Warren G. Harding and political scandal

This article looks at Warren G. Harding's presidency -- his poker parties with bathtub gin during Prohibition, his affair with Nan Britton, and his shady dealings with the Teapot Dome affair.

The relationship between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky stunned the nation, as well it should have. However, Clinton was hardly the first president to use the White House for extra-marital affairs, nor was he the most scandalous of our presidents. That honor would go to Warren Harding.

Harding was a newspaperman in Ohio, using his journalist connections to make his way into politics, eventually becoming lieutenant governor. In 1920, he was one of many candidates who was tossed into the presidential pool at the Republican convention. He started off receiving the fewest number of delegate votes, but as the wheeling and dealing continued, Harding’s name began to move up the ladder until finally he was the man to receive the nomination.

Significantly, 1920 was the first presidential election in which women were allowed to vote. Harding was considered to be quite handsome, and more than a few Republicans thought that with his looks and his charm, he would attract enough women to win the election. (In reality, it worked just the opposite. Women did not vote for Harding in large numbers. He won the election because the country was ready for a change after the Wilson years and World War I.)

Harding became president when Prohibition was in effect and the Roaring Twenties had not quite taken off. It was a time when the country wanted to have fun. It was also a time when the country didn’t have a peephole into the White House. The president and his family had privacy.

Warren Harding brought a number of his Ohio cronies with him to Washington. These men weren’t politicians or men interested in government. They were businessmen, for the most part, who were more interested in what they could gain from the government. This became obvious during the Teapot Dome scandal, where Harding and his “advisors” struck up an illegal deal for land and oil. Harding washed his hands of the affair, but a good number of men had their careers ruined (as did a lot of underhanded thieves).

Perhaps Harding had a “presidential look” while running for election, but he did not maintain what many today like to think of as a “presidential lifestyle.”

In the evenings, Harding would invite his cronies and some trusted members of Congress, which included fellow Ohioan Speaker of the House Nick Longworth and his wife Alice, for poker games that would last all night. During Prohibition, bathtub gin and other alcoholic beverages flowed in the Harding White House. His wife, Florence – usually referred to as Dutchess by Harding’s friends – would act as a
waitress, serving drinks, lighting cigars, bringing new packs of cards, and Harding and the others would play poker and gamble.
Florence Harding accepted the idea that the White House had been, essentially, turned into the back room of a musty bar, but she refused to pay heed to the rumors of Harding’s love affairs.
The most famous of the affairs was with Nan Britton, a young woman he knew in Ohio and had brought to Washington. She was given free access into the White House, and she and Harding used bathrooms, closets, offices, or whatever space was available. When she became pregnant, she claimed the child was Harding’s, and after his death, she wrote a book that discussed their relationship. But Nan Britton was not the only woman that Harding brought into the White House. He charmed many women, and his affairs were numerous.
Harding died while President, while on a campaign swing to California. A psychic had warned Florence Harding that the president should not travel, that tragedy would strike, but Harding shrugged off the warning. His death, possibly a heart attack, was sudden. Because the Teapot Dome Scandal was in full swing and Harding’s involvement was just coming to light, there was great speculation that he was murdered. There were also rumors flying that his wife, tired of his affairs and gambling, poisoned him.