

## BACK IN TIME

# President passes through—quickly!

By **DICK SHEARER**

Look at the poll numbers and it's clear that this year's Presidential candidates aren't winning many popularity contests. Even incumbent Barack Obama lacks the numbers second-term hopefuls usually can rely upon.

We mention this because local history suggests not much has changed over the years. Let's travel back in time to 1878 when Lansdale was a bustling railroad junction town through which about 85 trains traveled each day.

Without the benefit of Air Force One in those days Presidents, like the rest of the people, had to rely on ground transportation to get around. Back in 1878, our Chief Executive was Rutherford B. Hayes, one of a string of Presidents who didn't leave much of an impression on us 134 years later.

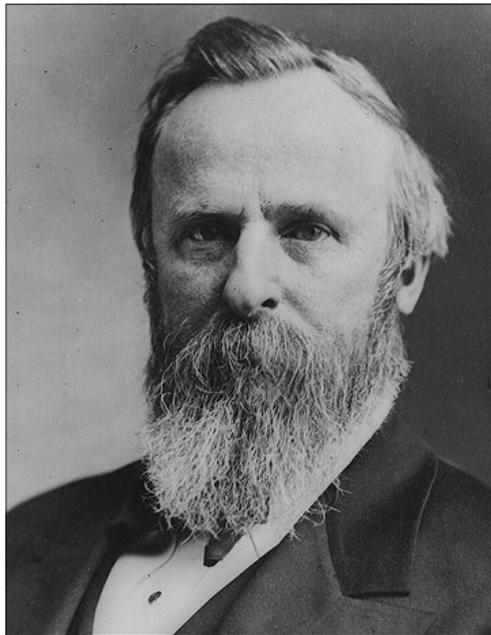
Hayes probably deserves a better fate. A Civil War hero, he was severely wounded several times and rose quickly through the officer ranks. A native of Ohio and a Republican, he was elected governor and gained national recognition for his progressive accomplishments on the state level.

But in 1876 he became the GOP's Presidential candidate and was entrapped in the messy and often corrupt politics of Washington. His Democratic opponent was Samuel J. Tilden and as was typical for the time they waged a long and bitter battle for the White House.

The campaign was so intense and corrupt that in the end no one knew for certain who won. Tilden had the majority of the electoral votes but Hayes and his party challenged and eventually he was awarded 20 votes and a one-vote victory by

way of the Compromise of 1877, a deal cobbled mere days before the inauguration.

The Republicans won but the Democrats never forgave and Hayes' four years in office were marked with uncompromising political divide similar to what we see today. Despite solid but not spectacular accomplishments during those years, Hayes vowed not to run again and he stuck to his word.



So what does all of this have to do with Lansdale?

During the wee small hours of May 4, 1878, a special express train roared through Lansdale en route to Tamaqua and on to what is now Jim Thorpe. On board was President Rutherford B. Hayes.

According to J.E. Wittmer, publisher of *The Reporter*, it was a non-event. No whistle to herald his arrival. No crowds to welcome him. Hayes was gone in a flash.

Wittmer, according to the paper's Old Timer back in 1966, speculated that the reason was that the President "failed to provoke spontaneous

patriotism among the citizenry".

Wittmer also suggested another reason for the indifference: He noted that "depressed market conditions generally, reflected by 40,000 unemployed in the area", tended to curb local residents' enthusiasm for the Chief Executive.

Hayes left office in 1881, replaced by James Garfield who narrowly defeated our own Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock.

In his later years Hayes expressed his concern with the direction the country was taking. He worried that power and influence were in the hands of relatively few people and that home ownership, education and support in old age would not be a reality for most Americans.

Seems like what goes around comes around.