

INTRODUCTION

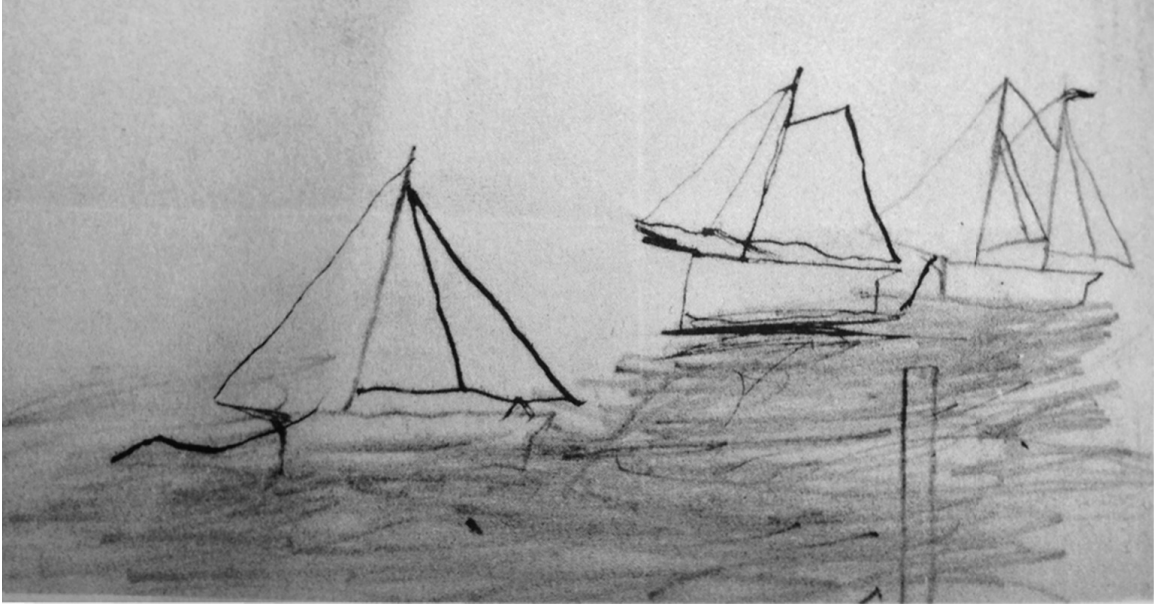
During the Roaring Twenties, a politically ambitious young man who had been crippled by polio bought a houseboat so he could cruise the warm waters of the Florida Keys and try to cure his damaged legs. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was stricken with the disease in 1921, he withdrew from public life. He spent three winters aboard his houseboat, from 1924 to 1926. While on the boat, he kept a log in longhand in a three-ring binder, writing in it almost every day. Sometimes he used black ink, sometimes turquoise, pages full of playfulness.

Grog in midst of glorious sunset
which was almost as poetic in coloring
as Frances' and Missy's nighties

So he documented one jolly evening. Or reporting on a broken motor:

Miami Engine doctor at work
Patient may respond to heroic treatment

A few years ago, I was working on a book about my girlhood polio, a book in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt looms large. Piled on the floor near my desk were four fat navy tomes of his letters. His son Elliott had edited these volumes of his father's personal correspondence in 1949, four years after Roosevelt's death during his fourth term as president. Having FDR's words near me was inspiring and comforting. One day, I picked up one of the books and began trolling around. Buried amidst the letters, I stumbled on Roosevelt's nautical log. His words were captivating. I loved his humor and language—even the repetitive details—and wanted other readers to fall under his spell too. Thus this book.



Roosevelt had always loved boats and water. When he was five, in his first letter to his mother, he enclosed his drawing of sailboats.

One night in August 1921, thirty-four years after he mailed that letter—after he boated, after he fought a forest fire and swam with his children in the Bay of Fundy—he was struck by polio. Roosevelt never walked again.

On August 28, the *New York Times* found it newsworthy to report his illness, though not its exact nature and seriousness.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Better

Franklin D. Roosevelt, former Assistant Secretary of the United States Navy, who had been seriously ill at his Summer home at Campobello, N.B. is recovering slowly. He caught a heavy cold and was threatened with pneumonia. Mrs. Roosevelt and their children are with him.

From then on, FDR tried treatment after treatment in his quest to walk again. Two years later, filled with hopes of healing, he rented a houseboat called the *Weona* and spent a month and a half in the Florida waters, fishing, relaxing, and entertaining guests. From the boat, he wrote his mother, Sara, "This warmth

and exercise is doing lots of good,” and said his visiting guests “are great fun to have on board in this somewhat negligee existence. All wander around in pyjamas, nighties and bathing suits!”¹

For FDR’s health, his wife, Eleanor, felt compelled to visit the boat, but she disliked the blithe atmosphere. “I tried fishing but had no skill and no luck, when we anchored at night and the wind blew, it all seemed eerie and menacing to me.”² She left the *Weona* after a few days.

In the summer of 1923, Roosevelt traveled from his home in New York to vacation with Louis Howe, his close political adviser, at Howe’s cottage on Horseneck Beach in Massachusetts. Missy LeHand, FDR’s assistant, stayed there too, taking care of correspondence. At the beach, Roosevelt tried out new regimens for his legs, working with a well-known neurologist, Dr. William McDonald, who had developed a strenuous course of treatment. FDR jokingly said that if he ever became president, the doctor would be the first visitor to the White House. Occasionally when Howe brought him breakfast, he said, “This is to make you strong. I will see that you become President of the United States.”³

Sometimes Roosevelt went to the dunes in an old bathing suit, found a secluded spot, and crawled on his hands and knees over the hot sand until he was worn out. Back at the cottage, Howe would fix drinks for the two of them. Picture FDR sipping a martini and discussing politics, having just crawled across the beach. He didn’t mind crawling because he could do that himself. What he hated was for others to have to carry him from place to place.

One day that summer, his old college friend John Lawrence stopped by the Howe cottage for a visit. He and his wife had been guests on the *Weona* the winter before. There at Horseneck Beach, the men hatched a plan to buy a houseboat of their own for the coming winter months.

FDR began the search. “What I am looking for is a boat that is fairly low in the water so that I can easily drop overboard and crawl back on deck.”⁴ In the fall, he found “a real bargain” on Long Island in New York. He wrote to Lawrence, “The owner is apparently up against it financially, and must sell quick!”⁵

The two bought the houseboat, named *Roamer*, for \$3,750. Her length overall was 71 feet. She was 19 feet in the beam and drew 3.6 feet. Her hull was about 15 years old and was planked with cypress. She had two 35-horsepower engines.

About renaming the boat, FDR wrote to Lawrence, “It has been suggested that we call her the ‘Larose’ or the ‘Rosela’, both of which are euphonious

and illustrate the new partnership of Lawrence, Roosevelt and Co."⁶ Lawrence replied, "How would you like LAROOCO (Lawrence Roosevelt Co.). The double O and seven letters have usually been typical of good luck in yachts."⁷ And so the *Roamer* became the *Laroooco*.

As the men prepared for their time on the boat, FDR sent Lawrence a list of who should contribute what.⁸

MEMORANDUM
J.S.L. & F.D.R.

1. To be attended to by J.S.L.

Purchase & have shipped to F.D.R.,
49 E. 65th St., N.Y. so as to arrive
prior to November 8th:

Cotton sheets - 48 single for cabin (@2 each)
15 " " crew (\$1.50 ")

Pillow cases to cover 20" x 28" pillows -
36 for cabin (50¢ each)
15 for crew (36¢ ")

Towels - 108 face towels @ 20¢
48 bath " @ 50¢
50 yards dish toweling.

Cretonne - 1 roll for curtains & sofa pillows

Eastern Yacht club private signal - absent
pennant & any old yacht ensign.
(ABOVE PRICES ARE MACY'S)

2. To be attended to by F.D.R.

Silver ware - nickel plated knives, forks
& spoons - steel knives carving
set -

Blankets - 12 pair army blankets.

Bed Pillows - 12 for cabin
5 for crew
12 sofa pillows

Crockery - complete for cabin
Glassware - " " "

Beds - 2 white enamel 7' x 3'
1 bed solid construction 7' x 2½'

Mattress - 2 for 7' x 2½' bed

Missy LeHand, becoming more and more indispensable, was the hostess on the *Larooco*. She had become FDR's private secretary the year before he got polio. A capable, tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed twenty-two-year-old, she was game for fun. At the head of the crew were Robert and Dora Morris, an older married couple from Connecticut, who were paid \$125 per month. Captain Morris sailed the boat, and Mrs. Morris cooked and did the housekeeping. The young mechanic George Dyer tried his best to keep the feeble engines running, as did Myles McNichols, known as Mac. Leroy Jones, FDR's black valet, woke him each morning, bathed him, and dressed him.

Roosevelt had the boat sailed from Long Island to the Florida Keys. From the start, it was unreliable. He reported to Lawrence:

Dear John:

The LAROOCO has last been heard from at Bordentown, N.J.,—i.e. where the Raritan Canal comes out into the Delaware, engines apparently working all right, but the steering cable to the rudder broke twice and Captain Morris had to get a brand new cable as the old one was rotting out. . . . (SHE IS LEAKING!)⁹

For three winters, FDR lived on the *Larooco*, fishing and swimming and sunbathing, entertaining friends, drinking and playing games, but most of all tending to his body so that he might walk again. About heading south to find a cure, he explained to one of his doctors:

You doctors have sure got imaginations! Have any of your people thought of distilling the remains of King Tut-ankh-amen? The serum might put new life into some of our mutual friends. In the meantime, I am going to Florida to let nature take its course—nothing like Old Mother Nature, anyway!¹⁰

Roosevelt had been assistant secretary of the navy under Woodrow Wilson and had run unsuccessfully for vice-president in 1920. In 1921, before he got sick, he became vice-president of the New York office of the Fidelity and Deposit

Company of Maryland, an insurance firm. Post-polio, in the fall of 1924, FDR and Basil O'Connor, a lawyer who had given him legal advice in the early 1920s, opened a law practice in New York City. Although FDR was active—he knew no other way—these years were the most politically withdrawn time of his life. When he was approached to reenter politics, he vowed that when he could walk without crutches, he would.

During this period, the Roosevelts' marriage was shifting. When FDR contracted polio, Eleanor ignored their estrangement, which had come about three years earlier when she learned of her husband's affair with her social secretary, Lucy Mercer. At that time, she offered him a divorce, which he refused, promising not to see Mercer again, but from then on, they never shared a bedroom. When he got sick, she chose to nurse him with undivided devotion, tending to all of his most basic needs.

Both Franklin and Eleanor were driven and passionate. As he withdrew to Florida in hopes of healing himself with warmth and water, she overcame her shyness and turned herself into a public figure, ostensibly to keep the Roosevelt name alive.

The year after FDR bought the houseboat, he helped build a separate home for Eleanor and two of her friends, a couple she met when the three worked for the Women's Division of the New York State Democratic Committee. Nancy Cook was a curly-haired, irreverent, dynamic woman in her thirties, and Marion Dickerman, seven years her junior, was an educator.

One summer day, Franklin and the three women were picnicking by the Fall Kill Creek, two miles from the main Roosevelt house in Hyde Park, New York. The women began to worry aloud that FDR's mother would be closing the house up for the winter and they wouldn't have a place to visit until the following spring.

“But aren't you girls silly?” said Franklin, “This isn't mother's land. I bought this acreage myself. . . . Why shouldn't you three have a cottage here of your own, so you could come and go as you please?”¹¹

So began the building project of the “honeymoon cottage” as FDR called it, which he supervised hands-on. He wrote to his daughter Anna, on July 20, 1925:

I have been awfully busy with Mr. Clinton getting prices on lumber, stone work, plumbing, etc. and yesterday telegraphed a bid to Mother and Nan and Marion on behalf of Clinton and Roosevelt, which, if they take, will save them over \$4,000! Your Pa is some little contractor!¹²

Both husband and wife created cozy, casual, independent living arrangements for themselves. As Eleanor was settling in to the new cottage with Nancy and Marion, FDR was taking up winter residency on the *Larocco* with Missy. Interestingly, Eleanor was close to Missy; she bought her clothes and treated her like a core family member. And FDR was close to Nancy and Marion; he inscribed an old children's book for Marion, *Little Marion's Pilgrimage*:

For My Little Pilgrim, whose Progress is always Upward and Onward, to the Things of Beauty and the Thoughts of Love, and of Light, from her affectionate Uncle Franklin. On the occasion of the opening of the Love Nest on the Val Kill.

January 1, 1926.¹³

Although Franklin and Eleanor spent little time together, they remained in constant communication, always aware of each other's doings. While FDR was trying to come to terms both physically and psychologically with his being crippled, Eleanor was carving out an independent private and public course in navigating the world. They found a way to be apart and together that appeared to suit them both. One can only guess how large the toll of hurt.

Missy reported that often, in spite of the general jolly mood on the boat, "It was noon before he could pull himself out of depression and greet his guests wearing his lighthearted façade."¹⁴ Eleanor made a few short visits to the houseboat and found it distasteful. Many friends came and went, as did two of the older Roosevelt children, James and Elliott, pictured on the next page with the family on Campobello Island the summer before FDR was taken ill.

After FDR's first winter on the houseboat, he was introduced to Warm Springs, a Georgia spa town. After the third winter, he was ready to say goodbye to the boat and plunge into the Warm Springs waters, which he felt were more likely to heal his legs. "The water put me where I am, and the water has to put



me back,”¹⁵ he said. Here his focus widened as he founded a rehabilitation center, working to heal not only his own stricken body but others paralyzed by polio.

To me and to so many who had polio, Roosevelt is a heroic figure. Happening upon his nautical log was especially thrilling. I too love fishing, I too love the water.

What follows is FDR’s *Larooco* log. The entries concentrate on the usual subjects of nautical logs—weather, route, fish caught, broken engines, guests, meals. I’ve interspersed them with notes and illustrations concerning people aboard the boat or events in the world outside the *Larooco*, a world in which FDR would play such a decisive role not too many years later. Scattered throughout are uncaptioned snapshots taken during the *Larooco* cruises. In the original log, these photographs are pasted onto ten pages with almost no identification of people, places, or dates. A complete facsimile of the log follows the afterword.

For the most part, Roosevelt used initials in the entries to indicate someone’s identity, but for the sake of clarity, I’ve substituted the full names wherever

possible. In some entries, in order to make the log more approachable, I have condensed or omitted sentences, changed their order, and laid Roosevelt's words out in the form of poems, but the words are all his own. My purpose was to make the text sonorous as well as draw the reader in. These edited entries contain almost no punctuation. All the entries that contain full punctuation are FDR's words untouched. May the shifting forms increase the log's glow. Welcome aboard, Reader.

