

IT'S A WOMAN'S WORLD

April 5, 1935

Description: Eleanor Roosevelt discusses her life as the wife of a public official.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt

Well do I remember my feelings/ when I entered upon/ what has been a rather long career/ as the wife of a public official./ My husband had run for the Senate/ in a district in New York State/ which for thirty-two years/ had gone Republican./ Our next door neighbor/ who was a Democrat,/ had been elected/ thirty-two years before,/ and I confess my husband's election/ was something of a surprise./

We had been settled for barely a year/ in a house in New York City/ which my mother-in-law/ had built next to her own,/ but we rented that/ and on the first of January/ 1910/ we moved to Albany./ I had been up there/ before this/ and rented a large/ old-fashioned house/ on State Street/ and an old friend of my mother-in-law's/ had sent me a list of the stores/ where we could buy/ the various needed supplies./

Many of my husband's constituents/ had signified their desire/ to come up/ and see him sworn in/ and so they arrived at our house with us/ and the entrance/ was somewhat complicated/ by having/ not only my husband,/ my mother-in-law,/ three children/ and the necessary servants moving in,/ but also/ several hundred/ of his neighbors and friends for luncheon./

This had been arranged for/ with a caterer/ but when they finally left/ and I was able to begin to unpack/ and find out what had happened to my children/ and definitely settle/ on what rooms were going to be used,/ I confess/ I was somewhat relieved!/

This was my first really independent existence/ for before that/ I had always lived near my relatives/ where they could all tell me/ what I ought to do. Here was I,/ still very shy and uncertain of myself,/ in a place/ where I did not know one single soul./ Necessity is a good teacher, however,/ and gradually/ I mastered the details/ of this new life./ Then I began to visit the Senate gallery/ and listen to the debates/ and I also visited the Assembly/ and before long/ because of a fight which was being carried on/ in which my husband was involved,/ I came to know/ at least thirty of his colleagues/ extremely well.

We had a big library where they could foregather/ and spend their days/ and whenever they were not in the Capitol,/ they were in that library,/ arriving fairly early in the morning,/ returning in the afternoon/ and staying frequently/ until one and two O'clock/ in the the following² morning. / When it was getting late,/ I would go and get beer and cheese and crackers from the pantry/ and make one of the men help me with the trays/ and that would be the signal for them/ to finally break up and go home./ This lasted for many weeks,/ they smoked constantly/ and the smoke/ permeated the room above/ which happened to be/ the two older children's nursery,/ so I had to hurriedly move the children/ to a room/ on the third floor!

Many and complicated were the events/ of the next few years./ I had to learn/ in these early days/ that the running of a house/ was largely a question of making it convenient/ and comfortable/ for the public official to live in./ Personal things/ had to be subordinate/ to the work that had to be done./ From my point of view/ as a fairly young wife,/ the family and the servant problem/ loomed very large/ because I had to learn/ to manage both of them/ so that they never interfered with work/ for life must,/ if possible,/ fit into a satisfactory pattern/ for all the individuals involved./

I recommend/ for all young wives of public officials/ that they become interested/ in the things their husbands are trying to attain/ for there is no use denying/ that both the man/ and the woman/ and the children/ will have to make many,/ many/ personal sacrifices/ and these will be far more difficult/ if they do not share in the interests/ and accomplishments/ of the public life/ which necessitates these sacrifices./

~~Four~~ Three and a half⁴ years were spent in Albany/ and then one Spring/ I found myself transplanted to Washington/ I left my children in New York/ until I could get back in the early summer/ and take them ~~up~~ down⁶ to Maine./

~~Through all these early years/ my husband's old home with his mother at Hyde Park/ played a great part in all our lives/ and the children/ spent the springs and autumns with their grand mother while I would come and go./ She would frequently/ open her hospitable home/ to the children who had whooping cough/ or to those who had not caught the measles/ whether she was in Hyde Park/ or in New York City./~~

In Washington/ I began all over again the making of friends/ and the settling of a household./ Finding schools for the children/ and arranging dancing classes,/ music lessons,/ etc. We had at first/ my aunt's, Mrs. Cowles, house on N. Street./ Mrs. Cowles had lived in Washington/ through her brother's administrations/ and from her/ I learned the intricacies/ of social-political Washington duties./ My husband/ was Assistant Secretary of the Navy,/ ~~very small fry indeed in the social scale/~~ and this meant/ that I had to call on nearly⁸ everybody first./ Added to that/ Mrs. Cowles told me to remember/ that my real job/ was the Navy/ and as I was very young/ I could appreciate the lives/ of the young naval officers' wives/ and therefore/ should make it as pleasant as possible for them./ I started in valiantly calling every afternoon with a car filled with children/ who were being aired at the same time,/ and by dint of calling from three/ to five every day,/ Mondays on the Justices,/ Tuesdays on Congress,/ Wednesdays on the Cabinet,/ Thursdays on the Senate/ and Fridays on the Diplomats,/ I managed by early spring/ to do the requisite number of calls./

Occasionally/ I had to spend an afternoon/ receiving with Mrs. Daniels,/ the Secretary of the Navy's wife,/ and once or twice/ I stayed at home myself/ to receive primarily navy calls,/ but usually/ I went my rounds,/ paste-board in hand,/ with the formula/ ~~which became so familiar to me before the end of the calling period./~~ "I am Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt,/ my husband has just come to Washington/ as Assistant Secretary of the Navy"/ This experience has given me / for all new comers/ a feeling of great sympathy/ for I know how bewildered/ and shy/ and lonely/ one can feel/ in the midst of this whirl/ which is Washington's/ social-political life./

My husband left in the morning around nine/ and frequently came home for luncheon/ so I arranged to have a very short luncheon/ in order/ that he might bring men home with him/ and get back to his office/ in the prescribed time./ We started then/ the habit which has remained with us ever since,/ even in the White House./ I kept a bell on the table/ and the maid/ when she had finished passing the food,/ returned to the pantry/ and did not return again/ until I rang the bell./ This was to facilitate discussion and free conversation/ and became doubly important/ once the War started./

Those luncheons were vitally interesting./ My daughter Anna/ was the only one of the children/ old enough/ to participate in them/ but even to her/ they must have meant something/ for years later when/ at the age of sixteen,/ her grandmother took her to her first grown up dance in the country/ she confided to me afterwards/ that the young men who had danced with her/ were not half as interesting to talk to/ as the gentleman/ who at that time/ was Counselor of the British Embassy/ and whom she had once sat by/ at luncheon!

The evenings were one long round of either dining out or giving dinners/ and our only real time to ourselves/ was Sunday evenings/ for we always kept them for our family/ and intimate friends./ When we

realized/ that large official parties were going to make it impossible,/ unless we made some kind of an effort,/ to have any intimate friendships in the swirl of social life,/ we decided/ that eight of us/ would dine together once/ every two weeks./

The William Phillips were old friends of ours,/ the Franklin Lanes/ and the Adolph Millers/ had come from California together/ and we were all drawn to each other/ and though we occasionally invited another couple to join us,/ this little group/ continued to meet regularly/ during the eight years of President Wilson's administration/ and six of us/ are here again now./

With our entry into the World War/ came a complete change/ as far as calling went./ No one paid any calls/ but everyone worked with the Red Cross/ and the days were even busier/ than they had been before./ The only concession to family life which I made/ was/ always to be home at tea time with the children/ and until they went to bed./ They would even play in my room/ while I dressed for dinner./ This habit was never interrupted/ until war time/ forced me occasionally/ to stay at the canteen for some emergency./

During these years/ the necessity of running a house to suit/ ~~the~~ life a public official's¹⁰ life/ and running the family life so that it¹² would fit in/ with his¹⁴ was ever more and more apparent/ and so/ when in 1920/ my husband was defeated for the Vice Presidency,/ and we returned to private life,/ I welcomed the change/ with the feeling/ that at last/ we were going to have lives of our own/ and not always be subordinated/ to some higher duty./

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~~It was good training, however,/ and has served me well/ as it will serve every woman well/ who goes through it/ and in the last two years/ I have found much/ that was valuable to me/ in these past experiences./~~

Life is interesting to the wife/ and family of a public official/ but by and large,/ they must make up their minds/ that they must enjoy what comes to them,/ they can not go out and choose what they will enjoy,/ and they must learn to plan their lives/ in a way/ which will give them some personal satisfaction/ and yet at all times/ do the things/ which their positions require./

It is like being a doctor/ or a minister,/ you serve as a public official/ and your family serves with you./ There are rewards and compensations/ but it is far/ from being always/ a bed of roses./

Transcribed by Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project staff.

Proofread by Angela Baker, Lee Febos, Margaret Swenson, Olivia Kinhan, Matthew Girardi, and Ikerighi David.

Transcribed from a script held in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

² The words "the following" are a handwritten interlineation.

⁴ The words "three" through "half" are a handwritten interlineation.

⁶ This is a handwritten interlineation.

⁸ This is a handwritten interlineation.

¹⁰ The words "a public official's" are a handwritten interlineation.

¹² This is a handwritten interlineation.

¹⁴ The words "with his" are a handwritten interlineation.