having the President make an inaudible address to a noisy crowd on the east front of the Capitol.

The inaugural ball, however, was specifically objected to by the statesmen who followed Senators Nelson and Borah and Representative Cannon in this instance, and the objection was the expense. It was pointed out in a Congressional debate the other day that in addition to the ordinary expenses of changing an office building into a ballroom the pay of

the people of the United States with all they could make Congress appropriate money for. Anybody who had the price of a ticket could get in. In order to give an official stamp to the proceedings it was customary for the President and his wife to show their faces for a moment and then go home as fast as possible.

When President Wilson was elected in 1912, he reviewed these features of the quadrennial humbug, and announced that there would be no ball. Neither would he join the Chevy Chase Club, which seemed to be growing into an institutional rite for Presidents. My recollection is that he subsequently changed his mind about the club, but he never warmed to the inaugural ball, and there wasn't any.

But the ball was not half as objectionable, in the opinion of many observers, as the chosen way in which the American people exhibit their dignity and that of their President when he actually assumes the office, and this really is official. The inauguration of the Vice President is the only dignified thing about it. That takes place in a most seemly manner in the Senate Chamber. But thousands of people have come from great distances to see the President take the oath, and they must be satisfied. This is what happens:

On the east front of the Capitol there has been built a great wooden platform for the occasion. In front of it stretch the thousands, clear into the Congressional Library grounds. The Library is quite a way from the Capitol. It may, roughly, be said that the President, if he stood in the Times Building on Broadway, would be facing a crowd the last of which would be visible, or, rather, invisible, at the corner of Broadway and Fiftieth Street. This crowd has been standing there since 7 A. M., the President coming out of the Capitol from the Vice President's inauguration at about 1:30, of course, it has brought its lunch with it; sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs and sarsaparilla in bottles, to be drunk without glasses.

The stand or platform is so elevated that people below it could not hear the President if they tried. Those further out in the crowd see a few little manikins step into a tiny box like a summerhouse. No matter how tall the President and the Chief Justice may be, they look about a foot high to more than half that vast crowd. One manikin reads something to the other, and when the reading is finished the crowd knows that the oath has been admin-

istered. Those who cannot see at all learn it from the front ranks. Then the other manikin, who is the President, steps forward in the little box and opens his mouth. Some of the crowd can see that he is speaking. Others cannot even see that his mouth is open.

Our forefathers picked on the one day in the year when it is practically sure to rain or snow in Washington. The President often faces thousands of wet umbrellas and sees few or no faces. The people around him do not hear him. The newspaper men have seats nearer than the other invited guests on the platform, but they catch only a detached word or sentence here or there. Down at their feet, below the platform, they see men with their hands at their ears, straining to catch a word and then giving it up. Perhaps the Vice President and some of the foreign Ambassadors hear the speech, but nobody else does. Having attended every inauguration since and including that of McKinley, I feel sure of my ground in saying that not a dozen men have ever heard a Presidential inaugural address, with one exception, to be noted later.

As the tired crowd cannot hear, and cannot see if it should be raining, it becomes restless. In the rear of it the crowd begins to talk, at first subduedly and then at the top of its voice. Meanwhile boys perched in the trees of the Library grounds throw down peanut shells and apple peelings into the crowd. Tilted ginger ale bottles give the hint to others, and the cracking of hard-boiled eggs begins. The talk spreads from the rear ranks forward, rank after rank yielding to the temptation toward sociability in the cold and wet, until it becomes a roar, and by the time the inaudible President has made his bow and gone off the whole multitude is talking. By his bow and the rising of the guests on the platform the chattering crowd below knows that the inauguration is over, and begins to run for the trolley cars.

The custom of the inauguration is said to have begun with Jefferson, though in his day there could not have been such multitudes and the scenes could not have been so noisy. In a blizzard Andrew Jackson took the oath, and made his speech inside the Senate Chamber. The chroniclers of that day do not record the difference, from which one is strengthened in the belief that the crowds could not have been so great or the scenes at the inauguration so confusing.

In 1900, when Taft was inaugurated, there was another blizzard

that swept the streets clean of trolley cars, automobiles and even hacks, and in which it was dangerous to life to venture out on the east front. This danger, remember, was real. Not an inauguration but has taken its toll of deaths, generally of elderly men who could not stand the long period of sitting or standing in the cold and wet. The deaths of private citizens were never recorded, but there has not been an inauguration in my time, nor, I suppose, for a long time before, which has not killed off celebrities by the dozen or half-dozen — Ambassadors, Senators, Representatives and other men of mark. There comes to my mind especially Baron Fava, long the Italian Ambassador at Washington, who gave his life up in fulfilling his official duty, that of attending Roosevelt's inauguration.

The Taft blizzard was so strenuous that no elderly man could have ventured out of doors, and there could have been no 7 A. M. crowd. At the last moment Senator Knox moved that the ceremony take place in the Senate Chamber. The motion was carried. It was the only dignified inauguration seen in this generation.

To the furthest nook of that chamber, the galleries of which were crowded, every sentence, every word, every syllable rang and penetrated. It does not matter now what Taft said. The people in the Chamber could see and hear and understand, and every face wore a look that showed the impression being made. Here was the American people, speaking at its fixed quadrennial date through the mouth of the man it had chosen to honor. The solemnity of the scene was brought home with a hammer blow to every spectator.

The silence, in which one could hear a pin drop, the expression of those earnest faces reacted on the President. Their enthusiasm reacted on him. It roused him to his best manner, and in tone and gesture he testified to the fact that for him, too, the occasion was a great and solemn one. Other Presidents had tried to shout over the roar of the crowd, and, failing, had subsided into a quick gabble with the one design of getting the thing over with as soon as possible. Thanks to the kindly blizzard, here was one President who had a chance to show what a Presidential inauguration might be, one audience that could see in fancy, that could not help seeing, the invisible pageant of the American people performing a great act.



"Boys perched in the trees of a library grounds throw down peanut shells."

too much splendor, and in the House Uncle Joe Cannon's voice was heard against such features as the misuse of the Pension Bureau for the so-called inaugural ball, which in past years was a private business enterprise, and had nothing to do with the inauguration except that it took place on the same day.

The showy ball was merely a means of enabling the business men of Washington to get back the money

the clerks went on even if it was a month before they could return to their work. But this was not the worst that could be said against the inaugural ball. It was not only an expense, but a useless expense.

The ball had nothing to do with the official ceremonies, which end at the Capitol in the afternoon. The business men of Washington formed a league and raised money for the expenses of it, although they saddled