

Introduction

When I was seven years old, my parents uprooted our family from Southern California, the only home I had ever known, and moved us across country to Hyde Park, New York. The familiar surroundings of home—my cozy bedroom, the sound of the breeze through the palm trees, and the occasional earthquake warnings—were exchanged for a loving grandmother and a piece of land that would become a part of my soul. It was at Val-Kill Farm in Hyde Park, New York, that I shared my childhood years with my remarkable grandmother, the woman who would change my life. To me she was Grandmère, but to most everyone else, she was Eleanor Roosevelt.

As I write this in 2021, important research is still being done, and wide-ranging books continue to be written about my grandmother's life. However, my experience was direct and distinctive, and I thought it would be worthwhile for me to describe her as I came to know her. Like many children, I looked up to this woman not because I knew she was famous, but because she welcomed me with kindness and treated me as a beloved granddaughter rather than a nuisance to be tolerated until I was older and more interesting. Grandmère, as we called our grandmother, took me with her on shopping trips for groceries; to listen in on sessions at the United Nations; and on trips to Campobello Island, the Roosevelt retreat at the border between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada; as well as to Europe, Israel, and Iran. We spent time walking through the woods at Val-Kill in the early mornings

and working in her flower garden, and in the evenings I loved to hear her read stories. There are numerous photographs from her visits with children around the world, her arm wrapped warmly around one or several children and eyes that exuded caring. My grandmother's broad smile became known as her "toothy" grin. I experienced the warmth and love she offered firsthand.

My grandfather, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, died when I was two and a half years old, and I have little recollection of him. However, events placed my siblings and me in a close relationship with my grandmother, nourishing our understanding of her life at home.

My father, John Roosevelt, Eleanor and Franklin's youngest child, married my mother, Anne Lindsay Clark, a sparkling young socialite from Boston. While my father served in the Navy during World War II and for a few years afterward, we lived in California, but then we moved to Val-Kill, Eleanor's enclave in Hyde Park, New York, where I lived until I married in 1964 and left home.

To me, my grandmother was not the shrewd, idealistic activist involved with issues that affected the lives of those in the



Figure I.1. Christmas at the White House, 1944. *Source:* FDR Library, public domain.



Figure I.2. John Roosevelt family: Haven, Nina, Anne, John, Joan on Anne's lap, Sally, and Shep. *Source:* Photo by T. Freudy, public domain.

world who were marginalized without a voice. From the time I was seven until I was nineteen, when Grandmère died, she was simply my grandmother. She had soft skin, would read to me and sit with me while she brushed her hair before kissing me goodnight. As a child, I saw my wise, compassionate grandmother shining bright and strong. But the Grandmère I knew was not the world's Eleanor Roosevelt who made grand speeches, lobbied for civil rights, and moved political mountains. In my world she was a loving woman who had kind eyes, a high-pitched voice, hearing aids that could be turned off when she wanted quiet, and stacks of mail that she took the time to read and respond to personally.



When I was very young, I thought *Roosevelt* was a common name, like *Smith*. Most of the people I knew were named Roosevelt. What I did not realize was that they were all related to me. Not until I was older—nearly an adolescent—did I begin to appreciate the roles that my grandmother and her husband Franklin had played in all of our lives.

Born in October 1884 to prosperous merchant and real estate families in New York, one would have assumed that Eleanor led a charmed life. However, no family is immune from tragic events, illnesses, and the struggles of developing into productive members of their communities. The turmoil of my grandmother's childhood could easily have resulted in a withdrawn, sad, anxious person who saw herself as a victim rather than the woman who, as Adlai Stevenson once said, "would rather light a candle than curse the darkness." By the time Eleanor was orphaned at ten she had experienced more adversity than most people face in a lifetime. When Eleanor was eight, diphtheria took the life of one of her two younger brothers, as well as her mother, Anna Roosevelt. After her mother died, it was decided that Eleanor and her surviving, eighteen-month-old brother, Hall, should live with their widowed, maternal grandmother, Mary Livingston Ludlow Hall, and her five unmarried children who were still living at home. All three young Hall women were of marriageable age and enjoying society balls, dinner parties, or any event in New York City where they might meet a potential suitor. The two Hall men were equally engaged in New York society. Without companions of her own, my grandmother only felt useful and included while attending to these giddy young women while they pampered themselves before parties or were exhausted after the festivities. Without her aunts to run errands for, Eleanor was left alone. This was a household that fluctuated between loneliness and the chaos of socially prominent young women, leaving little time or attention for two additional children. Eleanor's beloved father, Elliot, died two years later in large part due to his alcoholism, which also profoundly impacted her life.

As a teenager, my grandmother spent three years in London at a boarding school run by Marie Souvestre. This provided her with the experiences that broadened her horizon and allowed her to think she could indeed do and think things on her own. This was a pivotal time when young Eleanor lived in a safe, encouraging environment, where she developed her own thoughts based on knowledge she gained and then learned how to discuss subjects while remaining open, listening to other points of view. Learning how to critically assess issues was the beginning of her development as a broad thinker and activist.

The marriage of Eleanor Roosevelt to Franklin D. Roosevelt brought two branches of the Roosevelt family together—the Oyster Bay Roosevelts, which included her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth president of the United States, and the Hyde Park Roosevelts. Both branches of the family had been successful in real estate, banking, and coal and railroad investments. Both branches were involved in philanthropy and had developed friendships with other well-known families in this country and abroad. Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt were bound not only by political office but held many interests in common. Both were accomplished naturalists, were knowledgeable birders, and loved the sea and naval history. On March 17, 1905, Theodore gave Eleanor, age nineteen, in marriage to Franklin. My grandmother commented that, by marrying a Roosevelt, she at least did not have to change her monogram.

At the time of her marriage, Eleanor was a shy, quiet young woman with little confidence in her ability to engage in the domestic life that was expected of her. The evolution from an insecure, withdrawn woman took place over many years with many influences and role models, which has been, and continues to be, well documented in the hundreds of works devoted to the many aspects of her public and private life. My memory of interactions with my grandmother did not occur until after FDR's death. I have focused on my own experiences of Eleanor Roosevelt—life at home with my grandmother, the people I met

thanks to her, and our travels together—rather than her extraordinary accomplishments during this time.

Widowed in 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt retreated to the only place that she had ever felt was her own and the place where she could find solace. Wearing a black armband of mourning, my grandmother walked through the woods at Val-Kill with Franklin's dog Fala and busied herself with the job of settling her late husband's estate. When asked by a reporter what she planned to do next, her answer was simple and straightforward, although not true. She said, "The story is over." It may not have occurred to my grandmother that the social inequities she had focused on during her tenure as First Lady would, in this postwar era, be brought to the forefront of politics in the U.S. Her considerable political talents, which she developed over years at the side of Franklin Roosevelt, would become critically important and sought-after during the last seventeen years of her life. My grandmother never saw herself seeking a position in government, but all of her experiences converged at the time of her widowhood. She had a passionate commitment to humanitarian values and a desire to continue to be useful as war-ravaged countries began attempting to build a better world. Immediate attention was needed across Europe as thousands of displaced persons, including orphaned children from destroyed cities and towns, needed safe housing, health care, and work opportunities. The fight for civil rights and social justice took on new urgency during the late 1940s and '50s in the U.S., leading to the protests and legislation of the 1960s. With so many in need, it did not take long for Eleanor to continue her active and hectic life of travel and advocacy. She was a master politician who did not have to worry about votes, as she would never run for public office herself. The only thing Eleanor cared about was assisting her country to become the leading humanitarian democracy that the country was designed to be.

Val-Kill is often mentioned as the place where Eleanor liked to entertain family and friends and felt at home. But few people realize how special Val-Kill was for my grandmother. No longer did she live in the shadow of her mother-in-law, her husband, or



Figure I.3. Val-Kill Cottage. *Source:* FDR Library, public domain.

the scrutiny of the public; she was, finally, able to live in a house that was truly hers.

After busy days and often weeks of lecture tours, fund-raising trips, representing the United States as a delegate to the United Nations, later as a member of the U.S. Association of the United Nations, and assisting grassroots organizations around the world, my grandmother often commented about how nice it was to return to Val-Kill to “be at home again.” The return to Val-Kill nourished her, allowed her time for reflection, for planning and rejuvenation so that she could continue pouring her heart and soul into the needs of so many people the world over. She loved the familiar sounds and smells of Val-Kill—the quiet winters broken by the crunch of footsteps on snow or ice, the rustic scent of smoke from fireplaces in the air. Spring brought birds and blooming lilac bushes; summers were filled with the chatter

of family, the smells of the freshly mown lawn and fragrant flowers in her garden, the sounds of frogs in the pond and even the mosquitoes whirring overhead. The call of the crows announced cold breezes that brought brilliantly colored leaves to the ground in the fall. Grandmère slept on her screened-in sleeping porch as often as she could to be part of the cherished sensory pleasures of Val-Kill.

Personal relationships were a cornerstone of Eleanor Roosevelt's effectiveness as a humanitarian and politician. It was in the serenity of Val-Kill that my grandmother could spend time with activists, political leaders, and young people who were just beginning to become involved with the domestic and international issues of the time. There is no doubt she invited people to try to influence their thinking, but she also wanted to listen to other points of view. The setting at Val-Kill also allowed her to lobby for help, not only with the causes she was most interested in but on occasion for a personal motive as well. C. R. Smith, head of American Airlines, visited Val-Kill for a weekend, and during dinner I was surprised when Grandmère casually lamented, so that Mr. Smith could hear her, that she was about to embark on a long trip across the country and sadly American Airlines did not have a flight that accommodated her schedule. Mr. Smith smiled and suddenly there was an American Airlines flight going to where Grandmère needed to go at exactly the time she needed to go.

My fondest memories are of being included in so many of her activities—from gardening, to attending events at the United Nations, to entertaining guests from all walks of life, from heads of state to guests with no particular distinction other than being people my grandmother cared about. I was also fortunate enough to accompany Grandmère when she traveled to places around the country, as well as to the Middle East, Europe, and Canada. It was during the years that I lived in the Stone Cottage right next to my grandmother's Val-Kill Cottage that I learned to appreciate who this revered person was in her most intimate moments.

Spending time with my grandmother allowed me to see how she interacted with people publicly as well as privately. I



Figure I.4. Stone Cottage. *Source:* FDR Library, public domain.

was also able to experience how she interacted with people of notoriety as well as everyday people, whether wealthy or poor. I realized that no matter one's status in the community, my grandmother treated each person with the same respect. This was the example that I learned without knowing I was even learning it. So much of what my grandmother meant to me has evolved as I have matured and experienced my own life. As a child I looked up to her as my kind grandmother. As a teenager I enjoyed the wonders of seeing new places, experiencing different cultures, and learning how to face difficult situations with her. During my adulthood, I continue to find her strength, wisdom, openness, and inquisitiveness guiding me through my personal and professional life. Her life is the example I draw on as I try to live up to the values she embodied.

Val-Kill was not an elegant residence. Originally, it was the factory Grandmère and her friends built in 1927 to employ local men and women before and especially during the hard times of

the Depression. Later, it was converted into her home, a place for this world traveler and spokesperson for those without a voice to regenerate herself, a place to be with friends and family in a comfortable, welcoming, but most of all, relaxed setting. My grandmother would not have been able to travel as much or to reach out to people all over the world without those who worked tirelessly and with devotion behind the scenes to maintain Val-Kill and her apartment in New York. The people described in these pages are a few of those who gave of themselves so that Eleanor Roosevelt was cared for during her more private moments. On many occasions I have been asked about my grandmother's most personal moments—who she was when she was not in the spotlight. How she lived at Val-Kill provides at least one example of the foundation of Eleanor Roosevelt's care and appreciation of others. I have described that special world in this memoir because it is in that world that one can observe aspects of her life not typically depicted by her biographers.