

'The Roosevelts' on PBS takes a detour to Syracuse for Teddy's libel trial



Theodore Roosevelt pictured at his libel trial in Syracuse, New York. An inscription on the photo says, "Roosevelt at Barnes trial 4-21-15." Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association. (Courtesy of the Onondaga Histori)

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Did you catch the Syracuse connection in Tuesday night's episode of **"The Roosevelts: An Intimate History"**?

The seven-part Ken Burns documentary about Theodore, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt is being broadcast all this week on the local PBS affiliate WCNY.

Episode Three, broadcast Tuesday, included a lengthy segment on Teddy Roosevelt's libel trial in Syracuse in April 1915.

Roosevelt had left the White House in 1909 and had run unsuccessfully for president in 1912 as a Progressive.

The outspoken Roosevelt had called New York Republican Chairman William Barnes "a political boss of the most obnoxious type." Barnes sued for libel. The trial was moved from Albany to Syracuse after Roosevelt complained he could not get a fair trial in the state capital.

The trial took place in the Onondaga County Courthouse. It went on for more than five weeks. Roosevelt was on the stand for nine days.

A young Syracuse lawyer, Stewart F. Hancock Sr., was local counsel for Roosevelt. His son, the late Judge Stewart F. Hancock Jr., described the scene in the courtroom in a 1999 speech at the Onondaga Historical Association fund-raising gala in the courthouse taken from The Post-Standard archives:

Every available seat in the court room is taken.

Folding chairs are set up along the walls and crammed into the aisles.

Scores of reporters crowd the press section. Western Union operators man special telegraph cables installed in the corridor for instant transmission of the latest details.

Some of the most prominent political figures of the time have already testified -- among them Alfred E. Smith, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Robert Moses, Henry L. Stimson and Harvey D. Hinman.

In the witness chair testifying on cross examination is Theodore Roosevelt - a young ex-president, a big game hunter, the hero of San Juan Hill, the reformer and the unsuccessful candidate for President in 1912 on the Progressive Party ticket. He is the star of the show, and knows it.

Completely at ease, ebullient and charming, he simply ignores presiding Justice William S. Andrews, his classmate at Harvard, as the judge repeatedly sustains objections to his effusive answers.

To Roosevelt, the witness stand is his "bully pulpit."

He lectures. He gesticulates. He orates and occasionally clicks and flashes his famous teeth. He is enjoying it immensely. The audience loves it.

The jury decided in TR's favor but the trial took a toll on Roosevelt. In a letter to his son Kermit, the former president wrote:

... They were five weeks of great strain and even though I have won it will cost between thirty and forty thousand dollars. But the result was a great triumph, and I am bound that there shall be no more libel suits as far as I am concerned, and for the present at least no further active participation in politics for me.

As I wrote to a friend, in politics I have now become like an engine in a snow storm; I have plowed my way through until I have accumulated so much snow on the cow catcher that it has brought me to a halt. If I can get at men personally, as in the case of this jury, for a sufficient length of time, I can get most of them, if they are decent men, to come to my side; but the consistent and vicious attacks made upon me for many years have had a cumulative effect; and the majority of our people are bound now that I shall not come back into public life. ...

Read the entire **letter** online at the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson University.

Check out Episode Three of "The Roosevelts: An Intimate History."

You can **watch all seven episodes** online at PBS.org.

Coverage of the verdict in The Syracuse Herald-Journal of May 22, 1915, was eclipsed by news of a dynamite explosion on Spencer Street that killed five people and injured at least 20. Here's the front page of the paper that day:

[Theodore Roosevelt libel verdict](#) by [The Post-Standard](#)