

THE LAST WORD ON GOEBEL'S DEATHBED

By

Richard Renneisen

(From Courier-Journal)

FROM the typewriter of Urey Woodson, silver-haired editor and elder statesman—one of the two living persons who saw the mortally wounded William Goebel sworn in as Governor of this State at Frankfort in 1900—has come a book* which at last has put into some organized form a record of this greatest of Kentucky political tragedies, the Goebel assassination.

In the book, voices long silent—those of Henry Youtsey and James B. "Jim" Howard, now aging men—speak out in special interviews obtained for the purpose. In it runs the spirit of the day, the paramount questions, the hostilities, the lines of division of the parties. It will settle many a dispute, this book, perhaps start many another. But doubtless it will succeed in doing a real service in bringing order out of the moldering remnants of partisan recollection and sketchily acquired information.

The Goebel story, from the start of that two-fisted politico's career until his tragic end, is too important a chapter in Kentucky's history to bury. An unsavory chapter in many respects, true. A chapter, some still believe, about a political crook; a chapter about a crusader for the right, in the view of others, a crusader who consistently tossed aside warnings that violent characters were planning to kill him. Kentucky history, nonetheless, no matter what the view. Through the years Goebel has remained a sort of Jekyll-Hyde figure. As time has moved on, a fog of legend, poisonous and sacrosanct at the same time, has covered his memory. And a public surfeited with the seemingly endless new

Long silence ended for a new book on the tensest week in Kentucky's history

of the long trials, and the street corner discussions, has showed the Goebel case into musty crannies of the mind, and there it has lain.

The longer it was until the whole story was written, the more chance there was of eventual error. A striking example was in the case of the proclamation signed by Goebel immediately after he was sworn in. This document was in the possession of Mr. Woodson, among his effects at Owensboro. He requested Senator Alben W. Barkley to bring it to him at Washington on a trip the Senator made home in the latter part of 1936. Just about a month after Barkley had taken the document to Washington, the great flood of 1937 came and the document, had it remained where it was placed before, would have been lost.

It is fitting that Mr. Woodson, who was on the scene of the hurly-burly doings of that tragic time at the turn of the century, the march of the notorious "armed mountain men" on Frankfort and the other stirring events, should record what he knows. His multitudinous connections with source material and his own personal experiences as a newspaperman stand him here in good stead. He has no starting, no world-shattering disclosures to make. He does not claim to have.

Do we find out at last, for example, who pulled the trigger that sent a steel-jacketed bullet cracking across the State House grounds that frigid January morning to strike down the man whom the Legislature had just declared (some still contend irregularly) the victor in the post-election contest for the Governorship with William S. Taylor?

Hardly that. Mr. Woodson is frank to state that he cannot say who pulled that trigger—he doesn't know. Jim Howard, a mountain feudist, got a life term for it. He figured in eight years of trials after the killing. He steadfastly denied it then—he does so now.

No, it is not the flash of new material which will make the appeal of Mr. Woodson's book. It is rather the solidity of the basis for what he writes, and the fact that he has brought into one stack all the loose straws which the winds of a generation have scattered. The student will at least have them stacked up. He can evaluate the stack.

Pardoned, and now living near Manchester, Ky., Jim Howard has steadfastly refused to talk to anyone, at least to any outsider, about the Goebel case until recently. Mr. Woodson, through an emissary, the daughter of the attorney who defended Howard, has thus scored something of a scoop in getting some "quotes" from Howard for his book.

Youtsey today

Howard still denies the killing, still declares he has "suffered persecution for a crime I did not commit," and says that he says now "what I'd say if I knew I should die tomorrow—that I did not kill Goebel."

At his farm near Cold Springs, Ky., Henry Youtsey, at the time of the killing a young clerk in the State Auditor's office, and himself given a life term in the conspiracy, has, with others in the case, been enjoying the freedom of his pardon. It was his confession that perhaps did more than anything else to convict Howard. Youtsey confessed, in brief, that he gave the rifle with which Goebel was killed to Howard that morning in the office of the Secretary of State in the Capitol, and left Howard in the office "after I pointed Goebel out to him."

Still practicing his religious duties, singing in a church choir at Newport, Ky., every Sunday, selling

*THE FIRST NEW DEALER. Standard Press, Louisville.

WHAT SOME EMINENT AUTHORITIES SAY OF THIS BOOK



Senator Alben W. Barkley, of Kentucky, says:

"There was never a more stirring era in the history of any State than the events connected with the life and death of William Goebel of Kentucky. No man knew that era more intimately than did Urey Woodson. No man is better qualified to write about it than is he. His book 'THE FIRST NEW DEALER' gives a vivid history of the events connected with this great Kentuckian."

Senator M. M. Logan of Kentucky says:

"This story of William Goebel, the first New Dealer, his assassination and the trials of those charged with his death, is a book that should be read by everyone. It is concise, intensely interesting and accurately covers a stormy period in the history of Kentucky with which all should be acquainted. I earnestly recommend this book to all readers."

Honorable Joseph P. Tumulty, former Secretary to President Woodrow Wilson, now a member of the Washington bar, says:

"Urey Woodson's moving story of the life and death of William Goebel, Governor of Kentucky, recalls an episode comparable in its tragic sweep to many of the things that happened in the Age of Hatred following the bitter days of the Civil War."

"Mr. Woodson's standing as a Democrat and as a journalist who lived in the midst of the things he describes peculiarly fits him to bring home to us many of the stirring things that preceded the death by assassination of William Goebel whom Mr. Woodson describes as the 'best loved and the best hated man in Kentucky,' three or four decades ago. Urey Woodson, an intimate of Governor Goebel, who knew him as few men in Kentucky did, has written a political epic that raises the curtain upon incidents and sidelights that, until Mr. Woodson's trenchant pen touched them, have remained unexplained and unexplored."

Honorable Joseph F. Cuffey, Senator from Pennsylvania, says:

"I think it is wonderful and a fine testimonial."

Colonel Joseph M. Hartfield, famous New York lawyer, formerly of Henderson, Kentucky, writes:

"There is no more colorful page in Kentucky's political history than the Goebel tragedy, and the trials that followed. There is no one better qualified to record this thrilling story than Urey Woodson. He has written a splendid book and it should be on your 'must' list."

Judge Fred M. Vinson, of the United States Court of Appeals in Washington, formerly Congressman from Kentucky, says:

"Goebel is Kentucky's martyred son. Tragic and heroic, he was a forward looking pioneer in the battle for good government. For this preeminence he paid with his life. The history of his career and times well deserve the graphic pen of a Urey Woodson—his co-worker and intimate. It is indeed pleasing and fortunate to know that this stirring chapter of American government will be preserved for posterity."

Honorable Robert W. Woolley, formerly of Lexington, Kentucky, now a member of the bar at Washington, D. C., writes:

"Forty years ago I was sent by the New York World to my old home State to report the memorable gubernatorial campaign in which Goebel and Taylor were respectively the Democratic and Republican candidates. As a young newspaper man in Kentucky I had seen Goebel in action many times on the stump and in the State Senate. My daily dispatches to the World contained such alarming predictions that the managing editor wired me only murder of one of the candidates could justify them."

"Urey Woodson, who knew Goebel as few men did, has written an absorbing and thrilling story of one of the most intrepid and interesting characters in the political history of the United States. Start reading it and you won't put it down."

Charles Michelson, now Chairman of the Publicity Bureau of the Democratic National Committee, who reported the trial of Caleb Powers, at Georgetown, Ky., in 1901, for the Hearst papers, writes:

"This book brings back to me the dramatic trial of Caleb Powers for the murder of Governor Goebel. It was complicated with contradictory testimony and intense with animosities. We felt we were all standing on a powder mine at every session. I recall, for example, that all the lawyers and witnesses were searched and had to surrender their pistols before they were permitted in the court room. The atmosphere was cloudy with the feudist psychology, all of which was fascinating to a New York reporter accustomed to the deadly calm of city court rooms. It was fascinating to read in Urey Woodson's book the recital of the testimony we listened to in Georgetown, and the author is to be congratulated on his adequate presentation of a vivid story that must interest everybody who appreciates history drama."

insurance, raising chickens and occasionally taking dictation as a stenographer, Youtsey is trying to live down his early years. Insisting he fared disastrously at the hands of a "dirty bunch" with whom he became associated as a youthful stenographer, Youtsey says he firmly believed Goebel and his partisans were attempting to steal a legally-won victory from Taylor, and that he and others (quoting Mr. Woodson's book) "believed the effort to unseat Taylor was no less an outrage than the means which appeared to him (Youtsey) and his associates to be necessary to prevent it."

These voices, it is true, serve to make only more emphatic the stories they swore by all through the eight long years of trials, but they do provide highlights for Mr. Woodson's book. Howard, for example, believes Youtsey and all the rest are dead—and of course he is almost right.

Mr. Woodson and a Miss Portune, the nurse stationed at Goebel's bedside after he was wounded, are believed the only two living witnesses who saw Goebel sworn in.

Mr. Woodson's account is simple. "Chief Justice James H. Hazelrigg, accompanied by five or six others, then went to Goebel's room and announced to him the result of the action of the General Assembly, telling him that if he was ready he would then be sworn in as Governor. [The Legislature had declared him legally elected. No Republicans, however, signed the report, claiming they were not notified of the meeting.]

"Goebel, who was fully conscious, announced his readiness, raised his right hand, and took the oath of office, administered by the Chief Justice.

"Then John K. Hendrick, spokesman for the committee, said to Goebel, 'We have here a proclamation we want you to sign. It is all right, Will, and I will not stop to read it.'

"Goebel in a strong voice said, 'Read it!'

"Hendrick then read the proclamation, which simply called upon the military to disband and go to their homes, as there was no apparent cause for their presence in Frankfort. All other armed men were also ordered to leave.

"A fountain pen was handed to Goebel, and, lying on his back, he tried to sign the document but his signature was not good.

"Goebel then said, again in a strong voice, 'Hand me a pencil,' and his signature was attached and it was as perfect as any he had made in good health."

A facsimile of that document is printed in the book. Mr. Woodson lists in a footnote the witnesses who saw Goebel sworn in. They were, besides the Chief Justice, Mr. Hendrick, Dr. J. N. McCormack, John A. Fulton, Joseph W. Pugh, Arthur Goebel, Miss Portune, the nurse, and himself.

Goebel lived four days after being wounded. He died at 6:44 p.m. February 3, 1900. Up to within thirty minutes before he expired, Mr. Woodson writes, he "was fully conscious and his voice continued strong."

Seen by eighteen doctors

The report, however, had been "industriously circulated" throughout the State that Goebel was actually dead before the effort was made to swear him in, Mr. Woodson points out, "this in spite of the fact that at least eighteen physicians and surgeons, some from Cincinnati, Louisville and Lexington, as well as Frankfort, had visited him during these four days. Some of them were prominent Republicans, and all agreed as to the man's condition."

Mr. Woodson was a friend of Goebel's, and, in addition to his friendship, was a newspaper man alive to the events of the times. He thus tells a first-hand story with considerable vitality. One of the features of his book is part of a chapter dealing with a talk he had with Goebel when the latter told of his plans if sworn in as Governor. A dramatic incident is described in which an unidentified man obtains admittance to Goebel's room and gives him a warning that there is a plot on foot to assassinate him. This was the very day before the shooting.

"The afternoon before he was shot," writes Mr. Woodson, "I sat with Goebel in his room, Parlor A, at the Capital Hotel in Frankfort, discussing the probable outcome of the contest before the Legislature. I said that it appeared to me that in a day or two the contest would be decided in his favor and asked, 'Now, what is the first thing you are going to do when you are sworn in as Governor?'

"He replied that he was going down to Covington and ask Judge Tim Tarvin to call a special grand jury and he would indict Milton Smith, president of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad; Basil Duke, chief lobbyist for the Louisville & Nashville, and Dick Knott, editor of the Louisville Post, for criminal libel, and put them in jail for at least two years.

"That was Goebel! And he would have done it had he lived! He was a masterful man. Those men would have had to leave Kentucky or spend some time in jail, if Goebel was Governor. [This, Mr. Woodson doubtless meant, was provided the indictments could have been obtained.]

"At about this moment there came a knock on Goebel's door and he invited a stranger in. The man said, 'Is this Mr. Goebel?' Goebel replied, 'Yes.' 'Mr. Goebel, you don't know me and I don't know you,' the stranger said, 'but I feel it my duty to come here and tell you something I learned on the train coming down from the mountains this morning. I sat in the same coach with several mountaineers, very bad characters, as I well know, and they were talking of you. They said you were going to be killed in the next day or two, and more than one of them said he would like to have the opportunity of firing the shot to kill you. I

(Continued on next page)