Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt’s Own Program

July 9, 1940

Description: Broadcast time 1:15-1:30 PM over the NBC Red Network. As the Democrats gather for their 1940 national convention, ER discusses previous conventions she has attended and the mechanics of such meetings in general.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Ben Grauer, NBC Announcer

(30:29)

[Theme music 30:29-30:53]

[Ben Grauer:] Again we are privileged to welcome Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt who joins us today from Hyde Park. SweetHeart Soap brings you these programs, the same fine, delicately fragrant soap that now offers you a chance to save substantially on your summer soap bill. Listen for full details of this spectacular offer a little later in the program. And now, here is Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

[ER:] Good day, ladies and gentlemen. The Republican convention is over and now the Democrats are converging on Chicago. I think it might be of interest to many of you if I told you a little of what lies behind any ultimate results in our political conventions. I imagine that you, who've never sat through the national convention of a political party either as a delegate or an observer, find it hard to understand what it is like. In the first place, every candidate for the nomination, particularly if he is a candidate for the first time, has behind him weeks of pre-convention campaigning. I do not mean by that that he's actually gone out around the country, but he's been seeing people and making friends of many kinds in order to obtain delegates from as many states as possible so they will come to the convention, pledged to vote for him. His manager goes to the convention city at least a week or two beforehand and establishes headquarters in some hotel. Sometimes all the candidates congregate in the same hotel. In other cases, they're scattered around the city. All of them cater to the newspaper people and try to have human interest stories about the candidate to hand out on every occasion. (32:28)

My first national political campaign was the one at which Mr. Woodrow Wilson was nominated for the first time in Baltimore, Maryland. That was in 1912, and the whole performance was as incomprehensible to me as I’m sure it is to many other people. As each man’s name is put in nomination, his friends try to out-shout, out-march, and out-sing the friends of the previous nominee and they try to have each demonstration last a little longer than the one before it. Being of a very practical nature, it seems to me that much of the convention fuss and fury is a great waste of time. I was also very much shocked at first by the strong and bitter words that one candidate and his coworkers say about the others. It seemed difficult for me to believe that after all of this hostility the opposing factions could get together afterwards as though nothing at all had been said. Understanding, however, that much of the oratorical shouting is for purely political effect, we can discount much that is said at political conventions. When feeling runs high, the workers in one group may not even speak to those in another faction. The delegates of a political convention are, after all, out to have a good time, however, as well as attend to the convention business, so naturally one can expect a good deal of horseplay at every convention. For instance, outside of the headquarters set up for my husband in Chicago in 1932, his campaign managers had pinned up a large map of the United States, and as each state pledged its delegation to vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt, that state was painted a bright color, making a very effective chart. The workers in
the headquarters of one of his political rivals pasted a banner over this map one night which read, “It’s votes, not acres that count!” (34:21)

The second convention which I remember very vividly was the Democratic National Convention of 1924. By this time, I had a better idea of convention procedure. My husband was to make the nominating speech for Alfred E. Smith. I’d been working in the Democratic state committee office in New York City. Because this was Governor Smith’s native city, and because it was also the convention city, all of the New York workers had a great sense of responsibility. I’d agreed to take into my house, which was already partially closed up for the summer, a number of women delegates from upstate New York. I put up cots in order to house as many as I could, and I agreed to give all of them breakfast. I planned on having them not more than a week, but this was one of those long, drawn-out conventions with roll-call after roll-call bringing no results. My guests were with me three-and-a-half weeks. During this time, I did, however, gradually learn what went on behind the scenes at a convention in the fight for delegates. Those of us who were interested in Governor Smith had various groups of delegates assigned to us for special attention and I can remember attending teas and luncheons given for visitors from other states. Mrs. Caroline O’Day and I joined in giving a party for the delegates. My New York house adjoins my mother-in-law’s townhouse and so it was possible to receive a great many people by holding the party in both houses. Although we expected many visitors, even more appeared that evening. Personal things are not very much considered during a convention, and poor Mrs. O’Day had to stand there that night and shake hands knowing that her youngest son had broken his leg and she could not get out to her house in the country to find out how he was.

There is always one man at a convention who is the acknowledged leader for his candidate. Around him cluster all the other people who are working for that candidate. He is expected to be up early in the morning, never to be tired, and to be ready and willing to do whatever anyone wants of him. His bedroom and sitting-room in the hotel are used as conference headquarters, several stenographers and secretaries are always on hand to help get statements out, to type speeches, and answer the ever-ringing telephones. Often there is a telephone direct from the headquarters to the candidate’s home and he is kept in touch with what is going on unless, of course, he is at the convention. Usually the candidate does not attend the convention, but members of his family are present. And now, I would like to pause a moment so that we can all listen to a few words from our announcer. (37:11)

[Ben Grauer:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt, and my words will be very brief. Ladies, would you like to have some extra money? You can, and here’s how: right now, just one penny buys a full-size cake of SweetHeart Soap with every three at the regular low price. You buy three, you get another big oval cake of SweetHeart Soap for just one penny extra, and this astonishing offer holds good for all the SweetHeart Soap you buy in this sensational one-cent sale. See how you can save yourself a lot of money? Just get enough SweetHeart Soap now to last you the rest of the summer, and there you are with enough money saved to see a good show. Don’t miss this grand special offer. It’s one full-size cake of SweetHeart Soap for just one penny with every three you buy. Get at least two or three dozen cakes of SweetHeart Soap today. And now we return to you to Hyde Park and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

[ER:] One of the things which preoccupies everyone attending a convention is the problem of getting on the convention floor where they can hear and see what is going on. Many people will get themselves appointed as pages or messengers, or temporarily on some newspaper. Tickets to a convention are always at a premium. Each headquarters does its best to get its own supporters into the hall for the value that their cheers may have in impressing the delegates. Convention tickets, however, are nearly always in the control of the national committee. The committee chairman is supposed to give them out to the various state leaders. Sometimes there is a feud between the state and national leaders. When this happens, one faction is usually left without any convention tickets and the other has more than they can use.
During the first days of a convention, the most important committees meet. The committee on credentials which decides on the seating of delegations, the platform committee, and even the resolutions committee are hard at work from the first day. The platform committee is the one with which I had my first direct political experience in 1924. I was the chairman of the women’s group to recommend certain things of interest to women for inclusion in the party platform. Such a thing had never been done before, and the gentlemen on the committee were either determined that demands of this nature should not be presented to the committee, or were ignorant that the women had any suggestions. In order to finally get our very innocuous recommendations read, I had to sit for hours outside a closed door of the committee room until a committee member came along and agreed to sponsor the suggestions, the formulation of which had cost us many hours of hard work. But the woman’s part in the political conventions has grown considerably in the years since 1924. Today, we hope to include an equal number of men and women on the membership of the platform committee. There is always a certain rivalry for position on these different committees. Some of the delegates have been to so many conventions that what happens is more or less cut-and-dry to them and not of very great interest, but to a number of delegates, it is a new experience. Even being in a big city may be something comparatively new and exciting to them, and you can hear some very amusing conversation in the lobby of a hotel or if you wander around the convention hall. There were certain personalities in the old days who always stood out at any convention. I think a great amount of color has been lost with the passing of the old-time convention orators. Chauncey M. Depew and William Jennings Bryan could certainly be seen and heard.

The newspaper people at any convention work overtime, and they have special assignments to a particular candidate. On the other hand, they are allowed to pick up any good stories that they hear and the rumors fly about a convention hall in much the same way that they fly about the city of Washington, making a newspaperman’s life very difficult. Both men and women are assigned by their newspapers to stay in attendance on the various candidates, either in the hotels or at their homes, and to report on their activities both before and after the results of the balloting. There were ever so many night sessions in the Chicago convention of 1932. I remember that the poor newspapermen and women, assigned to cover my husband who was then governor of New York State and in Albany, looked completely disheveled and worn out when the nomination finally took place. It was very warm and I ordered breakfast out on the porch and invited some of them to wash up in the house and to have a cup of coffee with me. Up to this time, their headquarters had been in the garage. They certainly needed rest, and so did we, for we had been living on the end of a telephone wire for several days. (42:32)

The weakness of any convention is much the same as the weakness of any political campaign. Each group is putting forward its own candidate’s good points so zealously that a really balanced judgement is a bit hard to find anywhere. However, taken by in large, I think the results of our methods are fairly good, and if they do nothing else, they will force a candidate to take the people into his confidence both on the air and through the newspapers. In the end, it is the results which grow out of these political customs and maneuvers which make up the American political campaign. (43:11)

[Ben Grauer:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. Ladies, the spectacular one cent sale on SweetHeart Soap is really an invitation. We’re inviting people who haven’t gotten around to trying SweetHeart Soap as yet to do so right now. We want you to see for yourself why so many thousands of SweetHeart users say, “There’s no other soap like it.” And all of you thousands of regular users of SweetHeart Soap—you’re invited too. You’re invited to save nearly twenty-five percent on your soap bill. Yes ladies, that’s what SweetHeart’s big penny sale adds up to: almost twenty-five percent cut right off your soap bill. So rush to your favorite dealer right after this program. Get one full size cake of SweetHeart Soap for just one penny with every three cakes you buy. And don’t forget, ladies, the more SweetHeart Soap you buy, the more hard cash you save.

[Theme music 44:07-44:22]
[Ben Grauer:] [Music continues softly] And it’s time to say goodbye until next Thursday when Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt again comes to call on her countless friends all over the nation. If you’ve been meaning to try SweetHeart Soap, by all means do so now at the big savings SweetHeart’s one-cent sale offers you. Tell your friends about it and be sure to be listening next Thursday, same time, same station for [Music crescendos, cuts] Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt’s Own Program. This is Ben Grauer speaking.

[Theme music 44:52-45:01]

[NBC Announcer:] [Speaking over music] This is the National Broadcasting Company.

[Theme music fades 45:04]

[NBC Chimes]

(45:11)