

## IT'S A WOMAN'S WORLD

April 12, 1935

Description: Eleanor Roosevelt discusses entertaining in the White House.

Participant: Eleanor Roosevelt.

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I grew up in an atmosphere where social position was practically never mentioned. It was just taken for granted that birth and a certain amount of economic security entitled you to be included what was considered "society" in the particular place where I lived. There were certain things which you were not taught, but which you absorbed from your surroundings, namely, customs and traditions of thought and of life. Some of them were fundamental and useful in whatever kind of life you might be leading, others were useful purely in society. But all of this early training is useful to me or to anyone living in the White House.

I have long since outgrown any idea I might have had of the importance of any particular group of people in any part of the United States. I have grown to measure people's worth neither by birth nor by money, but by certain qualities of mind and heart.

However, in the White House, part of the work of the hostess is to dispense hospitality in two totally different ways. One is private and personal hospitality which comes to any hostess anywhere throughout the United States, the welcoming of personal friends, of casual acquaintances, of people who are interested in this or that, or who may be given pleasure by something which you for the moment are able to contribute. This is the informal easy kind of hospitality which rich and poor alike throughout this country have a genius for dispensing.

And then there is the formal and official side of the White House hostess' life. Here she is not herself at all, but the wife of the President of the United States, doing the things which the country expects this woman, whoever she may be, to do, with the dignity and formality which puts us on an equal footing socially with any foreign representative of any other country or any group anywhere in one own United States.

Through the years there have been grown up traditions about the formal White House entertainments. There are five dinners which are for the dinner for the Cabinet, the dinner for the Vice President, the dinner for the Diplomatic Corps, the dinner for the Chief Justice, and the Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and the dinner for the Speaker of the House. There are five formal receptions, namely, the reception to the Diplomatic Corps, the Judiciary, the members of Congress, the Interdepartmental and the Army and Navy.

At the dinners nineteen junior naval and military aides and two senior aides, one military and one naval, are in attendance, besides the White House ushers, the head usher being in charge of all the arrangements. Formal invitations are sent out and must be accepted if the individual is in Washington and physically able to be present. After the invitation is accepted, the guests are sent cards which must be presented at the door and the card indicates which entrance is to be used when arriving. The members of the Diplomatic Corps, the members of the Supreme Court, for instance, usually come in at one door, the Cabinet and specially invited guests come in another. The East Entrance is used for the great number of guests. They come upstairs, are greeted by the aides and placed according to rank around the East Room. When every one has arrived, and no one is ever late for a White House function, the President is notified, comes down stairs and proceeds with his chief aides down the Hall to the East Room, the Marine Band begins to play as he arrives and when he reaches the door, the Military Aide announces, "The President and Mrs. whatever her name may be, and then one by one the guests come up and greet their host and hostess. This is occasionally varied by the President making the rounds of the guests.

When everyone has been greeted, the ranking lady goes into dinner with the President, followed by her husband and the president's wife. All the others follow in accordance with precedence. This is all arranged by the State Department and one of the secretaries. The table seating is done by them and seating cards which bear the President's seal, are written by a specially trained man in the Social Bureau.

At the end of the dinner, I usually get up and go around the table and with the ranking lady proceed down the hall to the Green Room where we have our coffee, leaving the gentlemen to have their coffee and cigars with the President before joining us. Sometimes the gentlemen take their partners to the Green Room and then retire to the Red Room for their coffee and smoking.

After a formal dinner when the gentlemen join the ladies in the Green Room, they escort them to seats arranged in the East Room. Additional guests invited in for the music, are greeted by the President and his wife at the East Room door and then whatever entertainment is to be given, takes place. At the close of the entertainment, the President gets up and after meeting and thanking the artists, bids good night to the ranking guests and retires. Sometimes his wife goes with him, but I have made it a practice to remain and bid everyone good night. This is entirely optional, however, with the White House hostess. Some light refreshments are usually served at the end of the entertainment and the people stand around and chat a moment or move into the other rooms before they go home. As a rule by eleven-thirty all is quiet again in the President's House.

At the formal receptions the procedure is a little different. In the old days the President and his wife, followed by the Cabinet descended the main staircase preceded by the guard of honor carrying the flags, trumpets heralding their approach but we have made it a practice to greet the Cabinet in the family dining room and then proceed in the same formation through the State Dining Room into the Red Room and then into the Blue Room where we stand to receive the guests of the evening. The receptions begin promptly at nine o'clock. Special guests are placed in the Green Room and pass by the President first and the others come into the East Room and pass through the Green Room into the Blue Room and past the President. Receptions take from an hour to an hour and twenty minutes and range from 900 to 1500 people. The members of the Cabinet remain in the Red Room and when the guests have greeted the President and his wife, they are greeted by the Cabinet and proceed into the State Dining Room where light refreshments which consist of fruit punch, lemonade and cakes are served. They then wander about and converse until the entire line<sup>2</sup> has passed. During the receptions the Marine Band is stationed in the hall just as it is during the formal dinners and plays during the evening. After everyone has shaken hands with the President and his wife, the Navy Band begins to play in the East Room and dancing continues until about twelve o'clock.

The President retires immediately after greeting his guests and the White House hostess either retires at the same time or returns for further opportunity for conversation with her guests. I walk around the rooms for a short time and then go upstairs.

The President's chief aides do the announcing at the receptions and sometimes when the numbers are great, very amusing incidents occur and every administration has some pet story. We still laugh with the lady who was introduced as Mrs. Rhode Island. She had been given her name and added that she was from Rhode Island!

All the food for these formal entertainments, as well as the daily informal entertainments, is cooked in the White House with things such as cakes and bread occasionally bought from special outside people, but the White House staff carries the entire burden of daily meals and when you consider the number of employees, as well as family and guests that have to be catered for, it is no small task and I am always proud of the management and the efficiency of all those who are responsible for this part of the White House housekeeping.

Last year there were 2,492 people who "broke bread" in the White House with us, and 974,376 people who went through the White House, This will give you some idea of what is done by the ushers and the housekeeper and the staff of the Nation's home.

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.

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<sup>2</sup> The letter “e” is a handwritten interlineation.

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