

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

May 2nd, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt discuss the FDR Presidential Library at Hyde Park. In the interview segment, ER's guest is David Loth, author of *The People's General*, a biography of the Marquis de Lafayette.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Elliott Roosevelt, David Loth

[ER:] This is Eleanor Roosevelt speaking. Elliott and I are very happy to be able to bring you this program each day from my living room here in the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City. I hope you'll find the program we've planned for today an interesting one. Elliott, will you tell us about it please?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Bookstore displays are now featuring a blue and white jacketed volume entitled *The People's General*. It is the story of Lafayette, and its author Mr. David Loth is Mrs. Roosevelt's guest today. In writing about Lafayette, Mr. Loth feels he made a real friend of the famous French nobleman who played such an important part in our own early American history. And if you'd enjoy hearing about the Marquis de Lafayette from his current biographer, listen to his discussion with Mrs. Roosevelt a little later on in the program. As books are the topic of the day, this will be a good time to talk about the library at Hyde Park. We'll come to this talk as soon as we've heard from the sponsors who make our recorded program possible.

(Break 1:13-1:25)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, instead of answering a letter today, I'd like to have you tell our listeners about something I know they're-they're all interested in, and that's the library at Hyde Park. Uh first of all, why did Father start it? (1:40)

[ER:] Well, he started it originally because he had a feeling that it was a mistake--I think it started really in-in um the concern that some of the European countries had about their records and their uh collections of books and papers and paintings and so forth in uh wartime, uh when war comes from the air, because um they could with one bomb have, for instance in England, destroyed every historical record the country had. And so their first interest was to scatter their records to different places, and that I think was what started Father thinking, "Well now, we put everything into the Congressional library, all our presidential papers, um everything, centers in Washington, except for a few things um scattered in museums and libraries throughout the country. But the main" [Elliott Roosevelt: Bulk.] "things that deal with our history eh um and the past history of the country eh are concentrated in Washington." And he then um took a great interest in the Congressional library, and I remember that when we had lived there many years before, I had gone to look at some of Thomas Jefferson's papers and discovered that um the library had only just reached the point--the Congressional library--of cataloging and making ready to show you, in case you wanted to use them for historical purposes, um the first two years of Jefferson's administration. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.]

And uh so he began to look into it, and he found that there was really never had been sufficient personnel to bring up to date. There are wonderful things, of course, like the collections of prints and the different sections in the library, but that on the historical papers of presidents and of different periods, there just never has been the personnel to catalog them and bring them in to the condition where they can be used by uh any historian without a great deal of-of personal work done for the person who wants to use

them. So um Father began to be very anxious to have all the records of the period of history which he had known in another place, so that they--for the first place, there was more chance that they would be ready more quickly because there would have to be separate personnel working on just those, and in the next place it would be beginning to scatter these very valuable possessions, so that in case of an attack at any time they wouldn't all be concentrated in one place. And uh that led to asking um -- talking it over with some of his friends, and Mr. Frank Walker suggested that he would raise the money to build a library at Hyde Park if Father and his mother, who owned the land, would donate the land. They did that, and um the present library was built. Now part of the library is a sort of museum because it houses gifts that were made to Father through his life and collections that he himself made during his life. Only one wing is devoted exclusively to books and papers and um that wing is very little visited by the general public because there's nothing much to show them except stacks of books.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, actually that's [ER coughs] occluded to the general public, and is only open to students.

[ER:] It is only open to students, and specially, if some special visitors come it's open to them for --and they can look uh through them. But um gradually they have been trying to, as permission was given to open certain things to the public, they've been trying to get them cataloged, but it's very slow work even there because of the lack of personnel and people uh go to work and they get on very well and then they get drafted back into the service or something of that sort. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] But the museum has proved a very great interest. For instance, Father's collection of um model boats is uh a great interest, particularly to the schoolchildren who go there. And then the room that he used to work in when he was there, which has a great many things that belonged to him in it. That is always looked at with interest. And then there are all the things that he wanted to have there, like his crib and um all the things pertaining to his own youth. And um there is a corner for Fala, things that were sent to Fala and that deal with Fala. Then there is eh um, of course, um quite a number -- his desk and chair that came, all sorts of-of um different things so that you get an idea of the country. Then there is on exhibition of course um--they vary their exhibits very greatly--but things that have come from different countries are rotated so that visitors see things that were given from different countries at different times. And there is the um model statue which was put up in the square in London and um there is too--I think people are always interested in it-- um a uh copy of one of his speeches in all the different stages of preparation. I noticed that people are very much interested in that, to see how often he went over a speech and rewrote it [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] and changed it. Then there is the old Bible on which he always took his oath of office, the Old Dutch Bible.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, tell me about the Old Dutch family Bible. Uh um how long had that been in the family?

[ER:] Oh, that was brought over um with the original uh um--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Claes van Martens?

[ER:] Oh, not Claes van Marten, I don't believe, though it might have been. But it went all the way back in Father's side of the family eh um for uh--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] To the 1600s?

[ER:] Yes, to the 1600s.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh I believe that that Bible has entries of the births and deaths of all uh--[ER: It has.] Straight down the list of the members of his family uh all the way back, even to the Dutch members of the family [ER: Yes] who were living in Holland.

[ER:] It has um, and I think there is also one exhibition there--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Could I ask another question [ER: Yes.] before you go on? Uh before we leave the old family Bible uh the old family Bible is open to the page which uh it was open to at each of his inaugurations where he--the page on which he placed his hand when taking the oath of office.

[ER:] That's right.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What was the significance of that page? (9:38)

[ER:] Well, he always had it opened I think at 13th Corinthians, which was his um favorite chapter uh charity suffereth long and is kind, etc., and-and uh now bideth these three, faith, hope, and charity or love, whichever way you-you present. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And um he always had it open at that when I - - when he took his oath, and it went through all -- he used it for every oath, every public uh ceremony

[Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] where he had to take an oath, always. And then he, there is also on exhibition there I think the Bible that the--though it may be in the-in the church, but I think it's on exhibition in the library--the Bible that the King and Queen gave to the church after they spent a weekend at Hyde Park and went to church in the little church [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] up there, St. James's. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] And uh then there is also uh a Torah that was given him by uh a young Israel group and um uh that uh is a very interesting one and always looked at with great interest by people.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well now, uh in addition to that I believe that in the library at Hyde Park is located practically all of his uh American naval history print collection, [ER: Yes] uh which is considered by the experts to be the largest and most complete in the world. Uh there are parts of his stamp collection-

[ER:] Well in the library and in the house. Some of them are in the house still.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well, uh I think if we--

[ER:] His stamp collection was sold, of course.
ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] No, but there are portions of the stamp collection that are on exhibition up there.

[ER:] There are portions of the stamp collection still there.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And there are, of course, the uh various modes of transportation which were used at Hyde Park and on neighboring places uh throughout all the years

[ER:] Oh yes, the iceboats are downstairs, down in the basement, the one that he used to sail as a boy, and then the racing iceboat, the very large one that his uncle used for racing on the Hudson River.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right. Well--

[ER:] Then there are all sorts of sleighs and carriages, some that his father--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And this library is run by the federal government. What branch of the federal government?

[ER:] Well the library is run by the Archives, but the grounds and the house and the grave, of course, are all under the jurisdiction of the uh Interior Department, the section of parks and monuments. And uh so that Mr. Kahn heads the library for the Archives department, and uh Mr. George Palmer is the head of the, and runs both [Elliott Roosevelt: The grounds and the house.] the grounds and the house, and also the Vanderbilt mansion which belongs to the federal government.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well, I think that's all the time that we have right now, so we'll go on to another portion of the program and come to our interview in just a few minutes. (12:50)

(Break 12:50-12:59)

[ER:] If ever there was a time when it was important as well as interesting to learn about and know well the lives of the men who contributed so much to the beginnings of our country, the men who first set forth the ideals we are trying daily to maintain, this time is it. One of those men whose name is written into our history forever is the Marquis de Lafayette, and we're going to hear about him today from Mr. David Loth, whose study of Lafayette has resulted recently in a book entitled *The People's General*. I'm so glad you could be with me today, Mr. Loth.

[David Loth:] It is a very great privilege for me.

[ER:] Do you mind if I begin our talk uh first by telling you that I was very fond of an old cousin who once danced with Lafayette in New York City. She's dead now, but I've heard the story so often that I have a real personal feeling that I know what Lafayette was like. So I'm going to ask you to start off, if you will, by giving us a very brief biography of Lafayette.

[David Loth:] Well, I shall try and condense seventy-seven years of his life into a very few words. He was born a French aristocrat uh who, at the age of eighteen as an adventurer, wanted to come to America and fight, mostly against England. He came to America, and he found that really the Americans themselves had something worth fighting for--the rights of man. And he became a republican--democrat in his day was a term of reproach--uh and went back to France after fighting for four years in our revolution, to bring back those ideals to his own country. It was he who first started, for instance, the movement for the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man in France. He became one of the real leaders of the French Revolution, until it got, as he thought, out of hand. And rather than betray either the people or the government as he thought, he fled from France at the time of the Terror. Uh both sides, therefore, hated him intensely and he spent the next five years in jail. Coming out, he refused to serve Napoleon, until just before the end. After Napoleon came back from Elba, he consented to serve France, as he said, and it was he who made the last great speech against the Napoleonic regime. Uh then he was in opposition against the restored Bourbons as tyrants, and when your cousin danced with him he had come back here as an old man, and received probably the greatest reception that has ever been given to any living human being. I don't think anybody else was ever rugged enough to take that kind of a reception for over a year every day. [ER: Oh my.] Uh he returned to France and as an--at the age of seventy-three led the great revolution of 1830, which overthrew the Bourbons again, and almost immediately was in opposition to the new king, and died in opposition.

[ER:] He was always in opposition, which, I think, most of the people who are in opposition are interesting people. How did you happen to write about Lafayette at this time? (16:42)

[David Loth:] Well, it seemed to me that that is a great period uh of history. One of the periods that uh we should know about, and that Lafayette himself, although a Frenchman, gave us, to me, one of the best expressions of what Americanism and America is, even of all of the great men of his time.

[ER:] Yes I think that's very true. Well, now you've always been a businessman -- uh a newspaperman for a great many years, and I wondered uh how you got started in the writing of biography?

[David Loth:] Well, I think it was just because I had been a newspaperman for so long that I found that I understood better the contemporary events I was supposed to write about if I knew what had happened in the past, and I found it much more interesting to interpret that past through an individual rather than through rather generalized history. [ER coughs]

[ER:] I think that is-is true almost always, that if you can really um understand a period through an individual it comes to life as it doesn't if you just uh tell it as a story of a period. And so I-I would uh feel with you that choosing a man and -- is um is a good thing to do in history, eh if you want to tell about a period, but how do you really pick a subject for a book of the kind that you've been writing?

[David Loth:] Well, I think you pick uh a subject for a biography very much as you pick a close friend. Uh you know some of the men in the period after you've read a little bit about it, and some of them appeal to me and some appeal to someone else. Uh my old friend Claude Bowers, for instance, has always been just on the opposite side from me. Jefferson appealed to him, Hamilton appealed to me. Uh and you are really, when you write a biography, in effect asking the subject of it to come and be a guest in your house for two or three years and live with you. And you really pick him as a friend then, because I think as you know, houseguests can get awfully tiresome if you don't like them very, very much.

[ER:] Yes, that's true. You could be a particularly-- that stay as long as a couple of years, you could get very tired of them. Um, is that the way Mr. Bowers you think writes his uh biographies?

[David Loth:] Well, I think he must. He had Jefferson in his--his houseguest must have been twenty years.

[ER:] Yes, I think so too. Well, um I'm- I'm interested in what you said about Hamilton, because I think Hamilton was a fascinating person, though I don't agree with most of his theories. And yet as a person I think he must have been a fascinating person.

[David Loth:] He was. As a person he was a great deal more fascinating than his theories, and very interesting to write about, because as one can disagree with a friend, one could disagree with Hamilton about what he thought, in his principles on government.

[ER:] And still [David Loth: And still--] like him very much--I'm sure that's what one would have felt about him had one known him. (20:13)

[David Loth:] That's right. He was very much the kind of a man, I think, that uh someone once said about Gladstone: to continue hating him, you had to avoid meeting him because he was so charming.

[ER:] Because he was so charming. [ER laughs] There are a good many people who are like that, but living on such intimate terms, as you do, with someone whose biography you're writing, uh you must sometimes find that, like all other human beings, your subject isn't perfect. Uh how do you handle the weaknesses and the derogatory material which has to be handled if it's going to be a real biography?

[David Loth:] Well you, you recognize it. Uh I think you deal with it and bring them right into the book just as they are. Uh with a man like Lafayette, for example, or Hamilton, it makes the man more human,

uh just as one's friends have faults and you recognize that. [David Loth coughs] And it seems to me that when a man has the bright achievements that Lafayette had to his credit uh they stand out even more brightly against perhaps a little darkness of background in little matters of personal life or mistakes in policy and so on.

[ER:] Uh I think that would be true. Where do you get material for a book like this book on Lafayette?

[David Loth:] Well, it has always been amazing to me how many of the papers of the men of nearly two-hundred years ago have been preserved. Uh in his case there are three great collections in the United States. Uh one of them, I think, is a very charming story of Lafayette himself. It's the best collection in the world. It's owned by Mr. Stuart Jackson of Virginia. Uh as a young man he inherited from his father a letter which had been written by Lafayette. Uh when Lafayette was in this country--at the same time he was dancing with your cousin--he was wrecked in the Ohio River, and Mr. Jackson's grandfather owned a steamship that uh rescued him and brought him back to Louisville, and Lafayette wrote a thank you note, and this was the thank you note. And Mr. Jackson thought, "Now this is a personal touch, I'm going to get everything I can on Lafayette." And he has hundreds and hundreds of letters, and hundreds more of contemporary pamphlets and newsletters and so on, which make a very rounded picture of the man. And he gave me access to his library, and I browsed in it and got to know Lafayette better. Then there is a famous collection by the Nobel Prize winner, the Duc de Broglie, uh whose ancestor was Lafayette's commander in the army. And uh Lafayette's early adventures and his uh coming to America at first was largely due to Broglie. And there in those papers is the real record of how he happened to join the American Revolution.

[ER:] That's uh that's of course, uh must give you an intimate picture. Letters do give the most intimate picture, don't they really? Of a man.

[David Loth:] Yes, especially when they're unrehearsed letters.

[ER:] Well, I-I think that um uh I now would save letters in a way that a few years ago I would never have thought of doing. I used to think my husband was simply uh terrible because he saved every scrap of personal or business or even from acquaintances in the way of letters. But now I realize that that really is where you get your best history.

[David Loth:] Biographies will thank--biographers will thank him forever.

[ER:] Well, I-I think it's where you get your best picture of the times as well as the people, and now I'm sorry but we have to stop for just one minute and let our announcer have a word, and we'll be right back.

(Break 24:30-24:39)

[ER:] Now we come back to talk with Mr. David Loth who's just written a book on Lafayette called *The People's General*, and um I'd like to say that I can understand very well, Mr. Loth, how you take a subject like Lafayette and begin to feel that you're very friendly with the man, and you know about his weaknesses and you know about his virtues. But this particular man um had many things uh to recommend him. I wonder if you would like to tell me about them. (25:20)

[David Loth:] Well, I think one of the most important ones was the time in which he lived. Uh it was, to my mind, the one time in history that was most like our own. I think that all of us who have uh, oh, are even middle-aged, realize that we were born into a world that was completely different than the world we're living in now, and in a few years it'll probably be completely changed again. Uh he lived through such a time. Uh he lived in the beginnings of an age - of the age--of the end of the age of despotism, and

he lived to the beginnings of the days of freedom. Uh I think we're uh living in the heyday of freedom are living through the great changes where freedom will be consolidated--must be consolidated. And therefore, the two struggles are very much alike. And he, as one of the leading figures in those struggles, has lessons for us that I think we should not miss.

[ER:] Well, that's very interesting. What do you consider the outstanding message of his life for us today?

[David Loth:] I think the great message of Lafayette is almost in nothing that he said, but in everything that he did. His whole life was an expression of what uh I think the best--in the best sense of the word we would call liberalism today. He resisted, and resisted quite heroically, the tyranny of kings and dictators, and he resisted with equal energy the excesses of things that were done in the name of the people, by mobs who--or demagogues who misled the people.

[ER:] Yes, that unfortunately I'm afraid is what happens to almost every liberal leader. He finds that his um that he has to resist both the elements: first the oppressors, and then as the oppressed get a little bit drunk with successes, he finds himself having to um try to calm down their tendency to too much power. It's too much power always that gets in the way of liberty.

[David Loth:] That is true. And he was a man who resisted taking power because he felt that anybody who had too much power was bound to abuse it.

[ER:] Well of course, he was born into the aristocracy. Um he was wealthy, lived in an absolute monarchy, and he became a liberal. Do you think it was the philosophers who were the precursors of the French Revolution whose influence he felt?

[David Loth:] I think he felt it less than most of his contemporaries. He was not uh, in his early days at least, what we would call a reading man. But he learned his lessons of liberty in the battles for liberty in America. He learned them from living with Washington, with Hamilton, with Jefferson. Uh he was broadminded enough to be able to be an intimate friend of both Jefferson and Hamilton.

[ER:] That's interesting.

[David Loth:] And it was in America that he discovered the doctrine that men should be able to guide their own destinies. And he fell in love with that doctrine uh very much as he fell in love with women or with the country, as he fell in love with the United States. And the doctrine stayed with him all his life, although until he had come here, he had probably thought almost nothing about such things. (29:23)

[ER:] So that really, what he did in this country for the liberty of mankind led him on, because before that he'd done very little in his own country.

[David Loth:] That's right. He was a very young man, of course. He was only nineteen when he arrived here. But he was one, one that we remember, of the great army of Frenchmen who fought over here, and whose influence, I think, has been very much neglected in history. There were thousands of them--anonymous men who fought in the French army. Most of them marched across this country all the way from Rhode Island to Virginia, and they saw freedom in operation. They saw men owning their own homes, men tilling their own land and not having to give all the produce to the landlord, and they got back to France and scattered to their villages and towns. And their influence in bringing the French Revolution up from the grassroots was tremendous, and Lafayette was one of those.

[ER:] Well, uh Lafayette did more of course than fight these battles for liberty. He worked for those ideals in peacetime too, didn't he?

[David Loth:] Yes he did, for more than fifty years, which I think very few men start young enough or live long enough to have an opportunity to do. But perhaps his greatest contribution, although he thought of himself as a soldier, was his battles in peacetime: his early fight for the reforms that led to the French Revolution, his fight to free France after the restoration, and regain the benefits of the French Revolution through parliamentary and republican forms.

[ER:] Yes, um he really did I think what is perhaps the most difficult in doing that work in peacetime, because many of the people who could fight battles, who could be carried away by the leadership of someone like Washington or Jefferson or Hamilton--um when it came down to going back again and by themselves doing that day by day peacetime work--and it's not always inspiring work because there are moments when human beings fighting for freedom do fall down pretty badly. Eh and he seems to have had the kind of courage that people have to have who are going to really influence a period in history, and that's what he did.

[David Loth:] He had the great courage. I think of his convictions, and one of the things that you see in his very stubborn battles for what he thought was right. Uh every time there was a crisis in all those fifty years of his struggle for freedom in Europe, uh you can almost see him stop and say, "Now what would George Washington have done?" And then he did it, so much so that some of his contemporaries saw it.

[Charles Maurice de] Talleyrand said about him once that: "A queer man, this Lafayette, he always seems to be imitating somebody." And, of course, the person he was imitating was Washington.

[ER:] That's very--that's uh, that's unusual for Talleyrand, who was an old rascal I think, to have said that there was an influence like that back of--of uh Lafayette.

[David Loth:] Oh yes, well he was a shrewd rascal, Talleyrand, and, of course, Lafayette made no bones of his great affection for American institutions, and his love of Washington. He looked upon Washington as his adopted father. His own father had died just before he was born, and he spent a good deal of his youth trying to find someone who could be a father to him, and it wasn't until he met Washington that he found a man he thought was worthy of it. (33:49)

[ER:] We forget, I think, in this country, that even as a very young country--I mean there when we were fighting the revolution -- what we did, weak as we were, had a great deal of influence through the men that came over here and helped us on the old civilizations of the Old World. And I think that when you think of it, we had a great deal of influence through the statesmen who fought for us as colonies in England, and through Lafayette and some others we had a great deal of influence then on France.

[David Loth:] I think we--and through France on all the world--I think it was the influence of our fight for independence which gave the great era of the French Revolution its impetus and part of the direction that it took. I think it would have been a very different revolution--certainly it would have happened; man would have become free anyway. But I think the direction that the fight for human rights took was greatly swayed by the men who admired our country, and the way it had been done here.

[ER:] Well, I think that reading about the struggles and the hopes and achievements of these men helps us to bring into clearer perspective the problems of today, and it ought to help us to understand ourselves and what we should do.

[David Loth:] I think that is especially true of Lafayette and the men who were with him in this great struggle for freedom, because theirs was one of the world's great strides forward.

[ER:] Well, I have not yet read your book with care, but I have looked through it and read parts of it, and I think it will help us to understand ourselves as well as Lafayette. And I thank you for being with me today, and I'm sorry our time has-has to come to a close.

[David Loth:] Thank you very much.

(Break 35:56-36:04)

[ER:] Cancer is not the hopeless subject so many of us unfortunately think it is. It can be cured. Last year alone, more than 70,000 cancer patients were saved through radiation treatments and surgery. The important thing to know is how to recognize the early warning signals of the disease, and then to visit your physician at once. I am not qualified medically to delve into all the facts about cancer, but if you want to learn them, write to your unit of the American Cancer Society.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now it's time to close the program and to remind you that you've been listening to *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*, which comes to you each Monday through Friday at this same time, and this is Elliott Roosevelt speaking and wishing you all good day.

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