

Thirty Years of Gridiron Club Dinners

Since 1885 It Has Been Making Fun of Public Men to Their Faces, but Some, Such as Harrison and Reed, Turned the Laugh on the Club

By Charles Willis Thompson.

IT is thirty years since the Gridiron Club was founded; and Arthur Wallace Dunn, one of its members, is not boasting when he calls it "the most famous dining organization in the world." In this, the beginning of its thirty-first year, Mr. Dunn has published a history of the club, entitled "Gridiron Nights" and published by the Frederick A. Stokes Company. No, it is not a history of the club so much as a history of its skits and jokes, the high spots of its dinners.

Its beginnings were small and its early dinners very unlike those which now attract the leading men of the nation from all over the land. It began by copying the Clover Club, and guying the speakers. That practice was abandoned long ago, and the policy adopted of having the club furnish the fun instead of getting it out of the guests. The guests are lampooned unmercifully, but when one of them rises to speak he is listened to with respectful attention. He can speak freely, for his speech will not be reported. At the beginning of the dinner the President announces, "The Gridiron Club has two rules: Ladies are always present, and reporters are never present."

"After some training, both as Secretary of War and as President," wrote ex-President Taft, "I was able to smile broadly at a caustic joke at my expense and seem to enjoy it, with the consolatory thought that every other guest of any prominence had to suffer the same penalty for an evening's pleasure. The surprise and embarrassment of foreign Ambassadors at their first Gridiron dinner, and their subsequent whole-hearted appreciation of the spirit of these occasions, showed how unique a feature they were of Washington political life."

"I had the time of my life last night," said J. Pierpont Morgan to Mark Hanna, after his first Gridiron dinner.

All the Presidents of the United States from Harrison's time, with the exception of Cleveland have been guests of the Gridiron, most of them regular guests. Harrison had the reputation of being a cold and reserved man, and he astonished the club by making a scintillating speech. "This is the second time this week," he began, "that I have been called upon to open a congress of American inventors."

When the President concluded his witty and genial speech, Frank Hosford, one of the intense Democrats of the club, went over to Perry S. Heath of The Indianapolis Journal, who was in the President's confidence and his mouthpiece in the press.

"Perry," said Hosford, "your man Harrison is a wonder. I didn't think it was in him."

"Oh, he's all right on his feet," replied Heath. "It's only when he sits down that he falls down."

And that was so true, (says Mr. Dunn.) Sitting at his desk in the White House, he could do and say more things to make him unpopular than any man that ever occupied that exalted station. When he became tired of a visitor, or did not want to continue a conversation further, he would stare vacantly across the room and drum with the fingers of both hands on his desk. Many a prominent man, accompanied perhaps by a friend upon whom he wanted to make an impression, was actually drummed out of Harrison's presence.

At the beginning of Cleveland's second Administration the club gave a dinner to the new Cabinet. The President of the Club was Frank Hatton, who had succeeded Postmaster General Gresham when that statesman became Secretary of the Treasury. Gresham had now become the new Secretary of State, and sat at Hatton's right. Hatton made a speech instructing the new Cabinet in its duties. He warned them, from his own experience as Postmaster General, not to take themselves too seriously.

"I have been there myself, boys," he said; "the old colored messenger will show you where to sign your names, and the clerks will do the rest. I recall my first day as a Cabinet man, and it is no doubt very much like your own experience. I was signing papers where the messenger indicated, but finally I

thought I ought to assert myself when I came to a particularly imposing and bulky document with many papers attached. Leaning back in my chair, I said:

"I don't exactly understand this."

"Neither do I, boss," replied the messenger, 'but yo' signs yo' name right there."

"After that I got along without any difficulty."

At a dinner in 1896 David B. Hill was asked to talk about his Presidential chances. Hill, who was a bachelor, replied by telling of a census-taker who came to him when he was Governor of

fond of rapping him for his mastery of the McKinley Administration, and at a dinner held just before the war with Spain, the President of the club, Frank Hosford, in the course of a speech about it, turned to him and said:

"Senator Hanna, can we have this war?"

Hanna was opposed to the war, as was McKinley. When Hanna had spoken, Hosford said caustically: "At least we have one man connected with this Administration who is not afraid to fight," and introduced Assistant Secretary Theodore Roosevelt.

this same dinner, would not attend until assured that he would not be called on for a speech. "I'm nothing on the gab," he said, "and I'd be a mark for these guys." The club has kept for years a large book in its reception room, and in this book each guest inscribes his name. When Croker reached the book, Mark Hanna had just written his name and was rising from the table. The two leaders had never met. Each looked at the other for an instant. Croker spoke first. "Your face seems very familiar," and there was a twinkle in his eye.

"I ought to know you from your pictures," said Hanna, smiling broadly.

A little later they found themselves seated opposite each other at the dinner table and had a good time together. "I knew your face," said Croker, "but I missed that suit with the dollar marks."

"I'd have been sure it was you if you'd worn that striped suit," retorted Hanna.

"How did you like it, Chief?" asked Croker's host, John Corwin, after the dinner was over.

"Fine," replied Croker. "Say, do you know who made the best speech? The Chink. The Chink was better'n all of 'em."

He referred to his Excellency Minister Wu Ting-fang.

Senator Beveridge came to Washington heralded as the "Young Man Eloquent." He attended his first Gridiron dinner in 1899, handicapped by his boy-orator reputation. Mr. Dunn thus describes his adventures:

When Senator Beveridge was called upon he was escorted to the area in front of the President, given a brief lecture, and told how to deport himself as a United States Senator. First, his youth was criticised and he was told to overcome this defect by wearing whiskers, and a disguise of whiskers was put over his face. Then he was informed that one trouble in the Senate was due to an inclination to talk too long, and he was given an alarm clock and told that when the alarm sounded it was time to quit. Having received these instructions, he was allowed to proceed.

Holding the alarm clock in one hand and waving the other with oratorical gestures, the young Senator began to speak, but he had not been going more than three minutes when the alarm, which had been previously set for the occasion, went off, and as it rang loud and long everybody shouted and laughed, and Beveridge had to wait for another occasion before he was able to make a speech to the Gridiron Club.

When Senator Tillman made his Gridiron debut he had the reputation of being a wild man. Gorman, the conservative Democratic leader, was another guest. Tillman was presented with a black flag, informed that he was "partially civilized," and allowed to speak. Mr. Dunn says:

I wonder how many people recollect the striking figure which Tillman made as he stood there in all the strength and vigor of those days waving that black flag back and forth and saying that it would "wave over my grave before it would find me in the same camp with Arthur Pue Gorman." In later years, when Tillman became one of the conservative Senators on the Democratic side, this remark could hardly have been made, for I fancy that he and Gorman would not have been very far apart.

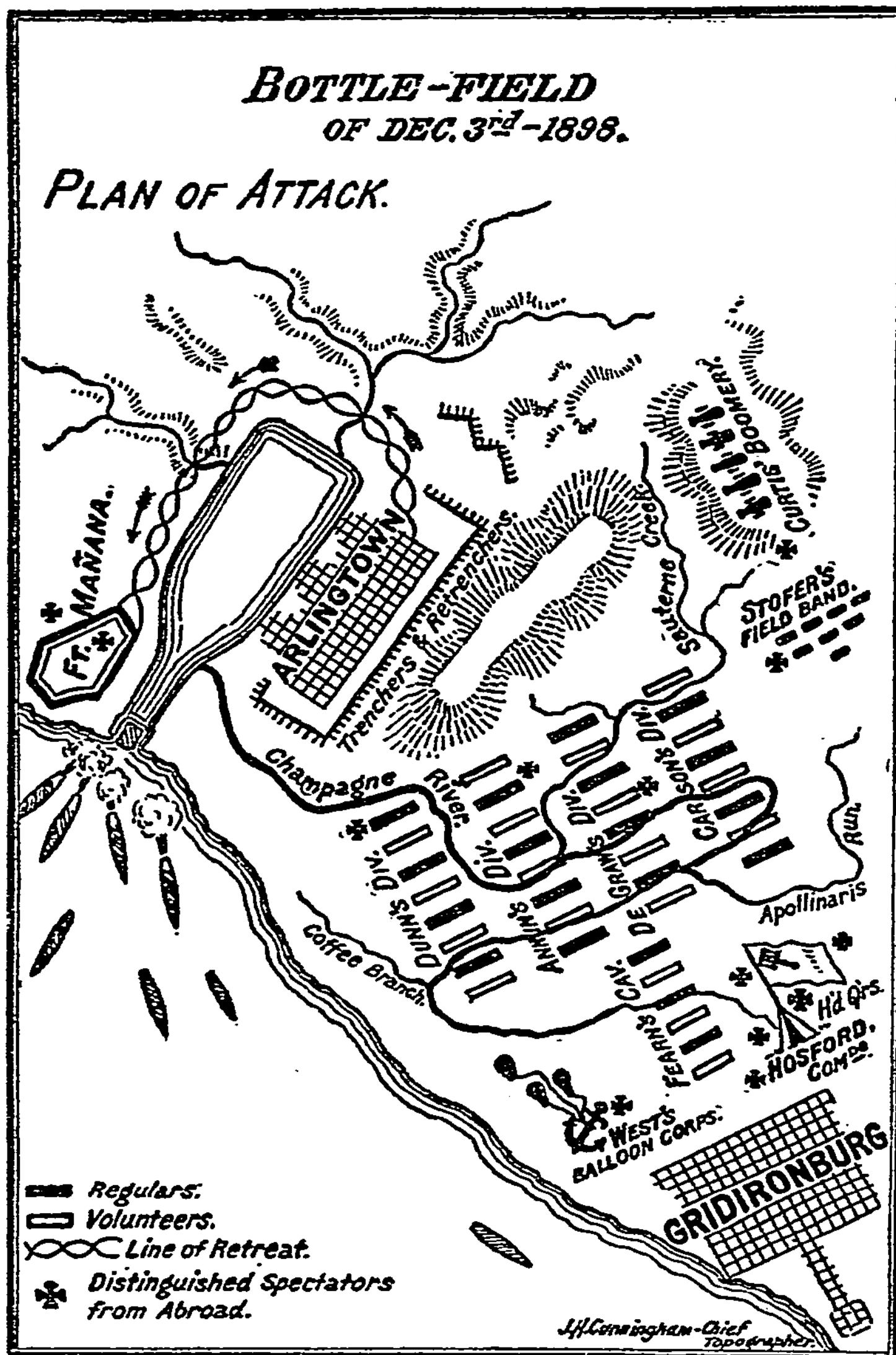
At a dinner early in 1900 Senator Thomas C. Platt surprised the club by reading a poem he had written many years before. This was a dinner given by the Lotos Club to the Gridiron. The poem was an amusing production, and made the greater hit because Mr. Platt's gift of humor was not generally known.

General Miles's once famous call at the White House, in which he had an altercation with President Roosevelt, has probably been forgotten now, but at the time it was widely celebrated and some of the stories about it were very lurid. At the next Gridiron dinner Miles was present, and so was the President. At one stage of the dinner General Boynton came limping in with his arm in a sling, patches on his face, and a bandage over his head.

"Why, General, where have you been!" asked Louis A. Coolidge.

"I have been to call on the President—"

Whatever else may have been in the reply was never heard, for there was a shriek and a roar from the head of the



On the Program at the First Dinner Held After the Spanish War.

New York, and among other questions asked, "How many children?" "None—to speak of," replied the Governor.

"That answers the Gridiron query," said Hill, and went on with his speech.

Just before McKinley was inaugurated the club held a dinner, at which one of the skits was a conversation over a telephone, McKinley being supposed to be at the other end, in Canton. William E. Annin, one of the members of the club, did the talking. "Yes," he said, "Boutelle is here." (Congressman Boutelle of Maine, who would have liked to be Secretary of the Navy.) "What's he doing, did you say? Oh, just waiting."

This raised a laugh at Boutelle's expense. "Yes," went on Annin, "Speaker Reed is here." Before he could go on, Reed, who was no friend of McKinley's, drawled out in his high-pitched voice:

"But not waiting."

Reed, at another dinner, sat beside Minister Wu Ting-fang, and in his speech poked a little fun at the Chinese Minister. When Dr. Wu was called on to speak, he said:

"I am told that your great Speaker is a Republican. In our country he would be a pronounced monarchist and a supporter of the Manchu dynasty."

Mark Hanna was a favorite at Gridiron dinners, and was always ready to stand for anything. The Gridironers were

"We will have this war for the freedom of Cuba, Senator Hanna, in spite of the timidity of the commercial interests," was one of the sentences ground out through the teeth of the Assistant Secretary. "It was," records Mr. Dunn, "a very dramatic moment, and there was no one present at that dinner who did not thoroughly understand that war was inevitable."

The Gridiron Club always made use of Chauncey M. Depew for any purpose whatsoever. At a dinner in 1899 General H. V. Boynton, the President of the club, made an introductory speech about Senator Depew, indicating that he was to be called upon. Just as everybody was expecting the Senator to arise, and while he was getting his preparatory smile ready, there stalked into the room a very large-sized book labeled "Depew's Jokes." On the other side was a picture of Depew laughing vociferously. When the uproar subsided Boynton went on with his speech and introduced somebody else.

A little later, however, he made a speech in which he really introduced Depew, and the Senator arose. But before he could say a word a phonograph began grinding out some of Depew's old stories, and the Senator was obliged to sit down. Later in the evening, however, he had an opportunity to speak, but he began gingerly, expecting some new trap. Richard Croker, who was present at



The Club's Burlesque of Roosevelt's Administration in 1907, Depicting the Probable Outcome of His Imperialistic Ideas.

table showing that Mr. Roosevelt thoroughly enjoyed the situation. The same could not be said for General Miles.

In January, 1904, Mirza Ali Asgar Khan, former Grand Vizier of Persia, was making a trip around the world, and was sailing to Europe from New York. His attendance at the Gridiron dinner was announced in the newspapers. What happened is thus described:

He came in late, after the dinner had been in progress for a time, and was accompanied by Scott C. Bone of The Washington Post, his host of the evening. Before taking his seat, directly in front of the President of the United States, he bowed low to that official, and then made a sweeping salaam to the assembled company. Senator Beveridge was introduced and shook hands. William H. Taft, then Governor General of the Philippines, who had crossed the Pacific Ocean on the same ship with the Grand Vizier, walked across the dining room and shook hands, expressing his pleasure at seeing him again. Senators Aldrich, Gorman, and Hanna and Speaker Cannon, sitting near by, were introduced.

After the dinner had progressed for a time President Louis A. Coolidge introduced the Oriental guest as one who had journeyed far and who came that night with views he had gathered in his travels. Mirza Ali Asgar Khan, with more profound bows, said that his message to the Gridiron Club and its guests had been written, as he was somewhat imperfect in our language, and then he began to read from large sheets of paper.

"The people of the United States," he began, "are watching every day to see whether there is to be a war in the Old World. In the East we also watch for that war. It is to observe preparations for that war that I travel."

"I was in Japan before I came to this country. In Persia we take great interest in Japan, because the next war will be the great struggle between the civilizations of the East and the West. We believe that the Eastern civilization will overcome the Western civilization."

"This will mark the downfall of Russia, that treacherous power that has plotted against the peace of mankind from the days of Peter the Great, and has been the hypocrite, the false friend of every weaker power it has aimed to destroy."

He was interrupted by a member of the club who suggested that as the Russian Ambassador was our guest no such discussion should be permitted. Mirza Ali looked puzzled and continued:

"The barbarous rule of Germany will be brought to an end and a higher morality will supplant the vicious rule of the vandals who have kept the intelligence of Europe under a reign of terror—"

Again he was interrupted and attention called to the presence of the German Ambassador. The situation was explained to the Grand Vizier, and he turned over two or three pages of his manuscript and continued:

"And then Great Britain, the traditional enemy of the free American people—perfidious Albion, as she is called by one of your poets. She has been the trader of the world—buyer and seller of men—pretending to love liberty, but hypocritically sheltering slavery when it could be to her interest—"

President Coolidge stopped him by sharp raps of the gavel. The faces of the diplomats were drawn into frowns of disapproval. Guests and members were aghast, while President Roosevelt looked as if he thought it was the makings of a bully row.

"We are very much obliged," said Mr. Coolidge, "to his Excellency the Grand Vizier, but as some members of the British Embassy are with us—"

"You will not let me speak," said the Vizier angrily, "then I bid you good night!"

You invite me here—you ask me to speak—I prepare my speech—you are as bad as the rest. You have no free press—you have no free speech! I go."

And as he was making sweeping gestures he tore away his fez, wig and beard, and there stood Francis E. Leupp of The New York Evening Post. He had put over the greatest hoax ever perpetrated by the Gridiron Club. The real Mirza Ali Asgar Khan had sailed for Europe that very day.

Senator Allison never committed himself on any subject, and there were many stories of his excessive caution in expressing opinions. The most famous is the story of some one's calling his attention to the fact that some sheep passing by had been sheared, and of Allison's reply, "It would appear that they have been sheared—on this side." Mr. Dunn contributes another:

One time Allison called a newspaper man into his committee room and read him a long letter addressed to a constituent at home, and asked the correspondent what he thought of it.

"Well, Senator," replied the correspondent, with some hesitation, "I don't think he will be able to make anything out of it." "That was the intention," replied Allison, fairly beaming.

When Ethan Allen Hitchcock resigned as Secretary of the Interior, and was succeeded by James R. Garfield, the West

was much pleased, for Hitchcock was unpopular there. A few days later there was a Gridiron dinner at which the late Francis W. Cushman, the brilliant Congressman from Washington, was called on for a speech. Cushman began by complimenting President Roosevelt, who was present, on the change in his Cabinet.

"When Hitchcock resigned," said Cushman, "there wasn't a dry throat west of the Mississippi."

At a dinner in 1911, at which William J. Bryan was present, the Gridiron Club held a mock session of the Supreme Court. One of the members applied for a writ to prevent Mr. Bryan from running for President.

"Oh, let him run," said the court. "What difference does it make!"

Just before President Wilson's inauguration the club held a session of the incoming Cabinet. One of the mock Cabinet was made up to represent Mr. Bryan, and when he entered he was asked:

"You have never attended a Cabinet meeting before, Mr. Bryan?"

"No," was the reply, "but I have made three attempts."

At another dinner in 1913 Thomas F. Logan of The Philadelphia Inquirer was

initiated as a member, and part of his hazing was to go about as a young reporter and interview the guests. Then he was questioned concerning the results.

"Did you interview the Secretary of War?" he was asked.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He denies it."

"What does he deny?"

"That's what I asked him, and he said it didn't make any difference what; it was the immemorial custom of the War Department to deny everything."

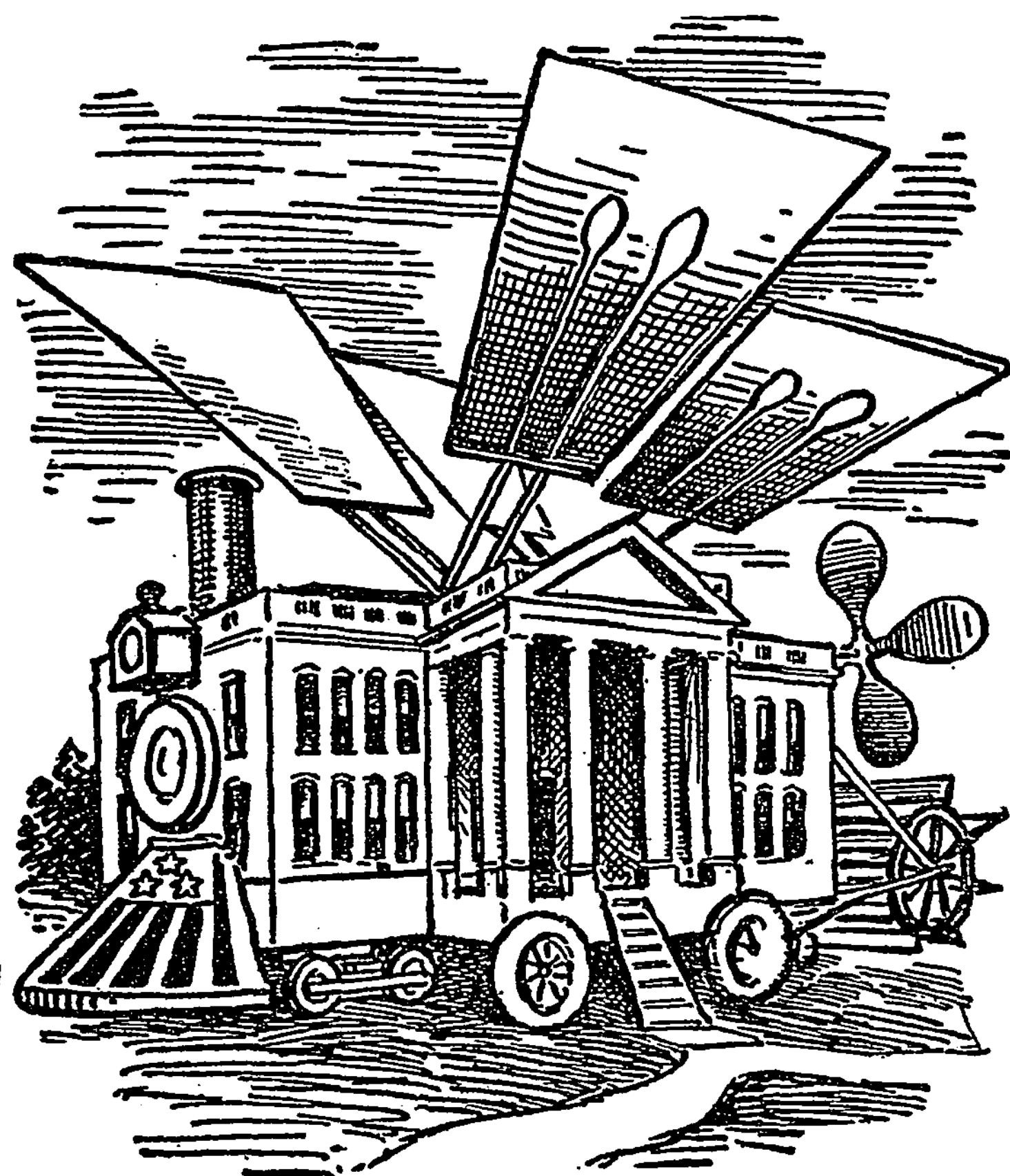
One feature of Gridiron dinners is the tribute to members who have died during the year, if there have been such. The lights suddenly go out, and in the darkness the voice of Louis A. Coolidge is heard. On one such occasion he said:

"The Gridiron Club goes on forever; though in the course of time its membership must change, till in due season those now mingling here become but memories to the later born. We cannot alter everlasting laws or stop the time-piece of eternity which strikes for each his hour to fall asleep. Our comrades come; they go; and as they pass they lay their offerings on the Gridiron shrine, contented if the gifts they bear blend in the glory of the club they love and fix their memory in a place among the crowding recollections of receding years. And as they melt into the shadows of the past it is most fitting that those lingering here speak each name fondly for remembrance sake."

There is a hush where a moment before merriment prevailed and jest went ringing. Upon a screen appear the faces of men who are no more. From out the darkness comes a voice calling their names, briefly reciting their deeds, and pronouncing a final tribute and farewell. There is a distant strain of music; the pictures begin to fade among clouds; the music grows stronger and the words of the song are heard:

Don't you hear them bells;
Don't you hear them bells;
They are ringing out the glory of the day.

The lights flash and the whole room joins in the chorus; and mirth, wit, and merrymaking again hold sway. "This," says Mr. Dunn, "is as it should be. It is as those gone before would wish. Every Gridiron man wants to be thus remembered by his fellow-members, but only for a moment would he have the enjoyment of a Gridiron dinner interrupted while the brief tribute is paid and he is enshrined in memories before forever passing into the shadows. Sentiment, of course; and as I have reviewed the past thirty years of Gridiron life I have found sentiment lingering at every milestone. It founded the organization, kept it alive, placed it upon a plane of success and achievement. Without such true and lasting sentiment there would be no Gridiron Club."



THE HOUSE JACK (COUGHT TO HAVE) BUILT A Gridiron Idea of the White House When President Taft Was Touring the Country. From a Dinner Souvenir.