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"Preliminary Report on Sagamore Hill, Oyster Bay, Long Island"

In 3 copies

H. Niles

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON
SAGAMORE HILL, OYSTER BAY,
LONG ISLAND

Sagamore Hill, private home of Theodore Roosevelt from 1887 to his death in 1919, derives significant historical value from its occupancy by this distinguished President, whose outstanding position in American history is already secure. Both as a national and an international figure, Theodore Roosevelt possessed an eminence attained by but few Presidents. As his private residence during the period of his public life, as the scene of many conferences that markedly affected the course of American history, and as the home most intimately associated with his private life, Sagamore Hill is the Roosevelt residence that will live longest in public memory of this great American.

Under Roosevelt's leadership the "progressive" or "radical" groups attained a status of power such as they had not possessed since the War Between the States. As a result, they wrote on the statute books a series of laws embodying many of their social and economic aspirations. The movement for the conservation of natural resources received a greater impetus than ever before. Laws were passed increasing the authority of the Government to withdraw public lands containing valuable natural resources from sale and to impose restrictions on the exploitation of such lands. The reclamation of semi-arid lands was likewise first undertaken on a large scale by the Federal

Government. Roosevelt also set aside many more forest reserves than had all the previous Presidents, and played a leading role in arousing the public to the need for conservation. Under his administration the regulation of interstate commerce was greatly strengthened and abuses connected with it, such as rebates, were vigorously attacked. Consumers of food and drugs were protected against adulteration and misbranding. Above all, however, Roosevelt was important in national affairs because he effectively focused attention on political, social, and economic problems and so helped enhance the pressure in both major parties for "progressive" Federal and State legislation. Direct primaries, the initiative, referendum, and recall were among the devices to enhance popular control of public officials that stemmed from the "progressive" movement. It was responsible, too, for workmen's compensation acts, minimum wage and hours laws, and large volumes of other social legislation, as well as for a series of laws regulating business enterprises.

In foreign affairs, Roosevelt threw the weight of the United States more freely into the consideration of international matters than had any of his predecessors. He supported Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and his intervention was instrumental in bringing about the peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which agreed upon a treaty of peace. He helped persuade England and France to attend the Algeciras Conference which peacefully ended the Moroccan crisis of 1905-1906, and he made the United States a signatory to the

resulting agreement with Germany. Roosevelt's decisive intervention in the Panama Revolution of 1903 hastened the completion of the Panama Canal by making possible a speedy agreement with the new and independent Republic of Panama authorizing its construction.

It was in 1887, following his return from Europe, where he had married his second wife, Edith Kermit Carow, that Roosevelt began the long residence at Sagamore Hill that was not to terminate until his death. Two years before this, he had purchased the estate and begun the erection of Sagamore Hill on a wheat field at the top of a hill overlooking Oyster Bay and Long Island Sound. It was of the type usually called Victorian today. Even Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., admits in "All In the Family," that he "supposes" it is, as people have told him,¹ "ugly" on the exterior.² The house as it stands today is somewhat larger than it was originally, as wings and rooms were added from time to time to meet the needs of a growing family and its expanding possessions. "It never was and never will be," writes Theodore, Jr., "entirely in repair. There are always boards missing in the lattice under the piazza and there is many a place where a lick of paint would not come amiss."³ But, as he adds, "It still is Sagamore."

Roosevelt was not coming to a place new and strange to him when he brought his bride to Sagamore. His grandfather had made his summer home at Oyster Bay and his father had rented Tranquility there in 1874. Roosevelt and his brothers and sisters had passed many happy summer days there in the years of their youth, and he developed an affection

4

for Oyster Bay that was to be life-long.

His estate comprised many acres of beautiful hill and hollow country. Here, the house stood on the summit of a hill, "separated by fields and belts of woodland from all other houses." In Theodore Roosevelt's own words, "We see the sun go down beyond long reaches of land and of water. Many birds dwell in the trees round the house or in the pastures and the woods near by, and of course in winter gulls, loons, and wild fowl frequent the waters of the bay and the Sound."⁵ In such surroundings dear to a lover of nature like Roosevelt, his children were reared. Here he taught his sons to ride their horses and sail their boats on the Cove and the Sound, to recognize birds, animals, trees, and flowers. Here, when he was at home, he went on long hikes with his children, the rule for these hikes being that no natural impediment should cause them to detour or to stop.

"After all," wrote Roosevelt in 1906, "fond as I am of the White House and much though I have appreciated these years in it, there isn't any place in the world like home--like Sagamore Hill, where things are our own, with our own associations, where it is real country."⁶

Here family heirlooms dating back to great-grandfather Roosevelt's days on Fourteenth Street stood side by side with Victorian furniture. Through the center of the house ran a fair-sized hall in which horns and heads of animals, trophies of Roosevelt's hunting trips in North and South America and Africa, were hung. Opening off

from the hall were the library, Mrs. Roosevelt's drawing room, the dining room, and the North Room. "Shelves bulging with books, game head and pictures line their walls. Skins and rugs alternate on their floors", writes Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. "The handsomest part of the house", he adds, "is the North Room", which was built while his father was President. From it hang the flags carried by Roosevelt during the War with Spain and his Presidential standard. In every part of the room are gifts presented to Roosevelt from all parts of the world — a suit of miniature Japanese armor, gift of Admiral Togo, naval hero of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, photographs of Roosevelt and Kaiser William II at the German army maneuvers in 1910, and many other interesting items.

Upstairs "around a dark hall hung with family portraits" are the bedrooms. "They are comfortable", according to Theodore, Jr., "but any decorator would be horrified by them — threadbare Brussels carpets and steel engravings in the best mid-Victorian manner".⁸ The east end of the second floor was set aside for Roosevelt's growing children in their youth. On the top floor was the Gun Room, so-called because there was kept the arsenal ranging from children's toy pistols to the formidable weapons of Roosevelt's African hunting trips.

When he was at home, Roosevelt chopped trees in the woodland section of his estate, rode his horses, rowed in the Cove, played with his children, and at night read aloud to the assembled family. Breakfast was a sacred function at which all members of the household were supposed

to be present.

After his return to the United States in 1910 from his trip abroad, Roosevelt wrote to William Allen White a letter revealing his deep affection for Sagamore. "Mrs. Roosevelt and I", he told White, "have been out here in our own home, with our books and pictures and bronzes, and big wood fires and horses to ride, and the knowledge that our children are doing well. I do not think that I have had such a pleasant five weeks for a great many years."⁵ Here Roosevelt composed most of his voluminous writings from the Winning of the West which he began in 1887 on taking up his residence here to his autobiography. And it was here that Roosevelt came to spend the Christmas season in 1918, leaving a sick bed in a New York City hospital in order to be with his family. Here, a few weeks later, he died.

It was at Sagamore Hill that some of the momentous conferences were held that resulted in Roosevelt's decision to become a candidate against Taft for the presidential nomination in 1912. Here, also, were innumerable conferences about the Progressive Party that was formed following Taft's victory, and then, in the years of Wilson's administration, about the issue of "preparedness" and American participation in World War I, both of which Roosevelt zealously favored. To enumerate these meetings and to tell of their frequently historical decisions would take a book.

Since 1919 Mrs. Roosevelt has continued to occupy Sagamore Hill. She is now advanced in years, and the question has arisen of the future

of historic Sagamore Hill. The Roosevelt Memorial Association, through its Secretary, Mr. Hermann Hagedorn, has suggested that the estate be presented to the United States. The trustees of the Association are ascertaining all the facts available regarding the probable price, and the inclusion of furniture and memorabilia. Before they proceed further in this matter, however, they wish official assurance that the Government would maintain it as a national shrine. Mr. Hagedorn has seen Secretary Ickes concerning the matter and he has been sympathetic to the proposal.

Of all sites associated with Theodore Roosevelt, none can compare in interest or significance with Sagamore Hill. The Roosevelt House at 28 East 20th Street, New York City, the site of his birthplace, has been restored by the Woman's Roosevelt Memorial Association and is maintained jointly by this body and the Roosevelt Memorial Association. Although an interesting Victorian structure, it cannot compare in importance with Sagamore Hill, for there Roosevelt lived in the mature years of his fame and it will forever be connected with his name.

FOOTNOTES

1. William Roscoe Thayer, Theodore Roosevelt (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1919), 72, 255; Theodore Roosevelt, All in the Family (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1929), 16.
2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 6.
4. Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, My Brother Theodore Roosevelt (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1932), 89.
5. Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., Roosevelt Cyclopedia, 349.
6. Ibid., 350.
7. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., All in the Family, 7-8.
8. Ibid., 10.
9. Joseph Bucklin Bishop, Theodore Roosevelt and His Times (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1920) II, 309.