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RIVER  
VALLEY  
REVIEW

*A Journal of Regional Studies*

**MARIST**

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## From the Editors

As we began assembling this issue, another colleague mentioned that Eleanor had once visited his grandparents, where his grandfather had been stationed in Japan. Eleanor mentioned them by name in her June 19, 1953 “My Day” column. “FUKOAKA, Japan...went to the Consul General, Mr. Zurhellen’s house. Mr. and Mrs. Zurhellen very kindly invited us to spend the night and it was a joy to see such a happy American family, four boys and a baby girl, all learning to be good Americans but at the same time all learning to speak Japanese in the most painless way. ...On the way up we had a glimpse of Fuji again, just the top floating in the clouds, and now we are catching up on mail which was awaiting us in Tokyo.”



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*The Hudson River Valley Review* is anxious to consider essays on all aspects of the Hudson Valley—its intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history, its prehistory, architecture, literature, art, and music—as well as essays on the ideas and ideologies of regionalism itself. All articles in *The Hudson River Valley Review* undergo peer analysis.

## Submission of Essays and Other Materials

HRVR prefers that essays and other written materials be submitted as two double-spaced typescripts, generally no more than thirty pages long with endnotes, along with a computer disk with a clear indication of the operating system, the name and version of the word-processing program, and the names of documents on the disk. Illustrations or photographs that are germane to the writing should accompany the hard copy. Otherwise, the submission of visual materials should be cleared with the editors beforehand. Illustrations and photographs are the responsibility of the authors. No materials will be returned unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope is provided. No responsibility is assumed for their loss. An e-mail address should be included whenever possible.

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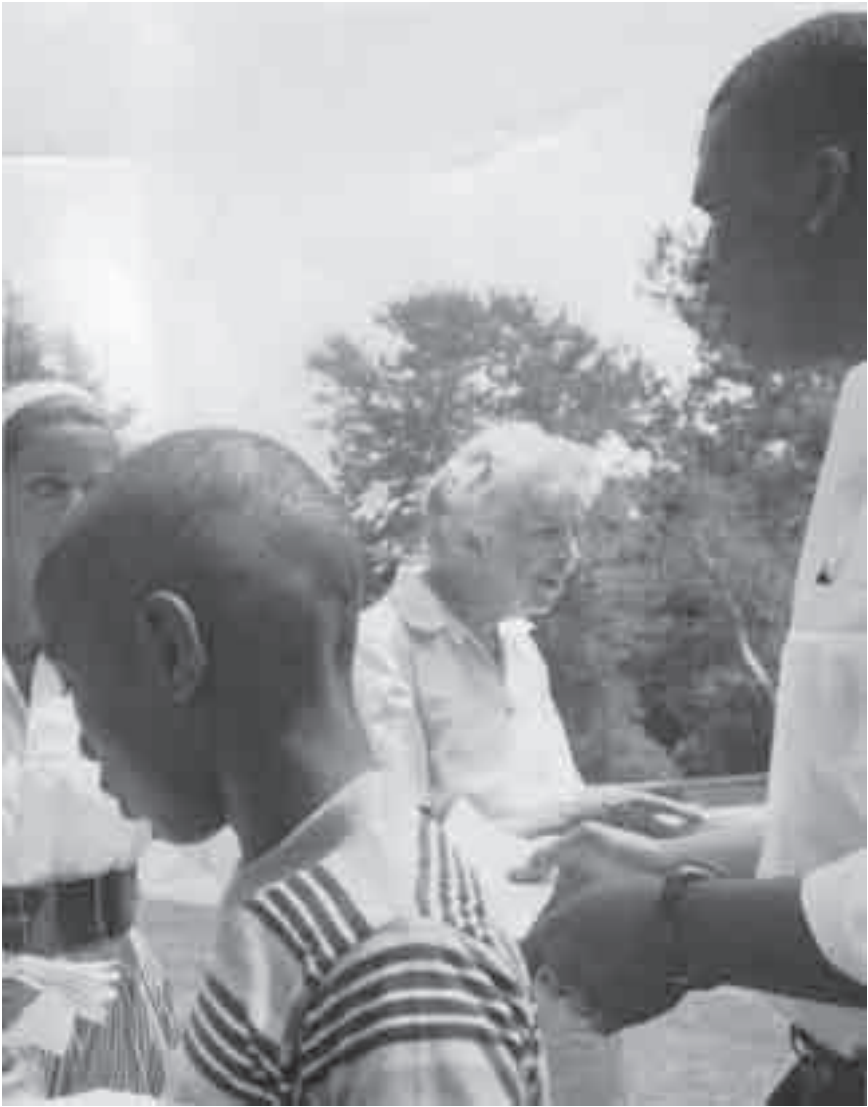
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Eleanor Roosevelt welcoming visitors to Val-Kill.

# Memories and Lessons from Eleanor Roosevelt’s “Kitchen Cabinet” 1931-1970

*Susan P. Curnan*

When I cross the old plank bridge to Val-Kill Cottage and walk on the grounds, I reclaim two decades of social study and childhood memories. I hear the sounds of many voices and see the colorful, diverse images of people at work and play around the landscape. I remember Eleanor Roosevelt, her friends, family, adversaries, colleagues, and “the help” at Val-Kill, a.k.a.: the “Kitchen Cabinet.”

I grew up there in the 1950s and ’60s—a Val-Kill kid for 20 years. Exploring the nooks and crannies and haystacks, and learning lessons of a lifetime. Am I a Roosevelt? No. I am a Curnan, “the littlest Curnan,” as Eleanor Roosevelt would be fond of saying when she complimented me on my “good seat in the saddle,” added me to her Christmas list, read to me on the porch, invited me to lunch, and so much more.

My father, Charlie Curnan, started the Curnan-Roosevelt connection in 1931 when, as he used to say, he “was just a young kid out to make a living.” A Hyde Parker of Irish-Dutch heritage, he was thirteen when he went to work in the greenhouses for FDR’s mother, at the “big house.” At the time, there were two kinds of people in Hyde Park—the very wealthy and those who worked for them on their Hudson River estates.

Well, he did make a living working with and for three generations of Roosevelts, including the President’s mother, FDR, ER, Elliot, and John Roosevelt. Over the course of nearly forty years of association, he worked his way up from tending the gardens to superintending the Val-Kill estate. In the process, he quietly integrated many other Curnans into the Roosevelt family. He arranged



**Charlie Curnan in the gardens at Val-Kill.**

for the employment of his brother “Tubby,” ER’s large, well documented chauffeur, “who never donned a uniform”; his sister Helen, who served as part-time correspondence and travel secretary for ER; his brother Patrick; cousin Woody, who worked in the library; and other Hyde Parkers he recruited to run the kitchens and grounds crew.

Early in my life, he purchased his own corner of the Val-Kill property for his family. Before that, he purchased land from Elliott Roosevelt and built a solid, square house on neighboring Creek Road. And before that, he (and the growing family) lived in and repaired Roosevelt farmhouses—“fixer-uppers”—on all reaches of the property, which at the time spanned six miles from the Hudson River to FDR’s famous Top Cottage.

As I think of my father’s words—“out to make a living”—I also think about words spoken by the Brandeis University rabbi recently. He said it is good to remember that one makes a living by *getting* (material goods to provide for your family), but one makes a life by *giving*.

My story is really about giving—making a life. It’s about a Val-Kill spirit of generosity and adventure. It is about Eleanor Roosevelt, to be sure, and it’s about my parents, because they are inextricably linked.

My family was part of the landscape there—the hidden infrastructure that kept the place going—Eleanor Roosevelt going—and in the process, I inherited what I call an uncommon legacy or sometimes invisible legacy. Unlike what Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *No Ordinary Time*, writes about, I know about ordinary days at Val-Kill—the daily habits (and extraordinary events) that humanize us all.

All of us have been influenced by many people, known and unknown, ordinary and extraordinary people, places, events. Each of us has a story to tell—how we learned certain things, how we came to value others, what shaped our view of the world. Most of these stories go untold, almost unthought. Yet, they find their way out of us, expressed in our choices of home, mate, career, child-rearing patterns. Ultimately, these early influences inform what we do, why we do what we do, and where. They influence what we come to know, think, believe. As ER once wrote, “We all create the person we become by our choices as we go through life... by the time we are adult, we are the sum total of the choices we have made.” I was fortunate—my worldview and values were born and nurtured at Val-Kill. It was a dynamic place where values were caught as much as taught.

Growing up at Val-Kill as I did in the 1950s and ’60s offered me a glimpse into world events (though I hardly knew it at the time) and opened my eyes to a world of possibilities beyond the confines of Hyde Park. Indeed, the exposure and opportunity afforded one (by birth, chance, and choice) influenced the choices I

made and shaped my values.

I learned to swim, shoot, ride, fish, play tennis, and play the piano. It was here that I learned about social class, social kindness, diversity, democracy, politics, and people. Early on, I learned about racism and civil rights, Jews and anti-Semitism, communism and democracy, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, accomplished and adventurous women called lesbians, and the U.N. Human Rights agenda. I also learned to work hard, play hard, and be “useful”; to see patterns; to craft an agenda not only for meetings and greetings but for lunch and dinner gatherings. I learned that simplicity is elegance, casual is comfortable, and conversation is important work. And sadly, I learned a lot about loss during those years, too. Finally, I learned by observing that social change is possible when you know who you are, act on what you know, think or believe is right or wrong even at personal risk, and are open with others that that is what you are doing. In Eleanor Roosevelt, I had a terrific role model close to home.



John Roosevelt and Anne Clark Roosevelt (left and right) flanking ER and Charlie.

## On The Grounds

I begin my story at the end of the story: July 28, 1962. The last party hosted by Eleanor Roosevelt on the grounds at Val-Kill was poolside at the Stone Cottage. My mother told the story best, as recorded in Stella Hershan’s book, *A Woman of Quality*:

“That summer before Mrs. Roosevelt died, she made a big surprise party for Charlie. She was the one who dreamed it up, but her daughter Anna was in on it too, and I, of course, also knew. The only one who was completely unaware of what was going on was Charlie. He even helped preparing the

food for the party. And then, when he appeared, everybody started singing, 'He's a jolly good fellow!' and Charlie sang right along with them and he kept looking around to see for whom all this celebrating was." She laughed and Charlie joined her. "They really caught me by surprise," he said.

"When did you find out that it was for you?" Ms. Hershan asked. And my mother responded, "When they gave him this." And she showed a lovely large silver platter. Engraved on it were these words: "Presented to Charles Curnan in grateful appreciation of continued association with Mrs. James Roosevelt, President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mr. and Mrs. John Roosevelt. 1931-July 28, 1962."

The silver platter itself is a family treasure, as you can imagine, but the words say much about the giver. ER thought of my father as her "associate"—in sharp contrast to the more popular notion of "domestic help." He was her "top man" at Val-Kill, and according to my father's journal, Charlie could do, and did, just about everything around the place. At the party that day, ER took my father's arm and held on to him with one hand, and to her white purse with the other. It was hard to tell if she was holding on to keep him at the party or to steady herself. Either way, she held tight and smiled that Eleanor Roosevelt way that told you she was totally present.

I was thirteen years old that summer, and through these eyes it seemed to be a happy time for Roosevelts and Curnans alike.

Like most summers of my childhood (1955-1963), we went to Campobello the August after the party. Mrs. Roosevelt went at the same time that year and it was special.



The last Val-Kill party hosted by Eleanor Roosevelt.



Charlie and Millie Curnan



Mourners at Eleanor's funeral service.

Just months after that wonderful party and vacation, Eleanor Roosevelt died. Charlie tended to every detail as ER had requested. Behind the scenes, he personally guided every preparation for the funeral and burial. He worked with the funeral home to honor her wishes. He officially



He officially welcomed all presidential entourages and other guests, directed Secret Service agents, personally gathered the pine boughs to cover the casket, and laid her to rest as a pallbearer with his brothers and others.

As it sent shockwaves through the world, Eleanor Roosevelt's death signaled big changes at Val-Kill, for the people and the place. However, although it was the end of her living story, it was not the end of the vivid memories of Val-Kill, which come to me as we celebrate the thirty-second anniversary of saving this American treasure, the sixtieth anniversary year of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 125<sup>th</sup> birthday of Eleanor Roosevelt!



The author in foreground with Roosevelts and Curnans in the service line.

## Picnics

One outstanding memory is about picnics, and there were many at Val-Kill. The Wiltwyck Picnics were my favorites. What a treat to have “city kids” arrive in buses at the gates to Val-Kill. The other kids-in-residence that week—including some of ER’s grandchildren, as well as other family and friends—were expected to help set up, serve, clean up, and entertain. That’s when I learned from ER and my father, “Never ask anyone to do anything you wouldn’t do yourself—and let them know you will and can do most anything!” And, “Never underestimate what young people can do when you put them in charge!” All of us were in it together!

I was my father’s constant companion during these days, and he was hers. On this day, he was Secret Service, chief cook and bottle washer, and property and people manager all in one. And he saw to it that I always got the best jobs on the service line—spooning beans and potato salad to the line of smiling faces—all as curious about us as we were of them. The main course: hot dogs and rolls prepared on the fieldstone fireplace in big vats—the same style hot dogs served to the Queen of England and members of the United Nations at other Val-Kill picnics. Dessert was solid slabs of Sealtest neapolitan ice cream—rainbow slice between two sides of wax paper so it was easy to eat. I don’t think they make that anymore,





Eleanor reading at the annual Wiltwyck Picnic.

and that's a shame!

After lunch, Eleanor Roosevelt would sit on the old weatherbeaten log near the lake and read to the children, often from *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling. Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, the mongoose, and Nagu, the black cobra, never seemed more alive than on the banks of the Val-Kill stream. While riveted to her words, most of us were fidgeting and looking in the tall grass for Nag and Nagaina, hoping beyond hope that the resident ducks would do the good work of the famous mongoose if necessary.

The other great event of the day, to which we all looked forward, was a fabulous steel drum concert. Homemade, hand-painted instruments and homegrown talent—it was amazing.

Each year, there were a few of the older boys whose attention would wander during these festivities. Soon their bodies would follow that wanderlust, and soon after that my father would hear the start of a hot-wired T-bird or see a tractor heading down the road with newly converted farm boys at the wheel. No one was ever seriously hurt, though a few vehicles had to be hauled out of ditches and kids out of the lake. But all in all, it was another successful Roosevelt picnic—one for a good cause.

Until reading my Uncle Tubby's oral history transcript recently, I could only imagine what it was like for people in charge—namely my father. Tubby said about the Wiltwyck boys: "...it was a lot of fun. Mrs. R. loved it, and as for the boys and the help, well, they loved to come and we loved to see them go." Apparently, the help was relieved when ER went happily to bed that night, filled with the sounds of colorful steel drums, reflecting on the good work and good people of the Wiltwyck School—none the wiser about the mischief.

## Inside the Cottage

To some, the phrase "Eleanor Roosevelt's Kitchen Cabinet" may conjure up images of political advisors, chief strategists, and foreign correspondents. To other more literal friends, a picture of someone's kitchen may come to mind. Both apply. The name of this article springs from the notion that kitchens, then and now, in ER's house, yours or mine, often become the center of nurturing, shared confidences and socializing, as well as sustenance. At Val-Kill, it was all of that and more. It was where critical events, life changes, and new ideas were played out—just as in life today. A place where protocol is relaxed, where wooden spoons convey golden rules, where plans are made and great ideas are hatched. As a kid, I spent most of my time on the grounds and inside the cottage.

Entering ER's home still evokes mixed feelings that come with joy, excitement, high adventure, high expectations, and anxiety. It is a big rambling, cozy house—knotty pine, wall hangings of all sorts arranged in random patterns, and an interesting mix of furniture. I know every room and slept in most at one time or another. The house was run by members of my family and people who worked for them, so I was "at home" and free to roam about.



Eleanor at home, at Val-Kill.

If you've been there, you know the house is casual, comfortable, simple and ripe for exploring and discovery. ER's "offices" with bookcases and fireplaces, photos and all manner of worldly collection were found in several places. I have fond memories observing her write with Lorena Hickock at the partners desk in the playhouse (now the Visitor's Center) while I played ping pong or read by the fire, and of playing in her bedroom while she read on the porch or in "Tommy's apartment" with her gifted assistant Maureen Corr or my Aunt Helen assisting with travel and manuscripts.

In other words, ER excelled at the art of integrating work and living. There were no boundaries for a start and end to work or socializing. A "both, and" way of life, in contrast to the "either, or" so common today. The spillover of the 24/7 lifestyle to the Curnan household was a given and became a way of life, almost an ethic—a seamless blend, simply the way one lives, blurring the lines between work and play, and work and learning. For me, "learning by doing" was also a way of life.

Being a kid "at the table," for example, offered many challenges and lessons. Having lunch and dinner with ER and guests in the dining room or on one of the porches was an invitation to practice all your best manners, including proper use of finger bowls (glass finger bowls filled with water and lemon wedges), multiple utensils and glasses (and yes, she used a little bell to call Becky or Marge from the kitchen)—but that was the easy part. The expectations for conversation were also clear and high. I learned from ER that it works best if you always carry at least three conversation topics into any social encounter. "Have an agenda," something about politics, travels, family, books, food. It was scary, but exciting. I read somewhere that in her younger days, ER was advised about using the ABCs to invent topics when your mind goes blank—A for Ants, etc.—but by the time I sat at the



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

table, she no longer needed to calm herself with the ABCs! She was compelling to be with, whether she intended to be or not. I remember a story about a reporter's inquiry. "Does she sit at the head of the table at Val-Kill?" he asked. The reply shot back, "Wherever she sits becomes the head of table." Fact is, she did always sit at the head—the chair on the north side facing south, whether in the dining room or on the porch.

When I think of food stories from Val-Kill days, I often think of Khrushchev. And when I think of Khrushchev, I think first of his visit to Val-Kill in August 1959, and then I think of borscht. That strange, great beet-red, beet soup served cold with a dollop of sour cream. My father made it for the first time for his visit! The perfect high-stakes recipe for cold soup to accompany high-stakes discussions of the Cold War! It was an exciting, fast-paced kind of scary day—the preparations were elaborate and intense behind the scenes. I was by my father's side as he briefed Secret Service agents and state troopers at one moment and instructed kitchen staff and put finishing touches on the borscht the next. A trip to the Presidential Library to ensure security and protocol was intact for the mansion tour and rose garden visit, and the flowers were perfect for laying at FDR's gravesite. Then on to the press corps, including Walter Cronkite, Daniel Schorr, Howard K. Smith, Charles Kuralt, Sam Jaffe, Harry Reasoner, and others.

It was a paparazzi occasion and we were all a little surprised when ER asked to have me in the short receiving line with her. The moment sticks with me like it was yesterday. I was nervous and awkward as I was "escorted" to the front line and had a sense this was more than a simple request...the event was captured by the press, photographers, and film makers who seized the moment to show Khrushchev's "Pause for Affection." The story was subsequently featured in "Images of Peace—a Television Chronicle of a Turning Point in History" (CBS Television Network, 1960). On this occasion, the reporters wrote, "For once, Nikita Khrushchev seems dominated. Mrs. Roosevelt has him by the arm and is obviously in charge."

Unfortunately, the borscht moment didn't go nearly as well. Time was short, duty at the U.N. called. The delegation made a quick pass through the kitchen and dining room, picked up a dinner roll, and moved out to the limos. ER was furious about the hasty visit and we all ate borscht for weeks!

From Val-Kill, the entourage moved down the Hudson River to the U.N.—a well-known visit—and on to Hollywood to meet with Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Marilyn Monroe, Shirley MacLaine, and others.

Only later, reading "Images of Peace," did I understand the gigantic impact of this visit. Indeed, in Khrushchev's final statement made on American soil, only days after the Val-Kill visit, he said:

We were here at the kind invitation of President Eisenhower. We visited various cities in your country from the Atlantic to the Pacific. We had many pleasant meetings and talks with Americans, with the business people of America, with political and public men. We met your workers, farmers and intellectuals. As a result of the useful talks we had with President Eisenhower, we came to an agreement that all outstanding international issues should be settled not through the use of force but by peaceful means and through negotiations. When we come home we shall tell the Soviet people of our impressions, of the meetings and talks we had on American soil. The Soviet people as a whole seek to live in peace. They want there to be good friendly relations between our two great nations. We are convinced that the American people also desire peace. There are many outstanding issues between us. But let us rather not turn to the past but look to the future and do all we can for that future. Let us join efforts to consolidate peace and to improve understanding between all the nations of the world.

To be sure, it was a special time and place. As someone once said, “When history is being made, and I am present, I miss the significance.” That was surely true for me despite the fact that my father always told me, “Don’t forget where you came from.” Crossing the bridge that my father built transports me back to that place where I came from. Where values were lived and where ideas were debated with reason and passion.

Historians Blanche Wiesen Cook and Allida Black describe Val-Kill as the “Window into ER’s infinite courage and compassion. Sturdy, comfortable, accessible, and enduring, Val-Kill Cottage is the personal symbol of ER’s life. Part home, part refuge, part retreat, part political laboratory, Val-Kill was the space held closest to her heart.” And to that I would add—a place where she blurred the lines between work and play, and between family, friends, and staff. And it is a place I call home, too.

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# The Hudson River Valley Institute

The Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College is the academic arm of the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. Its mission is to study and to promote the Hudson River Valley and to provide educational resources for heritage tourists, scholars, elementary school educators, environmental organizations, the business community, and the general public. Its many projects include publication of the *Hudson River Valley Review* and the management of a dynamic digital library and leading regional portal site.

## Patriots' Society

Help tell the story of the Hudson River Valley's rich history and culture by joining **The Patriots' Society** and supporting the exciting work of the **Hudson River Valley Institute** at Marist College. Contributions such as yours ensure that the scholarly research, electronic archive, public programming and educational initiatives of the Hudson River Valley Institute are carried on for generations to come. **The Patriots' Society** is the Hudson River Valley Institute's initiative to obtain philanthropic support from individuals, businesses and organizations committed to promoting our unique National Heritage Area to the country and the world. Please join us today in supporting this important work.

Each new contributor to **The Patriots' Society** will receive the following, as well as the specific gifts outlined below:

- **Monthly Electronic Newsletter**
- **Specially-commissioned poster by renowned Hudson Valley artist Don Nice**
- **Invitation to HRVI events**

I wish to support **The Patriots' Society of the Hudson River Valley Institute** with the following contribution:

- \$100 **Militia** (includes 1 issue of *The Hudson River Valley Review*)
- \$250 **Minute Man** (includes 1-Year Subscription to *The HRVR* and choice of Thomas Wermuth's *Rip Van Winkle's Neighbors* or James Johnson's *Militiamen, Rangers, and Redcoats*) Please circle choice.
- \$500 **Patriot** (Includes same as above and a 2-Year Subscription to *The HRVR*.)
- \$1,000 **Sybil Ludington Sponsor**  
(Includes all above with a 3-year subscription to *The HRVR*)
- \$2,500 **Governor Clinton Patron**  
(Includes all above with a 5-year subscription to *The HRVR*)
- \$5,000 **General Washington's Circle** (Includes all above with 5-year subscription to *The HRVR* and a copy of Myra Armstead's *Mighty Change, Tall Within: Black Identity in the Hudson Valley*)
- Enclosed is my check, made payable to Marist College/HRVI.
- Please charge my credit card: # \_\_\_\_\_  
Expiration Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_
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Please fill out your contact information on the other side of this form.