

IOWA HISTORY

Shaw and His Horses Grab Headlines in Washington

When former Iowa governor Leslie Shaw was chosen by President Theodore Roosevelt as his secretary of the treasury in 1902, Iowans were prepared to see his name in the national headlines. Shaw did grab headlines, but sometimes it had nothing to do with his actions as head of the treasury department. A Chicago newspaper, *Inter Ocean*, gave its readers a humorous description of a memorable outing by the former Iowa governor.

In those days everyone used horse power as their mode of transportation. Even the White House had stables on the grounds. Shaw brought his favorite riding horse from Iowa to Washington, D.C. While it was said the horse wouldn't win any ribbons at the county fair, he was described as "slender of limb, well gaited and well behaved." And while some poked fun at Secretary Shaw for his drab clothing—a long black "frock coat," which made him look like "a Methodist preacher," they said he sat in his saddle "as comfortably as in his swivel chair at his desk" as he "glided about" the streets of the capital.

Other politicians had been asking Secretary Shaw to join them in rides around the city—just for fun and relaxation. Shortly after Shaw's horse arrived from Iowa, he decided to join a group of riders. Congressmen from Nevada and Maine led the ride in which they were going to "test the horsemanship" of the newcomer. Of course, Shaw was unaware, but others in the group were in on the secret.

At first, the group rode within the city limits, where the streets were relatively smooth and straight. Shaw and his horse "glided along like a toy rocking horse." Soon the two congressmen made their way to the country, where the streets were no longer easy for a horse to navigate. It was here that Secretary Shaw's horse "woke up." He overtook the lead, moving to a bridle path which led up a steep hill. With no regard for the thick brush, Shaw took his horse to the steepest part of hill. The horse easily made his way up the rocks "like a mountain goat."

When the group reached the top of the hill, they found Secretary Shaw and his horse enjoying the panoramic view of the city. "Here, gentlemen, is where I propose to build my house. It is the finest location I have been able to find near the city," Shaw remarked before directing his horse down an even more hazardous path to town.

The congressmen from Nevada and Maine claimed Shaw's horse actually climbed trees "like a squirrel" and "jumped off precipices like a mountain goat." And the next day when Shaw sent a messenger to ask the riders to join him for a ride in another part of the city, they all had previous "urgent engagements."

Secretary Shaw was again the subject of headlines in the *New York Times* a couple years later when he selected a driver for his carriage used for government business. He was required by law to make his selection from a list of applicants sent to him by the civil service commission. The office sent him three to consider: an accountant, stenographer and a grave digger from St. Elizabeth's Insane Asylum. After much thought, Shaw chose the grave digger. He joked that the man would be invaluable on a dark night because he would not be afraid of ghosts.

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Sources

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