



Sara Delano Roosevelt and her son in the Springwood library they had planned together, 1932.

# THE HOUSE AT HYDE PARK

**A biographer who knows it well tours Franklin Roosevelt's home on the Hudson and finds it was not so much the President's castle as it was his formidable mother's.**

by Geoffrey C. Ward

**F**or better than four years now I have been writing about Franklin Roosevelt's youth, seeking the sources of the serene self-assurance that served him and his country so well during the two worst crises since the Civil War. In the course of that work I have spent months at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, New York, burrowing through his papers in search of clues.

Sometimes, after the reading room closes at 4:45 sharp, I put off retreating to my motel room across the old Albany Post Road and wander along a path that leads beneath ancient evergreens and past the tall hemlock hedges that wall the garden in which Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt lie buried, to the lawn that overlooks the Hudson just south of Springwood, the big, comfortable house in which FDR was born and to which he

her chauffeur, Louis Depew, to Long Island to collect stones from Theodore Roosevelt's Oyster Bay estate to be incorporated into the library walls as one more sign of family continuity. (Depew brought back the stones, but somehow they were overlooked until the building was completed; later they became part of the little gatehouse in which sentries were posted during World War II.)

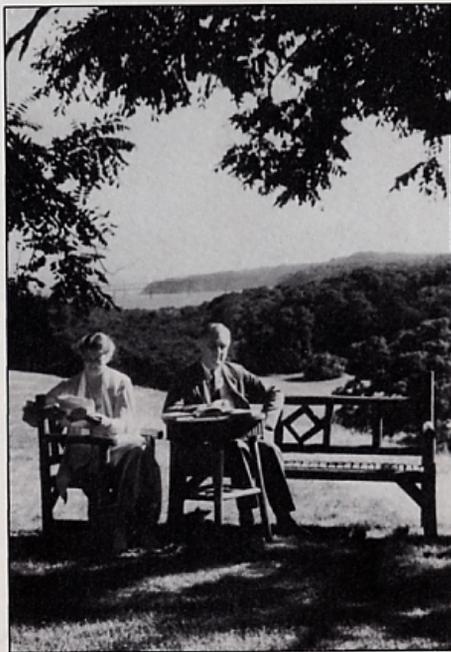
Sara's resolve to remain central to her son's life never diminished, however, and when he announced plans to give up his small Springwood study and shift to a bigger, brighter office in the south corner of the library, she commissioned a life-size portrait of herself from Douglas Chandor and made sure it went with him, to stand on an easel just across from his desk.

Sara Delano Roosevelt did her best to keep things as they had always been at Springwood, but the public lives her son and daughter-in-law insisted upon leading inevitably disrupted her stately routine. She delighted in the more distinguished men and women who sought them out; on the top of the music-room piano at which Franklin once stumbled reluctantly through his lessons are displayed portraits of members of royalty, the sort of people his mother most enjoyed meeting. But she also tried to accommodate visitors whom she found far less appealing: political operatives who scattered ashes on her carpets; woman social workers in trousers; profane newspapermen; labor organizers from the Lower East Side.

She was gracious to all of them, of course. "I have always believed," she once explained, "that a mother should be friends with her children's friends." But the strain sometimes showed. On a Sunday morning in the early autumn of 1932, Sen. Huey P. Long of Louisiana came to Springwood to confer with the Democratic nominee for President. Always a flamboyant dresser, Long had outdone himself on this occasion, wearing a broadly striped suit, an orchid shirt, and a bright pink necktie—perhaps in a conscious effort to show the patrician Roosevelts they could not intimidate him. FDR, as apparently affable as always, invited him to stay for lunch, and the two men discussed campaign strategy, leaving the other guests to talk among themselves. During a momentary silence Sara's voice could be heard whispering

loudly, "Who is that awful man sitting on my son's right?"

Her priorities remained fixed. Family and standards always came first. Long after her death at eighty-six, in September 1941, a homemade bulletin board covered with the telephone numbers she had most frequently called still hung above the telephone just off the front hall; every number noted on it in her confident hand belonged to a family member or someone connected with the running of her household. For her,



Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt on the south lawn in the summer of 1933.

## More and more, the place became for FDR a symbol of calm and security.

everything else was always secondary.

FDR's old resentment of his mother's resistance to change waned as his own public life outside Springwood grew more turbulent. More and more the Place seems to have become for him, as it had been for her, the reassuring symbol of calm and security. At critical moments in the White House, he once told a daughter-in-law, he found that the best way to lull himself to sleep was to close his eyes and "coast down the hills at Hyde Park in the snow, and then I walk slowly

up . . . and I know every curve."

In the end FDR's eldest son believes that one of the things his father came to admire most about Sara was that "she could be counted on to keep Springwood just as it had always been, which was how he really wanted it, how we all really wanted it. Father never tried very hard to make the place modern or efficient," he adds, pointing out that after Sara's death, when Springwood was at last FDR's to do with as he wished, he did not wish to do much. Eleanor had hoped she might at last be allowed to alter the house to suit herself, but he dissuaded her. He did have the watercolors that line the upstairs hall rearranged to his liking, carefully supervising their hanging from his wheelchair, and he ordered his mother's bed moved back into the room in which he had been born because she had asked him to have that done. Otherwise, he left things as they had always been, going so far as to ensure that the descendants of the woodchucks he had pursued in his boyhood be allowed to live on the place unmolested.

Woodchucks still stand sentinel by their burrows all over the Springwood lawns, but there have been many other changes. The sweep of the Hudson that FDR once commanded from his bedroom is now all but obliterated by the tops of trees; the forest road over which the Roosevelts drove back and forth from Val-Kill is overgrown; and visitors who wish to visit Eleanor Roosevelt's cottage must come and go by shuttle bus from the cement parking lot that stretches over her mother-in-law's old kitchen plot.

But when I wander to the south lawn in the evenings nowadays, after the last visitors have left and the rush-hour traffic on the old Albany Post Road has subsided, Springwood seems most as it must have been in FDR's time. Blue shadows stretch across the grass, the wind nudges the old trees outside his bedroom window, and I can gaze down through the old apple orchard at the steep slope where he coasted with his father as a boy and up which his coffin was slowly borne on a soft April day forty-two years ago, to be buried in his mother's rose garden. ■

Geoffrey C. Ward, a former editor of *American Heritage*, is at work on a sequel to his *Before the Trumpet: Young Franklin Roosevelt, 1882-1905*.

returned more than two hundred times during his dozen years as President.

Without getting to know this place—the house itself and what is left of the estate that once surrounded it—I believe it is impossible even to begin to understand the sinuous, complicated man who chose to spend so much time here.

Certain historic homes evoke their former occupants more vividly than others. Thomas Jefferson's ingenious self-portrait-in-brick at Monticello; Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill, still echoing with his noisy energy; Mark Twain's opulent, idiosyncratic mansion at Hartford, which seems simultaneously to lampoon and to revel in the Gilded Age he named—each is filled with clues to character and personality indispensable to a biographer but also detectable by any visitor with the time to take them in. Springwood at Hyde Park is as evocative as any of them, but it is not FDR's personality alone that it mirrors.

Despite his genuine love for the house and his public identification with it—between 1933 and 1945 Hyde Park was one of the world's most familiar datelines—Springwood was never really his. It was his mother's home, and before that it had been his father's, as Sara Delano

## Despite FDR's true love for the house, Springwood was never really his.

Roosevelt never let anyone forget; his initials, not FDR's, are still emblazoned on the weather vane that turns on its tower above the roof of the old family stable. James Roosevelt—"Mr. James" to servants, friends, even most members of the family—bought a seventeen-room farmhouse here with his first wife in 1867 and began to lead the quiet life of an English country squire. "Life as it is meant to be lived" Sara once called it: rowing on the river, raising trotting horses, supporting St. James' Episcopal Church and serving on the local school board, and going into the city to look after his investments as rarely as possible. "I often wonder," he wrote from the piazza that once wound around his Hyde Park house,

"why men are satisfied to live all their lives between brick walls and thinking of nothing but money and the so-called recreations of so-called society when there is so much enjoyment in the country."

And it was here that, as a widower, Mr. James first courted the beautiful Sara Delano, half his age, in the spring of 1880. The James Roosevelts managed to have just one child, to whose development and well-being his mother devoted attention singular even in that time, when motherhood was universally thought woman's highest calling.

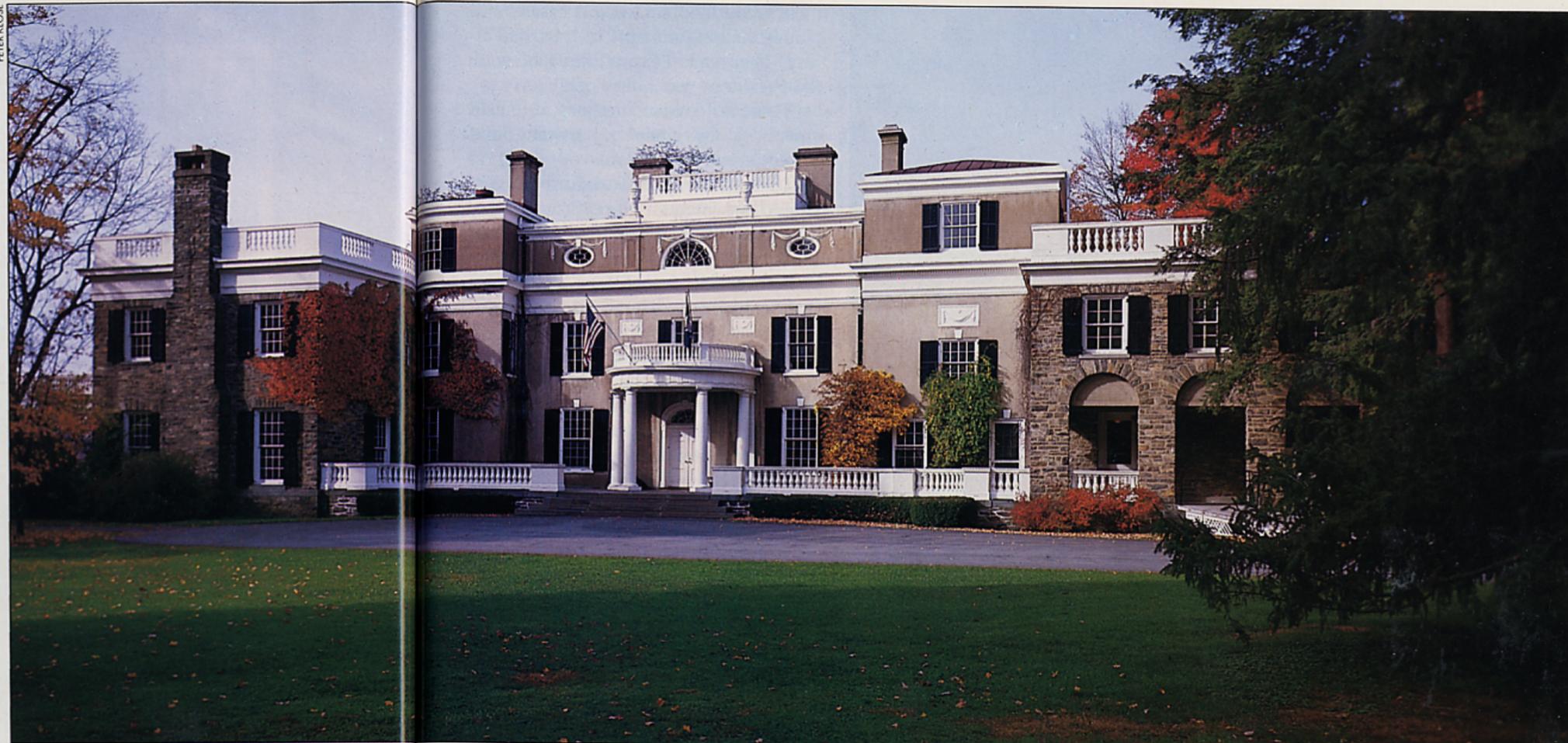
Franklin built crow's nests in the tallest trees and banged together a river raft that sank five feet from shore, rode a fat pony named Debbie, helped his dogs dig after the woodchucks that riddled his father's fields, coasted on sleds down the long slope below the house, ventured farther and farther into the deep woods that separated Springwood from the other estates that stretched along the bluffs. No achievement was too small to win his parents' praise; his mother saved every childhood book and toy, every childish drawing and all the golden curls she reluctantly had clipped for the first time when he was nearly six—"Oh, long before they should have been!" she said.

Mr. James was a vigorous, enthusiastic presence in Franklin's first years, inculcating in him while riding through Springwood's forests a lifelong love of trees, horses, the outdoors; to be a Roosevelt and a Delano, he and Sara both taught their boy, was a mark of distinction never to be disgraced, an exalted position that carried with it both privileges and obligations.

Sara Delano Roosevelt was once asked if she had always thought her son would one day be President. "Never, oh, never!" she answered. Her ambition for him had been far loftier, she said: "The highest ideal I could hold up before our boy—to grow to be like his father, straight and honorable, just and kind, an upstanding American."

His father died after a long illness when Franklin was eighteen, leaving his widow—who seems never even to have considered remarriage—free to pour still more of her formidable energies into ensuring that Franklin reached that goal. "You are *everything* to your dear mother," Franklin's godmother told him then. He would always be everything to her, and what his daughter, Anna, once called the

PETER ALCOSE



Springwood as it is today. The matching fieldstone wing here FDR's idea; he also approved the stately entrance and the piazza, from which four times he greeted crowds celebrating his elections.

"consistent, warm, spontaneous love" she offered him without stint explains better than anything else the confidence with which he faced the world. Sara Delano Roosevelt believed always that her son would succeed at anything at which he tried his hand, and so, eventually, did he. He learned that lesson and others almost as useful at Springwood.

"In thinking back to my earliest days," FDR once wrote, "I am impressed by the peacefulness and regularity of things both in respect to places and people. Up to the age of seven . . . Hyde Park was the center of the world." And he remained at *its* center. Raised here, apart from other children, served by tutors and governesses who came and went as needed, treated by servants, by tenants, even by the townspeople of Hyde Park as "Master Franklin," an important personage, he found reinforcement for his parents' teaching in everything and everyone he encountered.

Mike Reilly, a Secret Service agent who knew FDR well, once explained that while the boss had always been kind and cordial to him, "it was just a lit-

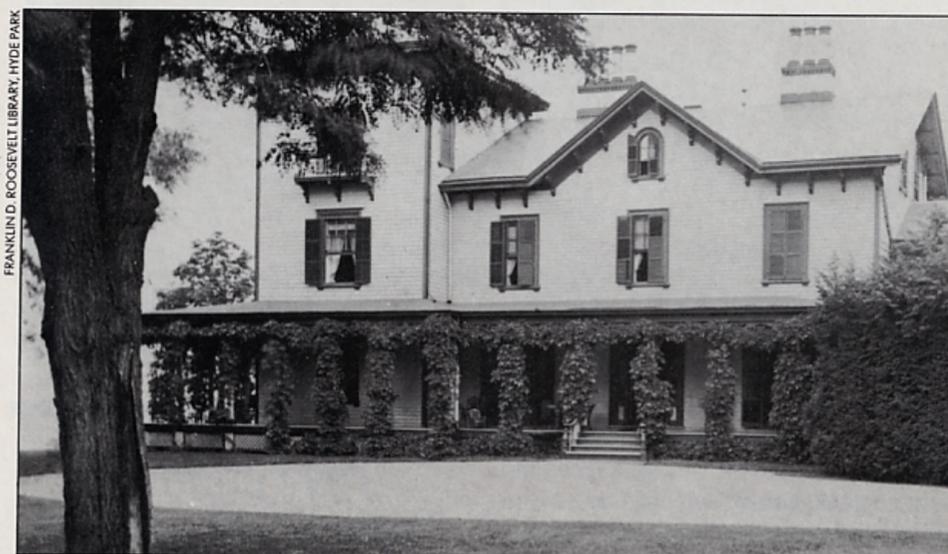
tle too much to expect him to be 'one of the boys.' He never was 'one of the boys,' although he frequently made a good try. It was such a good try that it never quite came off." At Springwood he had always been *the* boy, and no matter how life treated him elsewhere—at Groton or Harvard, in business or politics—in his mother's house, he would remain so always.

Her affection and admiration never wavered, but it was sometimes alloyed with a fear that she might lose him. She had long before lost the father she revered; her beloved husband had died; her son and his family were all she had left, and she determined to hold on to them.

It had been Franklin's fond hope that, as he grew to manhood, he would inherit some control over Springwood. On his honeymoon in England in 1906 he had held "many long and interesting talks . . . on farming and cattle raising" with old friends of his parents, and, he had told his mother, his "plans for Hyde Park now include not only a new house but a new farm, cattle, trees, etc. . . ."

In fact, however, both knew that in

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT LIBRARY, HYDE PARK



Springwood as it was in Franklin's boyhood; the third-floor tower window lit his playroom.

the end only her plans for Springwood really mattered. Sara Delano Roosevelt was to remain in charge to the day she died. Her late husband had left Springwood in her hands. "I see him in every room," she once told her sister. "I hear his voice at every turn." And whenever conflict arose between her and her son over "the Place" (mother and son both

disliked the term *estate*), she held the upper hand, for she retained control of the bulk of the family fortune. "For years," James Roosevelt recalled, "she squeezed all of us—Father included—in that golden loop."

She encouraged her son's youthful interest in forestry, liked him to oversee tasks she had set out for her tenants,

continued both to resent and to rely upon often centered on Springwood and the children, who, she once confessed, "were more my mother-in-law's children than they were mine."

Franklin, who did his best always to ignore the tensions between the two most important women in his life, was the exuberant center of things at holiday time too. He supervised the cutting of the tall tree that always stood in the center of the library and placed each of the scores of candles that decorated it in its holder, climbing a ladder to reach the highest branches while the children offered noisy counsel from below. (To the end of his life the Roosevelt tree blazed with candles; in a bucket of water nearby stood a cane with a big sponge tied to it for dousing the sparks.)

Franklin carved the turkey himself, too, proudly producing slices so thin, he liked to say, "you can almost read through them," a skill taught to every young gentleman at Groton. And after the feasting and the opening of the presents, piled in gaudy heaps on library chairs around the tree, one chair for each child, he read aloud Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, another Groton ritual, performed there by the headmaster, Endicott Peabody. It was evidently an irresistible performance, FDR's "clear, confident voice . . ." James Roosevelt remembered, "soaring into the higher registers for . . . Tiny Tim, then shifting into a snarling imitation of mean, old Scrooge."

After 1921 Franklin could no longer climb the ladder to place the Christmas candles or coast with his children or even climb his mother's stairs. Infantile paralysis forced him to readjust his life at Hyde Park, as he had to do everywhere else. For example, the long, narrow drive that splits the fields in front of the house and runs down to the Albany Post Road between twin rows of oaks is two hundred yards long at most, a couple of minutes' effortless exertion for a long-limbed schoolboy home from Groton, his dogs tumbling at his heels. After 1921 that driveway would become an infinity; he spent one whole summer trying to stump its length on crutches and never managed it. A local carpenter built parallel bars for him on his mother's veranda, and he hauled himself back and forth along them, dragging his lifeless legs, chattering amiably all



While still a boy, Franklin took this photograph of one of many roads that wound through the estate. After polio, he liked to drive along it.



One of FDR's homemade wheelchairs rests in the dressing room. Behind it hang his Naval cape and battered campaign hat.

## Springwood's second floor gives the best sense of FDR's physical limitations.

the while to keep visitors at their ease.

His mother—who had always been "so proud" of his legs, as she was of everything else about him—hoped he would abandon the political career of which she had never entirely approved and come home to Hyde Park, where, under her care, he could take up the tranquil invalid's life his father had once led. FDR refused, of course, gently—he was careful always to avoid offending his mother—but implacably. It took him seven years to reenter active politics, and he spent most of that time elsewhere, struggling to regain his feet.

He never succeeded, but he did come back often to Springwood during those arduous years, doing his best to hold on to as much of his old life there as he could. He had roads cleared along paths he had blazed as a boy and liked to drive visitors along them in the open automobile Edsel Ford had fitted out for him with hand controls. He went on family picnics, too, sitting on a car seat dragged into the woods for him by an aide.

It is on the second floor of Springwood that a visitor can best sense the limitations Roosevelt's physical helplessness imposed upon him and how he did his best to overcome them. An old-fashioned hand-powered elevator, once employed by the servants to pull his parents' steamer trunks up to storage after their annual European tours, was used to get him up to the landing, and a ramp was installed so that his wheelchair could roll up to the long second-floor hall that led past his boyhood room and the room in which he had been born to his bedroom directly above the library. Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., remembers seeing him practice crawling down that hall, so that he could make it to the elevator unaided in case he was ever left alone in a fire. Against his mother's wishes and the advice of the Secret Service, he refused ever to have an electric motor installed; flames might shut off the power, he told his son, and he preferred taking his chances hauling himself down before the thick rope burned through.

He was, in fact, almost never alone; a valet slept at the end of the hall and in the morning waited for orders in the little dressing room where FDR's wheelchair, fashioned to his own specifications from an ordinary kitchen chair, sits today.

The bedroom itself is arranged to minimize the importance of his paralysis. A



The east end of the library where the Roosevelts often gathered after dinner. FDR sat in the chair to the left; his mother at the right. "I sat anywhere," wrote Eleanor Roosevelt.

special White House telephone rests on a bedside table within easy reach; the walls are hung with cartoons and family pictures; the view from the big double bed his godmother gave him of the Hudson and of his beloved trees is magnificent. He spent several hours here each morning, propped against pillows, a sweater around his massive shoulders, a cigarette in his mouth, his breakfast tray littered with ashes, half a dozen newspapers and mail dispatched overnight from Washington spread across the bed in front of him. Visitors—and they began early—were greeted with warmth and exaggerated animation. Even as an attendant helped him wash and dress, he talked incessantly, gestured broadly, listened and laughed and held forth, intent on demonstrating that he was still in command. Through sheer force of personality, pity was transformed into fascination in this room, potential patronization into delight and admiration.

Sara eventually made her peace with her son's decision to return to politics—his stubbornness, she knew, was at least the equal of her own—and she was proud, though "not surprised," she said, to have been the only mother ever to see her son three times elected President of the United States. (His fourth victory came after her death.) She especially

## By the mid-1920s Eleanor could only bear the house for a few hours at a time.

enjoyed welcoming the traditional torchlight parades that brought the cheering Democrats of Hyde Park up the driveway to her broad porch on election night, though the damage these enthusiasts did to her lawn each time was a source of some concern to her and her gardener.

But if FDR was running the country, she continued to run Springwood, and this sometimes caused confusion at the dining table. Eleanor once brought two Vassar girls to lunch with her mother-in-law. One of the students, up on current events, asked the First Lady what her husband was going to do about the budget.

"Budget? Budget?" Sara said. "What does the child mean? Oh, but Franklin knows nothing about budgets. I always make the budgets."

The office her son used as President had once served as his children's summer schoolroom, a tiny, dark cave off the veranda, part of the servants' wing. World

leaders and national politicians crowded into it, the President often broadcast from behind its desk, and in this room he and Winston Churchill signed the agreement that led to the making of the atomic bomb. Yet even here his mother made her admonitory presence felt. A small adjoining cloakroom beneath the stairs served to house the presidential staff, and here, in the evenings before dinner, he would call together for drinks his guests and aides and secretaries because his mother discouraged cocktails elsewhere in her house. "It was made into fun, you know," the journalist Martha Gellhorn remembered. "With shrieks of laughter we'd gather with the President of the United States, the coats hanging up on the wall, he in his wheelchair whipping up the martinis and drinking as if we were all bad children having a feast in the dormitory at night. . . ."

Great and genuine affection for the mother who was so devoted to him, plus many years of practice at forbearance, usually kept FDR from more than momentary exasperation at his mother's loving intrusions. But by the mid-1920s her daughter-in-law could no longer endure Springwood for more than a few hours at a time, and with FDR's backing, she built for herself a simple stone cottage on the bank of Val-Kill Creek, one and a half miles east of her mother-in-law's home. Sara was never able to understand her daughter-in-law's wish to have an establishment of her own, or her determination to sleep there overnight, and was further hurt when FDR began to build a cottage for himself on a hilltop overlooking Val-Kill and the Hudson Valley—so deeply hurt, in fact, that the President promised never to spend a night there so long as she lived. (The little stone house, named Top Cottage by FDR but called, to his fury, his "dream house" by the press, still stands—privately owned and off-limits to visitors.)

There is no written record of what his mother thought of her son's plan to build the very first presidential library on the Springwood grounds; it permanently altered the look of the Place, but it also provided still another handsome backdrop for her son and for all the relics of his youth that she had hoarded and that now form part of the chronological account of his life arranged around its gallery walls. In any case she was finally reconciled to the notion and even sent



The three Roosevelts on the south lawn in 1891; Master Franklin rides his pony, "Debbie."

sometimes listened to his advice, and did not object in 1911 when he began amassing adjacent parcels of land on which to experiment with trees. (He eventually planted some three hundred thousand of them.) But the Place itself—its fields and herds and flocks and beehives, its gardens and greenhouses and stables—remained under her exclusive care.

"She supervised very closely," her superintendent remembered, "went over there [to the tenant farm that then stood across the road] pretty nearly every day." FDR sometimes chafed under this arrangement, arguing that with modern methods he could put the Place on a paying basis. But his mother would not hear of it. Springwood was a gentleman's country seat, whose tenant farmer's first duty was to produce crops and poultry and dairy products for that gentleman's family. Springwood food supplied Roosevelt tables for decades; when James Roosevelt was a student at Harvard in the late twenties, he was still receiving shipments of Springwood eggs and cream three times a week, precisely as his father had during his own student days at the turn of the century. Eleanor Roosevelt thought this a "terrible waste," he remembers, "but I enjoyed it and Father never did anything to stop it."

Franklin liked teasing his mother. At breakfast he would sometimes urge his guests to have extra helpings of eggs, explaining that they must be especially good because they were the most expensive in the world, costing his mother

fifty cents apiece. The eggs were produced exactly as they had been in his own boyhood, Sara would answer, and they would continue to be produced that way. Sometime during the 1930s a Wisconsin senator wrote to the President, offering him a very good price on a constituent's prize poultry. "Tell Ryan Duffy," FDR told his secretary, "I have no chickens of my own and that my Mother has special chickens she does not want to mix with others."

During the presidential years, FDR did undertake to rename the place. Springwood, the name his father had chosen for it, was meaningless, he decided, "like Bellevue, or Oak Hill, or the Willows." It should be called "Crum Elbow," he said, claiming that was its original name. (The historical basis for this was that in the 1790s an old house had stood on the Roosevelt land that was called alternately

### Food grown at Springwood supplied Roosevelt tables for decades.

"Krum Elbow" and "Crooke's Delight." FDR understandably preferred the former name.) Howland Spencer, a very distant and wealthy cousin who lived just across the Hudson and deplored the New Deal and its author with special vehemence,

loudly objected. His estate, still plainly visible from Springwood, had always been called Crum Elbow, he said; the President was a usurper.

"There is no reason in the world," FDR shot back, "why anybody owning land on either side of the river abutting on the 'Crum Elbow' or 'Turn in the River,' should not call their place 'Crum Elbow,' if they want to, but the fact remains that the land owned by my Mother and myself was called 'Crum Elbow' by the original occupants two hundred years ago."

Spencer was not mollified. FDR then asked the Board of Geographical Names, U.S. Department of the Interior, to make a formal decision regarding who had the most legitimate claim to the old name. Perhaps not surprisingly, a judgment was formally rendered in favor of the President of the United States; Crum Elbow was designated as a "point on the east bank of the Hudson River about 4½ miles above Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County, New York."

FDR was pleased; his mother was not. To reject the name by which she had always known her home must have seemed to her a betrayal of Mr. James's benevolent ghost, and once, when she overheard a guest using "Crum Elbow" in conversation, she was quick to correct him. He apologized, saying that he had heard the President himself use it.

"Franklin doesn't know *everything*," she said.

By then he had managed to make his own limited mark on the place. FDR, a doting aunt once wrote, had been "raised in a beautiful frame." In 1914 he persuaded his mother to make that frame a good deal more elaborate. He had long wanted to enlarge the house, to make it a setting more suitable for the statesman he was already confident he would become. She had resisted. But now he had five children, and when the younger Roosevelts arrived for a visit with a full complement of maids and governesses, even his mother had to admit that her old house was strained to the eaves. She gave her permission to expand.

Francis Hoppin, a fashionable architect once married to a Roosevelt cousin, was nominally put in charge of the project, but it was very largely Franklin's work. The old clapboards were ripped off; the piazza was dismantled; the south tower, in whose attic room Franklin had played as a boy, was lowered, and a sec-

ond tower built to match it to the north. The front roof was raised to hold a third-floor nursery. Three-story wings—built, at Franklin's urging, out of native stone brought to the site from the old walls that twisted through the Springwood forests—were added onto either side of the central section, which was stuccoed gray to match them. A broad porch with a sweeping balustrade formed a new, far more formal entrance. The result—"Georgian, with a dash of Hudson River Dutch," according to one architectural historian—has thirty-five rooms, including eight meant for servants, plus nine baths.

Not long before Eleanor Roosevelt died, someone was smart enough to get her to record her memories of the house at Hyde Park, and today, before moving past its rooms, visitors may rent audiocassettes and have the benefit of her bittersweet account of how life was lived in them. In her recording, she managed to have the last word about the home in which, she once wrote, "for over forty years I was only a visitor. . . ."

It is evident the moment you step into the entrance hall that the redesigned house was meant in large part as a showcase for those gentlemanly accomplishments of Franklin's of which his mother most approved. A sizable portion of his collection of early nineteenth-century naval prints blankets most of one wall. To the left is a life-size bronze statue of a seated Franklin, cast in 1911, the year after he had entered politics as a state senator. Behind the statue a case displays stuffed local birds, shot and labeled by him as a boy, and which his mother would trust no servant to dust.

Off the hall to the left is the crowded, claustrophobic little chamber that was the real seat of power in Sara's house. She called it her "snuggery" and filled it with memorabilia and with pictures of the ancestors whose example she insisted her son keep constantly in mind. Here she wrote her letters, gave orders to the staff, was served breakfast, and herself poured tea in the afternoon for those guests nimble enough to pick their way past the bric-a-brac to one of the small, red, velvet-covered chairs, and from here she could keep watch through the window on who came and went at her front door.

The big, paneled library that occupies the whole south end of the house was the



The dining room from Sara's end of the table. Her son's chair faces hers.

room to which Franklin and his mother devoted the most loving attention. Nearly every inch of it is designed to display his collections to full advantage. His leather-bound sets of books line the walls; his miniature books fill specially built cabinets; glass-covered shelves display his coins, medals, and other knickknacks; a map case held his stamp albums.

The Roosevelt coat of arms is deeply carved above the imposing marble fireplaces at both ends of the room. On either side of the west fireplace, Franklin and his mother each had a special chair—matching, high-backed governor's chairs

after 1933. Eleanor had to find her own place to sit.

She had no special seat in the dining room either. Sara sat at the head of the table, facing her son, whose chair was kept at a slant so that he might slip into it more easily from his wheelchair. In the center of the table sat a blue-green English bowl of Oriental design in which Mr. James had asked her to arrange flowers from his garden on her very first visit to Springwood. She continued to fill it herself every morning for some sixty years thereafter, and the National Park Service, which has cared for the house

since 1945, continues this ritual.

Things ran on Sara's schedule, and she made few concessions, even to her family. A Chinese gong on the stairs was tapped once, precisely half an hour before lunch and dinner and again just five minutes before food reached the table. It was unwise to be late. Grandchildren were inspected before they took their places. "My dear, you have a decided stable odor," Anna Roosevelt remembered being told after she had come in from a morning's ride. "A bath, of course, will cure it. And don't forget you must wear a dress for lunch!" (Sara never stopped trying to teach her descendants manners. In 1935 she had built on the lawn a white playhouse in which she wistfully hoped her small grandchildren would serve one another formal tea in the afternoons; later Eleanor Roosevelt had it moved to the lawn of her modest nearby cottage, where her grandchildren put it to more rough-and-tumble use.)

Eleanor, also, came under her mother-in-law's dining-room scrutiny. A visitor recalls Sara saying to her, in front of dinner guests, "If you'd just run your comb through your hair, dear, you'd look so much nicer." Such advice, once welcomed by an orphaned daughter-in-law unaccustomed to having anyone care about her, eventually came to seem intolerable. Franklin's favorite boyhood foods were often served: hot cornbread, kedgeeet, minute pudding. But even when he was President, his behavior was monitored. Once, the youngest grandson, John, used the word *damn* at table. Sara frowned but said nothing. A few minutes later FDR himself used it. "Our little Johnny learns his language from the stable," she announced to the family, "and Franklin apparently learns it from Johnny."

Despite the lofty standards of behavior upon which she insisted, Sara's grandchildren shared their father's delight in visiting Springwood. "Hyde Park," Anna Roosevelt once told an interviewer, "was very definitely my most favorite place in life. . . . Hyde Park was home, and the only place I ever thought was completely home." Her brothers felt the same way. Their grandmother was responsible for much of that. Her unqualified affection for her son spilled over onto each of his children. Anna remembered that her busy parents' morning greetings were perfunctory pecks on the cheek over the breakfast table, but "when I was sent . . .

to say 'Good Morning' to Granny as she finished her breakfast in bed, her hug and kiss were . . . warm—almost suffocating. . . ." Sara had provided for her son the sort of unchanging, unquestioning love Anna once privately admitted her own mother, Eleanor, had failed to provide for her and her brothers, and Sara tried her best to provide the same for the grandchildren, who adored her. She was "far more than a grandparent," Anna remembered. "She was inextricably interwoven with the Place."

The children's warm memories of Springwood were also bound up with the active presence of their father. "My happiest memories of Father, my most carefree escapades of childhood," James

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## Eleanor said that for forty years she was "only a visitor" at Hyde Park.

remembered, "all seem centered [at Springwood]." The children came closest to holding FDR's attention there; he swept them up in the activities he had always loved. He took Anna riding with him through the woods, "point[ing] out varieties of birds as they darted by," swam with all the children in the ice pond behind the house, and took them iceboating on the frozen river. Coasting below the house, James recalled, FDR "was like a kid himself. He would chase us back up the steep road at a pace so fast our lungs would ache. . . ." then plunge with them down the hillside again. Those who fell off were not to cry. Sara, bundled in furs, often watched from the edge of the snowy bluff, Elliott Roosevelt recalled; his mother sat alone inside by the fire.

From infancy Eleanor Roosevelt had felt at home nowhere, had been unsure where she belonged or how to behave in order to make herself welcome. To be required, year after year, to spend weeks and sometimes months at a time, often without her husband, in this place where everyone else in her family seemed so eager to be, and yet to feel always apart from it, became an agony. Her complicated struggle with the mother-in-law she

## Visiting the Roosevelts, Dropping In on the Vanderbilts

For anyone interested in history, the \$1.50 ticket that gets you into Springwood must be one of the best bargains in the country. Armed with one, you can wander through the Roosevelt home; visit the Roosevelt Library, with its galleries devoted to the lives of both FDR and his wife; and then go upriver for a tour of the Frederick W. Vanderbilt mansion just two miles north on Route 9, the old Albany Post Road. (A visit to Eleanor Roosevelt's Val-Kill Cottage is free, but the short bus ride to and from Springwood, which is available between April and October, costs \$1.95.)

FDR was fond of contrasting what he called the "comparatively simple style of living" that he believed his mother's home exemplified with the Vanderbilts' establishment. His secretary William Hassett once tried to puzzle out in his diary exactly what the President had in mind when he made that comparison. "There are varying degrees of simplicity," he wrote. "I doubt if many rigors went with the life he speaks of. It probably was not Spartan. What he means, I suppose, is that the old-fashioned families didn't show off."

Roosevelt's upriver neighbors, however, sprang from a clan that included some of the most ebullient architectural show-offs in our history. Frederick Vanderbilt's mansion is an Italian Renaissance palazzo built in 1897 of Indiana limestone at a cost of \$660,000, designed by McKim, Mead & White, and filled with furnishings that must have added up to almost as much. The relentlessly imposing building nicely epitomizes the excesses the New Deal made far more difficult to achieve, and it may have been in part that built-in lesson that persuaded FDR to help have the Vanderbilt estate designated a national historic site in 1940.

The Vanderbilt mansion's interiors are well worth seeing; the ancient trees and landscaped grounds are lovely, and the views up and down the Hudson from the lawn are among the handsomest on the river.—G.C.W.