

Karen Chase. *FDR on his Houseboat, 1924-1926: The Larooco Log.* Albany: Excelsior Editions, 2016. 213 pp. \$19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-6227-1.

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

In 1921 Franklin D. Roosevelt's life changed forever when he contracted polio and lost the use of his legs. Despite the long odds against full recovery, FDR remained determined to regain his health and continue his public life and political career. Like generations of people before him, he looked southward to sunny Florida as an escape from harsh winter weather and a place to find healthy therapy. After experimenting with a rental craft in 1923, he and a friend bought their own houseboat for extended cruises in South Florida waters. Roosevelt opted to keep a log of these winter trips, and it now appears in Karen Chase's edition titled *FDR on His Houseboat: The Larooco Log, 1924-1926*. This slender volume opens an interesting window into a little-known period in FDR's full life.

Roosevelt and partner John Lawrence paid some \$4,000 for a seventy-one-foot vessel they renamed the *Larooco* (after Lawrence, Roosevelt, and Company). It required a crew of four to maintain the aged craft, and FDR often mentioned engine and other nautical problems in his log entries. The *Larooco* became a frequent guest at the repair yards in Miami and Key West, but passengers and crew took it all in stride. Despite delays, the boat managed to take its guests on what must have been magical voyages among the Florida Keys at a time when they were still a very isolated

group of islands. Ironically, Franklin's wife Eleanor was an infrequent guest aboard for these trips, but sons James and Elliot sailed and fished with their father there.

Why was Eleanor Roosevelt not a prominent member of the *Larooco* set? She clearly did not warm to the thought of extended fishing trips with her now estranged husband and his companions. In the midst of creating her own separate life and friends, the last thing she wanted was to be stuck on a houseboat in Florida for months at a time. Finally, she may have been uncomfortable with the fact that Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, FDR's private secretary, served as the hostess aboard the *Larooco* and remained aboard for weeks at a time. Her cabin was next to Roosevelt's and they shared a bathroom. Neither ever informed his mother Sara about Missy being on the boat with Franklin, "as she has more peace of mind when she doesn't know things" (p. 29).

Sara Delano Roosevelt, the powerful matriarch of the clan, would have cringed at the casual lifestyle about her son's houseboat. Fishing and swimming meant very relaxed tropical clothing and swimming suits without the proper chaperones. Alcohol flowed on the *Larooco* in the face of Prohibition, and FDR would never pass on the opportunity for cocktails at the end of the day. Fortunately, the isolation of the Florida Keys during the

Roaring Twenties provided plenty of seclusion for the *Larooco* and its passengers. They were able to enjoy a cruising arraignment that might have raised a few eyebrows and damaged FDR's public reputation.

The *Larooco*'s sailings at times combined political business with the pleasures of the Florida tropics. When passing by Miami Roosevelt met with James M. Cox, the top of the failed 1920 Democratic national ticket that featured FDR as its vice presidential nominee. While still anchored there he visited with the legendary William Jennings Bryan, who now lived in South Florida and helped market real estate during the great boom of the 1920s. In February 1926, Lady Cynthia Mosley and her husband Oswald joined the party for a few weeks of swimming and fishing under the sun. In time, Franklin Roosevelt's political views drastically diverged from those of Oswald Mosley, who by the 1930s had become the founder of the Union of British Fascists and an ardent supporter of Hitler and Nazi Germany. To all observers, Roosevelt projected an image from the deck of his boat of a healthy man with the promise of a political future. No surviving photograph taken on the *Larooco* shows otherwise.

The log goes on in brief notations to describe FDR's efforts to rehabilitate his legs from the ravages of polio. In remote spots he would be lowered into the warm salt water, whose buoyancy allowed him to stand. At other times, he would crawl though the sand in an attempt to build up his up body strength. Such activities did not come without risk for a physically impaired man. On February 11, 1925, Roosevelt fell during a transfer from a launch to the houseboat, and painfully tore a knee ligament that required bed rest and a leg brace. By the 1926 trip, FDR realized that while great fun, wintering in Florida waters simply was not enough for the sort of rehabilitation he desired. Some other source of therapeutic waters had be found for further exercise and treatments.

By later February, 1926 an answer appeared on the horizon while the *Larooco* swung at anchor in Key West. On the 24th, Roosevelt chatted on deck with Charles S. Peabody and William Hart about the possibility of purchasing Warm Springs up in Georgia, with its potentially healing water pools. When the third and final winter cruise ended in late March, he left his boat in a Miami yacht basin and took a northbound train for Warm Springs. The *Larooco* went on to become a victim of the deadly 1926 hurricane's storm surge, and ended up sold for scrap. Franklin Roosevelt did learn the old boater's axiom that that best days of vessel ownership are the day it's purchased and the day it's sold!

An interesting feature of *FDR on His Houseboat* is the descriptions of the Florida coast in the 1920s and the very abundant fish FDR and his friends harvested. A twenty-first-century reader might scan the entries and wonder about things like fishing seasons and catch limits that did not exist in that era. Moreover, at one point he even considered joining the speculation frenzy in real estate by buying a few acres himself. In the end, Franklin Roosevelt was destined to come back to Florida in 1933, where he barely escaped death at the hands of an assassin in Miami.

FDR on His Houseboat: The Larooco Log is entertaining to read and shows us an FDR fighting to regain and reshape his life in the face of disease. It is illustrated with several photographs taken during the three trips, although many others are of famous contemporaries. The editor includes these to place the voyages into some historical context. However, readers might wonder why the birthdate of Marlon Brando or the release of Coco Chanel's first "little black dress" in Paris are noted in connection with Franklin D. Roosevelt, or why the dust jacket of the book shows a smiling FDR swimming in Warm Springs and not in Florida waters. These quibbles aside, this book remains an interesting account of one interlude during his amazing life and times.

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