

The 16-part "Dreams of a Barefoot Boy" originally appeared in the 2017 Kansas Newspapers in Education. Have fun reading stories, answering questions, and completing activities while learning about Dwight Eisenhower's childhood.

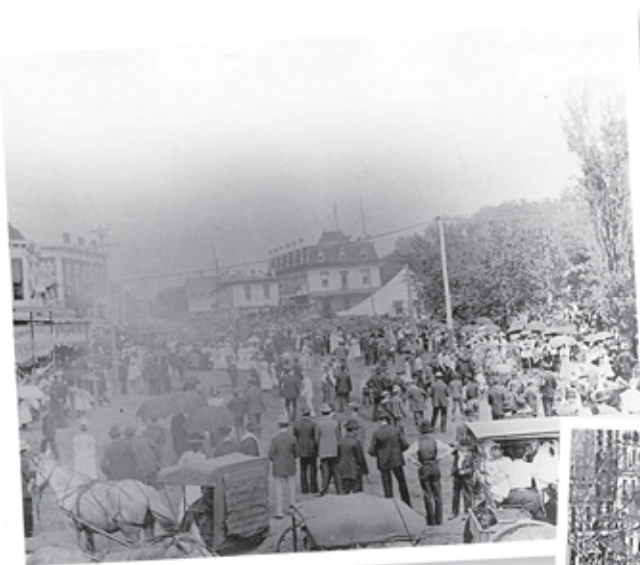


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"Dreams of a Barefoot Boy"

Chapter 10:

CARRYING THE TORCH



"Because no man is really a man who has lost out of himself all of the boy, I want to speak first of the dreams of a barefoot boy...Because today that dream of mine of 45 years or more ago has been realized beyond the wildest stretches of my own imagination, I come here, first, to thank you, to say the proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene."

Dwight D. Eisenhower June 22, 1945

Although Dwight Eisenhower would not hold a political office until he was 62 years old, his first experience with politics began in Abilene when he was only six years old. In 1896 the presidential race was between Republican William McKinley and Democrat William Jennings Bryan. Most of Abilene's residents were Republican and wore bright yellow McKinley buttons. Dwight was too young to be interested in the main issue dividing the candidates—the Gold Standard—but the enthusiastic discussions between his elders caught his attention.

One evening a torchlight parade was held in town, and Dwight joined his older brothers to watch the procession down Buckeye Avenue. Standing north of downtown, the boys were recruited to hold torches and join the parade. The torch, a rod topped with a can of flammable liquid, was as tall as Dwight. Once the wick was lit, he lifted the torch above his head, resting the rod on his shoulder, and began marching. Try as he might, his short legs couldn't keep up with taller members following the town band. In the end, the boys were lucky to avoid burns to hair or skin from the flaming torches.

Dwight's second brush with politics came in July of 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt came to

Abilene. Pictures show crowds of people meeting Roosevelt at the train station and listening to his speeches. It is quite possible Dwight and members of his family were in the audience during the president's visit.

Shortly after graduating from high school, Dwight spoke at the annual banquet of the Dickinson County Young Men's Democratic Club. The Dickinson County News published Dwight's speech on November 18, 1909. He stated that young men (only men 21 and over were eligible to vote in 1909) should consider the platforms of the two parties and vote according to his best interests. In this case, because Dwight knew his audience and the politics of 1909, he endorsed the Democrats (even though he wasn't old enough to vote yet) for supporting lower tariffs and having U.S. Senators elected by the direct vote of the people. (At that time, U.S. Senators were selected by each state's legislature.)

During Eisenhower's long Army career, he never voted in a presidential election, honoring the tradition of officers remaining non-partisan since the President is also the Commander in Chief. In 1952, both parties competed to nominate him at the head of their ticket, with the Republican Party eventually winning out.

By the time of his election, he was very familiar with parades. He could recall with fondness his first parade in Abilene compared to those honoring him as he waved at crowds from a convertible while carrying a virtual torch for freedom and democracy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Who was running for president in 1896? Find out who won.
2. Which president visited Abilene, Kansas in 1903? What reasons did Eisenhower give for supporting the Democratic Party in 1909?
3. How many times did Eisenhower vote before he became president?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Three changes to the U.S. Constitution are indirectly mentioned in this article. What are they and which Amendments to the Constitution address them?
2. Research Eisenhower's 1953 and 1957 inaugurations in the online documents section of www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov. Add this information to your Eisenhower timeline.