Teddy Roosevelt’s gift after winning trial in Syracuse comes home

Douglas Lowery  dlowery@syracuse.com

A century ago, Theodore Roosevelt gilded his triumph in a lawsuit at Syracu-
sue’s grand courthouse on Columbus Circle. The 25th president shook the jurors’ arms so enthusiastically it looked like a pump han-
dle, an observer said. Roosevelt offered them each a token of thanks: a signed portrait of himself.

A few-week trial in 1915 pitted the former Republican president — he’d left office in 1909 — against state Republican titan Will-

iam Barnes Sr., who accused the rough-and-tumble icon of holding him in the papers. By the end, the jury actually wanted to award Roosevelt money he requested only El. Barnes, then publisher of the Albany Times-Union newspaper, had visited for years for barns of land to Smithtown, L.I., then an oasis of land accountant for inflation. Roosevelt’s trial moved from Albany’s massive city jail and at the end of it all actually cost him a $300,000 settlement.

Today, as the community prepares to celebrate a piece of that remarkable history, one of the signed por-
traits and a personal letter from the president to one of the jurors.

The portrait and letter were put on display this week in the Onondaga County Jury Room at the new criminal courthouse, across State Street from where Roosevelt celebrated his victory in 1915.

Hundrends of people who report for jury duty each week can now see how much their service means — and how much has changed in 101 years, Tommy said.

Back in 1915, the jurors were all “white, well-to-do men,” Tommy said. A photo of the jury in Roosevelt’s case accompanies the exhibit.

Starting with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, juries have become more diverse, and now stress to represent all backgrounds and walks of life. Tommy said. It’s evi-
denced by the people who report to jury serv-
cice today.

So how do Roosevelt's artifacts survive?

They were donated by Carol Higberg of Syracuse, the granddaughter of Judge George Schenck.

The successful Syracuse industrialist was immensely grateful for the president’s por-
trait after the trial. But only months later, it was destroyed in a fire at his Tulley cottage.

So Higberg wrote the president, asking for a replacement. Roosevelt wrote him back twice, sending him one. Brooch proudly hung the portrait on his wall and bequeathed it to his son, who then left it to his son.

Brooch was especially fond of Roose-
velt’s politics, standing up for the common man against big corporate interests. In fact, it was the former president’s lifelong criticism of the political machine that led him to be sued.

The Barnes lawsuit stemmed from com-

mutary Roosevelt made against “party bosses” and “corruption.” He accused Barnes of being no better than the infamous Democratic political machine in power at the time.

“The state government is rotten through-

out in almost all of its departments, and this is directly due to the dominance in politics of (Democratic leader) Mr. (Charles) Mur-

phy and his sub-bosses, acting through such entirely sub-subsidiary agents as Gover-

nor (John) Aiken Jr. and (Martin) Glynn, and aided and abetted when necessary by Mr. Barnes and the sub-bosses of Mr. Barnes. Mr. Murphy and Mr. Barnes are exactly the same moral and political type. Not one shadow of good comes from submitting one for the

jury, they said.

Higberg, the last of her grandfather’s line, added that planning to give the portrait to the courts.

“The history belongs to all of us. I think it’s high time that it belongs to the commu

nity,” she said.

Higberg thought the 100th anniversary in 2015 would make a good year. As it turns out, she was also called for jury service.

During lunch break while on a jury, Hig-

berg approached the courthouse. She discovered that she was in the very courtroom her grandfather had served in. She was sitting in the very jury box where his grandfather had heard Roosevelt’s long, entertaining tes-
timony.

After her trial was over, Higberg ap-

proached the judge. She figured a descend-

ant of another juror would have already donated one of the portraits.

But state Supreme Court Justice Donald Greenwood was exasperated. It turned out that he was also the head of the jury board.

Higberg figured the artifacts would be dis-

played in the old courthouse. There’s already a clear that Roosevelt sat in and other arti-

facts from the case. They’re located in in and around a ceremonial courtroom next to the

jury box.

But Tommy insisted that the artifacts should be displayed in the jury room. More people would see them, they argued, and they were a testament to jury service over the years.

From the president of the United States can be brought before a jury of ordinary peo-

cle. Higberg said of the significance.

During a ceremony Monday in the jury room, Higberg met two others who also had family connections to the Roosevelt trial. Current City Court Judge Ross Andrews, great-great-grandson of Judge William Andrews, presided over the trial and attorney Marlon Hancock Fish’s grandfather, Stewart Han-

cock, represented Roosevelt at trial.

“We still all look pretty good,” Higberg joked.

Dedication of new Teddy Roosevelt artifacts at the Onondaga County Jury Room. From left to right: Lou Higberg, Elisa Foller, Onondaga Community College associate professor and pres-

idental memiorabilia collector Dick Woodworth, etes Supreme Court Justice Donald Greenwood, City Court Judge Ross Andrews, Carol Higberg, Fifth Judicial District Administrators Judge James Tomney and lawyer Marion Hancock Fish.  (Photo provided)