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Mrs. Roosevelt Slept Here

By Pamela Gerhardt
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Early on in your tour of Val-Kill, Eleanor Roosevelt's retreat and private residence in Hyde Park, N.Y., you realize the guides want to make a point. Notice the mismatched fabrics on the living room chairs? See the tiny desk shoved into the corner? The four-term first lady wrote her "My Day" columns there and shared the desk--small enough for a school child--with her secretary.

Notice the common dinnerware? One tour guide told me that his grandmother-in-law serves Easter dinner on identical plates. Detail after detail reinforces Roosevelt's committed vow of austerity--a lifestyle she savored in bits and pieces, between visits to the imposing family mansion down the road, her tony Manhattan town house and the elegant family vacation home in New Brunswick. "Of course," our guide muttered, nearly under her breath, "Mrs. Roosevelt did have a formal silver tea that she used for entertaining."

Moving right along. See the tiny kitchen? Roosevelt cooked only one thing for guests, regardless of their place in the world: scrambled eggs and toast.

These Gandhi-esque details are meant to wow us, and, in light of Roosevelt's world stature and considerable family wealth, they do. But what we don't learn is that Anna Eleanor Roosevelt--daughter of New York's high society, niece of Teddy, spouse of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, proto-feminist icon and honored guest, all those years later, at Hillary Rodham Clinton's channeling parties--probably couldn't cook, well, because she never had to.

After some pressing, a guide admitted that Roosevelt had a live-in cook--her entire life. "She was just a regular person," several guides insisted at different points in the tour.

What they mean to say is that she wanted to be a regular person. As we make our way through the cramped downstairs of the cottage where Roosevelt lived periodically before moving there permanently from 1945 to 1962, entertaining many of this century's greatest thinkers and political figures, we begin to sense a gap between what we are seeing and the more complex truth.

When most people hear the word "retreat," especially in conjunction with such words as "upstate" and "Roosevelt," they think animal rugs, quaint bent-twig furniture handmade by locals, vast wine cellars, stables.

But Val-Kill, a mile or so down the road from the more visible and visited Roosevelt and Vanderbilt mansions along the Hudson River, essentially belonged to Eleanor, who apparently had little interest in material possessions, despite--or perhaps because of--her upbringing. After 20 years of marriage, Franklin had a cottage built for her in 1924, on the edge of the Roosevelt property near a small stream. Two of Eleanor's best friends, New York Democratic Committee co-workers Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, lived in the home (now called Stone Cottage) from 1925 to 1947. Eleanor spent weekends and holidays with them--unless Franklin came along, in which case she repaired to the family mansion up the road.

Two years after the original cottage was built, we learn, she and her friends constructed a second, larger building to house Val-Kill Industries, an experimental furniture-making business intended to provide skilled jobs for the surrounding rural residents, who traditionally headed to cities to work. Unfortunately, it had trouble keeping employees, who, as it turned out, gained skills and headed to the cities after all, and after 10 years the business folded, a victim of the Depression. The building was converted into a home for Eleanor and later renamed Val-Kill Cottage.

The guides and brochures stress that the property was the only place Eleanor could call home. Orphaned as a child, she lived with various wealthy relatives. Then boarding school. Then, at age 20, marriage to Franklin. Her mother-in-law, Sara Delano Roosevelt, apparently insisted that the couple live with her in three different homes, in Hyde Park, Manhattan and New Brunswick.

Most historical home tours are laced with some degree of psychological deconstruction that attempts to find, in the furnishings and artifacts, clues to the motivations and yearnings of the person who owned them. Val-Kill is loaded. For example, brochures and biographies use words such as "doting" or "domineering" to describe Franklin's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, but one tour guide pointed out Sara's portrait prominently displayed near the mantel at Eleanor's home, suggesting the rivalry perhaps has been exaggerated. You leave Val-Kill with many strong impressions and more questions than answers.

For example, you learn that in the small office, actually part of the secretary's quarters, Roosevelt received guests and hosted a before-dinner cocktail hour. "But the 'hour' really lasted about 15 minutes," said one guide. "She didn't agree with drinking."

Why not? The guides did not say.

The tour begins in a separate building, the Playhouse, where visitors are shown the obligatory 20-minute film bio. Next, guests cross a gravel driveway and enter Val-Kill Cottage through a plain wooden doorway. The tour guide asks you to pause there and imagine Churchill or Nikita S. Khrushchev or Marshal Tito, just a few of her visitors, crossing the same common threshold.

The tour includes only three rooms: the office/"cocktail hour" room, a narrow dining room and the living room. Within those rooms we discover tidbits about her political life and the workings of her mind and heart.

Schoolchildren made a desk plaque for her one year, but they forgot one of the E's in her name. Rather than call attention to the error and risk hurting the kids' feelings, she placed the plaque on her desk, where it remains today. Any person experienced with children would do the same (Roosevelt had five). But her stature and wealth render such an act worthy of a tour guide discussion. The implication: Such behavior is unusual for an aristocrat.

When you first walk into the living room you feel a bit overwhelmed by the rows of chairs, each a different style and size. You find yourself looking for the Three Bears.

"She wanted different seats because people come in different sizes," the guide explains.

The tour's brochure highlights Roosevelt's more well-known political accomplishments, which included hands-on research to help her husband formulate his New Deal policies, visits to wounded soldiers overseas during World War II, writing a magazine column called "My Day" for 30 years and shunning social activities. After FDR's death she served as a delegate to the U.N. General Assembly from 1946 to 1952. She wrote 17 books and co-authored six. And the tour guides and brochures explain that every summer in her later years she entertained more than 150 guests from the nearby Wilwyck School for delinquent boys, feeding them hot dogs and reading to them from Kipling. Visitors are encouraged to walk the grounds.

Somewhere along the tour you find yourself trying to put it all together.

You learn that while in the United Nations, Roosevelt chaired the U.N. Commission on Human Rights and helped write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. You find out that this year marks the declaration's 50th anniversary, celebrated by the nonpartisan, nonprofit Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill, which is "dedicated to Eleanor Roosevelt's belief that people can enhance the quality of their lives through purposeful action based on sensitive discourse among people of diverse perspectives focusing on the varied needs of society." Whew.

The declaration reads, in part, "All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

The word "should" . . . the Kipling . . . the furniture factory: You are witnessing history, all right.

As you leave you might find yourself questioning your own politics or wanting to read one of Eleanor Roosevelt's books. You might find yourself a bit annoyed or

cheated by the worshipping tour guides. Finally, as you walk the grounds and review Roosevelt's devotion to the ideal, you might feel astonished that people, people who lived right here in a simple cottage along the Hudson River, once believed that they could make the world right with reason and words.

Hyde Park, N.Y., is along Route 9, which runs north and south along the east side of the Hudson River. The town is about 12 miles north of Poughkeepsie and about a six-hour drive from Washington. I-87 runs along the west side, and you can cross at several points. You can tour Val-Kill, Springwood (the home of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which includes the couple's grave site) and one of the Vanderbilt mansions in one afternoon. Call 914-229-9115 or write to Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites, 519 Albany Post Rd., Hyde Park, N.Y. 12538. Admission: \$5 for Val-Kill, \$10 for Springwood, \$18 for a combo ticket that includes the Vanderbilt mansion. On the Web: <http://www.ervk.org>, <http://www.academic.marist.edu/fdr>.

Pamela Gerhardt last wrote about the Washington area's three major airports for Travel.

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