

Ambassador Claude G. Bowers Was Once A Boone County Boy

by Dr. Holman Hamilton

(Editor's note: Dr. Holman Hamilton of Lexington Ky., the author of this article, is now writing a book about Claude G. Bowers and will appreciate copies of any Bowers letters in the hands of Boone Countians. Send same to Boone, Your County Magazine. A Fort Wayne native, Hamilton is a retired University of Kentucky history professor. Like Bowers, he is the recipient of an honorary degree from Indiana University.)

This autumn marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of a Boone County boy who grew up to become one of the most versatile Hoosiers and Americans of his generation.

Claude G. Bowers was born in Westfield, Hamilton County, on November 20, 1878, and briefly lived there and in Jolietville as an infant and small child.

But most of his childhood through his tenth year was spent in Whitestown, where his father--Lewis Bowers--ran a general store. The family home was at 101 Bowers Street.

And later the son often returned to visit local friends and relatives including his grandmother, Mrs. Jemima Catron Bowers, who operated a Boone County farm.

A newspaperman in Indiana and New York City, Bowers eventually wrote 14 books.

A valued friend of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman, and of Indiana Governors Samuel M. Ralston and Thomas R. Marshall, the onetime Whitestown lad served as ambassador to Spain for six years and ambassador to Chile for 14.

He also delivered the keynote speech at a Democratic national convention exactly half a century ago, when Al Smith was nominated to run against Herbert Hoover for the American presidency.

In "My Life: The Memoirs of Claude Bowers" (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1962), the ex-keynoter and ex-ambassador described the Whitestown of his boyhood:

"In the winter the stores served as clubs where men fresh from the farms, in work clothes stained by soil, gathered about the big base-burner stove for gossip and the discussion of controversial political and religious subjects. Always convenient was a tobacco box filled with sawdust to serve as a cuspidor, and it was amazing with what dexterity the tobacco chewer could hit the box from a fantastic distance.

"As in the old coffeehouses of prejournalism days in London, these loungers about the stove disseminated the news of the town, the birth of babies, the illnesses of old men, the amorous adventures of the young. Everyone knew everybody in town and all about them, and it was the kind of friendly, neighborly community where the women flocked to the aid of the sick.

"In these days of telephones, automobiles, radios, television and planes, the isolation of these small towns of the 1880's seems incredible. The people were thrown entirely on their own resources for entertainment. Lebanon, the county seat, was eight miles away and he who made the journey in less than an hour was criticized for cruelty to his horse. Indianapolis, but twenty miles away, seemed remote."

From Whitestown, young Bowers moved to Lebanon where he lived two and a half years, attending the public schools there as he had done in Whitestown. Thence he went to Indianapolis, graduating in 1898 from what subsequently became Shortridge High School.

As editorial writer on the old Indianapolis Sentinel during parts of the 1900-1902 period, he joined the Terre Haute Gazette staff in 1903 and the next year shifted to the Terre Haute Star.

At the ripe old age of 25, Bowers won the Democratic congressional nomination in the old Fifty (Terre Haute) District. Renominated two years later, he lost both times in Republican years but ran well ahead of his ticket.

In 1907-11 he served on the Terre Haute Board of Works, and in 1911-17 as secretary to U.S. Senator John W. Kern of Indianapolis and Kokomo. Bowers performed his best-known journalistic work on the Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette

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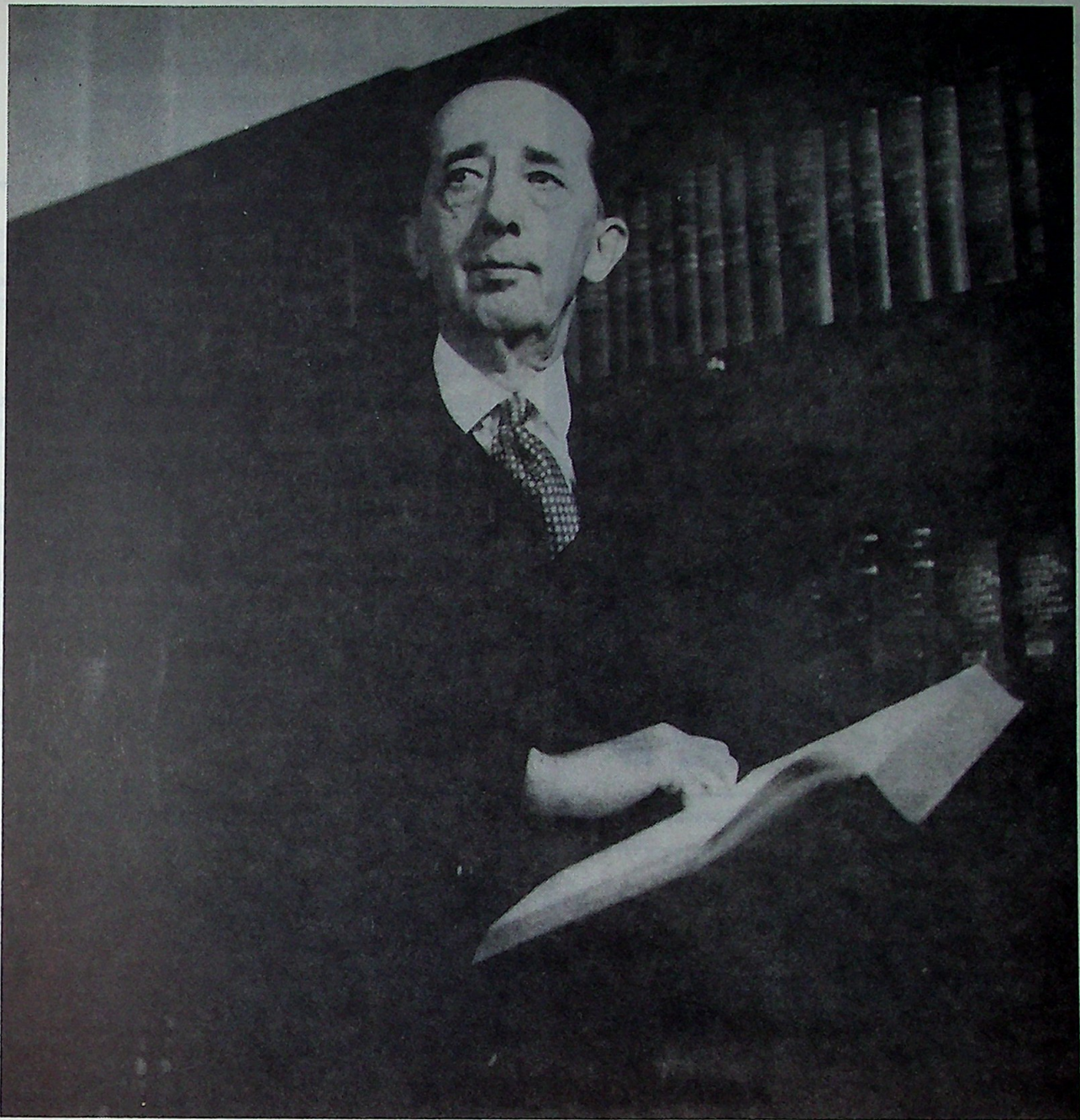
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Claude G. Bowers, United States Ambassador to Spain and to Chili under President Franklin D. Delano Roosevelt, lived his boyhood years in Boone County, attending the elementary schools in Whitestown and Lebanon.

(1917-23), New York Evening World (1923-31) and New York Journal (1931-33).

Meanwhile, the Indiana-New York newsman spent his spare time composing historical works and biographies.

The first two were "The Irish Orators" (1916) and "The Life of John Worth Kern" (1918), both published in Indianapolis. Next came "The Party Battles of the Jackson Period" (1922), "Jefferson and Hamilton" (1925), "The Tragic Era" (1929), and "Beveridge and the Progressive Era" (1932)--all bearing the imprint of Houghton Mifflin in Boston, and two being national bestsellers.

While abroad in the diplomatic service, Bowers concurrently continued his literary work. When friends marveled at his ability to accomplish so much, he replied

that he found plenty of time because he played neither golf nor bridge.

Books written overseas by Bowers included "Jefferson in Power" and "The Spanish Adventures of Washington Irving" as well as "The Young Jefferson" and "Pierre Vergniaud: The Voice of the French Revolution." "My Mission to Spain" came out in 1954; "Making Democracy a Reality" the same year; "Chile Through Embassy Windows" in 1958 (the year he died), and "My Life" was prepared for publication by his daughter four years afterward.

Bowers' service as ambassador to Spain (1933-39) coincided with the inception and actual hostilities of the Spanish Civil War. During his Chilean period (1939-53),

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AMBASSADOR CLAUDE G. BOWERS

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he became one of the most popular and respected envoys ever assigned to that South American country.

He wrote in "My Life" that while residing in Whitestown he found his "two greatest interests"---politics and history.

Living to the age of 79 (his last four years being spent in New York), the widely-traveled Hoosier native remembered with nostalgia the Boone County of his youth-- especially the fair at Lebanon:

"The farm families usually went in large wagons, and great baskets of food were taken along for a feast on the fairground. ...At noon, white tablecloths were spread on the grass; so general was this custom that it seemed the entire fairground was covered with spotless linen.

"The families sat on the ground about the cloth and literally stuffed themselves with chicken, hard-boiled eggs, pies and cakes. It was a gala occasion for the youngsters, since peddlers mingled with the throngs offering many-colored balloons, and groups gathered about the taffy vendors, watching them pull the taffy from a hook fastened to a tree."

Such were slices of life recalled by the elderly author-ambassador-newspaperman-orator as in the mind's eye he fondly recreated the Whitestown, Lebanon and Boone County of the long ago. ☆

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