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Eleanor Roosevelt Honored in Hometown Today

Eleanor Roosevelt was born and died in New York City, and spent big intervals of her life here. Today, she comes home -- as a statue in Riverside Park.

History's longest-serving First Lady returns to a city where she was a rich if exceedingly uncomfortable debutante, a tireless worker for social causes, a newspaper columnist and a delegate to the United Nations. She comes to a place where she was so revered cab drivers would ask her to sit in the front seat so they could better converse.

It was here she fought Tammany Hall, the Catholic Church on aid to parochial schools, and the sweatshops on the Lower East Side. There are still people who remember seeing Mrs. Roosevelt run for a bus, ride a horse in Central Park or dance elegantly.

"She always said, 'Hello, hello,' " said Maureen Corr, her last secretary. "One was never enough."

Lately, Mrs. Roosevelt has been most in the news as a result of conversations the First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, says she has with her as an exercise in dealing with First Lady pressures. Mrs. Clinton plans to be on hand for the 1 P.M. ceremony at Riverside Drive and 72d Street to dedicate the statue, which is the first of an American woman ever commissioned for a New York City park.

There has also been controversy over several new biographies reporting evidence that Mrs. Roosevelt may have had lesbian relationships, sparking new interest in her.

But for many New Yorkers, this is pretty much irrelevant. For them, Mrs. Roosevelt represents an untarnished heroine in the fight to house and feed the needy and make the world more civilized. Perhaps for

everyone except Mrs. Clinton, it is hard to imagine the "I hate Eleanor" buttons that were the rage among Republicans 60 years ago.
"Young people seem to know nothing about history, but they know Eleanor Roosevelt," said Blanche Cook, a history professor at John Jay College, whose research in "Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume I" has fueled the debate about the former First Lady's sexual proclivities.
"Everywhere I go, people are galvanized and energized by her."
The fact, though, is that many do not even know who she was. A boy of high school age who would identify himself only as Waldo said he had heard the name but could not quite place her as he wandered by the statue the other day.
But others clearly know -- and care deeply. When the statue has been uncovered for last-minute polishing, people have stopped to take a look. Some have smiled, some have cried, some have stared through the years at a ceaseless inspiration. An older woman looked and looked, and said she wished she could have a long talk with her. Jenny Feiffer, a writer who brought her two young daughters to see "an incredible role model," said, "She takes on more and more substance the more time goes by."
The statue itself depicts a bronze Mrs. Roosevelt leaning contemplatively against a granite rock. The oak-shaded site is near the spot in Riverside Park where she took her son, the late Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., to see the shantytowns in which people lived during the Depression.
"She's going to last forever as a symbol of the Democratic Party caring about the less privileged," said June Bingham, who has written a play, "Eleanor and Alice," about Mrs. Roosevelt's tense relationship with Alice Longworth, Theodore Roosevelt's acid-tongued daughter, that is being presented at the New-York Historical Society tomorrow.
The iron loyalty of Mrs. Roosevelt's disciples is clear at the historical society, where an exhibit covering her years in New York before her husband became President in 1933 is on display. The picture frames are the simple dime-store ones she preferred, and unfinished knitting is laid about, giving the impression she just left the room. Older women wait patiently in line to write comments in a book.
A typical inscription: "I hope to bring my granddaughter here so she can learn more about being a fine woman from the best woman ever."

Some suggest such spontaneous emotion contrasts with their impression that Mrs. Roosevelt has never been a major heroine of feminists. "It's always been strange to me that the women's movement didn't adopt her more enthusiastically," said Richard Kaplan, who made a 1966 Academy Award-winning documentary, "The Eleanor Roosevelt Story."

Mrs. Roosevelt engaged in hard-ball politics and played the game well. Fred Siegel, a political scientist at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Sciences, credits her with being the biggest force in the reformers' victory over Tammany Hall in the early 1960's. "Eleanor Roosevelt carried enormous emotional prestige as a symbol," he said. Indeed, former Mayor Edward I. Koch, one of the reformers, regards her endorsement in his unsuccessful 1962 race for the State Assembly as one of his proudest badges. "Her imprimatur was the most important imprimatur in America," he said in an interview.

The monument's backers say that it is the first public statue in the nation devoted to a President's wife. "I still have to keep pinching myself to believe it's really happening," said Franklin D. Roosevelt 3d, co-chairman of the monument committee.

The idea was born in March 1986 as Herbert Zohn, a retired art dealer and the other co-chairman, was walking along Riverside Drive near 72d Street where he lives. That part of the park was in shabby condition, and he thought it would be a wonderful idea to refurbish it with a statue of Mrs. Roosevelt, whom he had long admired, as its centerpiece.

It took 10 years, but the state ultimately paid for removing an unused entrance to the Henry Hudson Parkway (itself a major New Deal public work), the city did landscaping and other improvements and more than 2,000 donors gave money for the statue. The total cost was $1.3 million.

The statue itself proved more troublesome than the park. It took four years instead of the 18 months expected, and plans for the dedication were repeatedly postponed. Part of the reason was that the sculptor, Penelope Jencks, who was chosen in a national competition, was determined to do everything just so.

The first step was finding the rock for Mrs. Roosevelt to lean on, a key feature of Ms. Jencks's award-winning design. That took months before she realized she would have to create the shape of the rock herself. Then, she fought to get the proportions of the body right, doing copious geometrical calculations. Solutions came more easily when she found the perfect model, at least for the upper body. (Other models were used for other parts.) It was Phoebe Roosevelt, Mrs. Roosevelt's great-granddaughter, who is 5 feet 11 inches tall, an inch shorter that Mrs. Roosevelt.

"I felt like I was being a wonderful tool for a certain part of her body," said Ms. Roosevelt, a second-year student at Fordham University School of Law. "It's my slouch."

To be sure, some who knew Mrs. Roosevelt say she sometimes fell short of saintliness. Henry Morgenthau 3d, a son of Franklin Roosevelt's Treasury Secretary and a producer of two television programs featuring Mrs. Roosevelt, recalls a letter Eleanor wrote to her mother-in-law, Sarah Delano Roosevelt, mentioning how terrible it must be for her son -- and her own new husband -- to have to sit with Jews in classes at Columbia Law School.

Mr. Morgenthau goes on to ascribe this to the attitudes prevailing among the upper class in which she grew up, pointing out that Mrs. Roosevelt later quit a club because it would not admit his own Jewish mother. "The important thing was not where she came from, but how she grew," he said.

But even as she grew into an international figure due to her campaign for universal human rights, Eleanor Roosevelt's principal memorial is surely the individuals, mostly complete strangers, she befriended. The stories are legion. One concerns Ray Lamontagne, 62, who helped found the Peace Corps, among other accomplishments. As a senior at Yale in 1957, Mr. Lamontague was offered a big contract to play for the Baltimore Orioles organization. Instead, he went to China to teach. Mrs. Roosevelt was fascinated how a young man could so easily give up the usual American Dream. Her secretary called the young man, and asked if he would like to meet Mrs. Roosevelt. The result was a weekend invitation to Val-Kill, her cottage at Hyde Park. His first surprise was that there were no servants and that she personally went to the linen closet and made his bed. The next day, she asked if Mr. Lamontagne would mind her inviting another visitor. He said fine.

Soon, George E. Jessel, the comedian, a favorite of Franklin Roosevelt, arrived with two tall showgirls. "We laughed and laughed," he said. "And she didn't condescend to the showgirls."

As a result of such friendliness to people of all kinds, Mrs. Roosevelt could hardly walk down a New York street without people running up to thank her for some favor. Edna Gurewitsch, who with her husband shared a house with Mrs. Roosevelt during the last three years of her life, said Mrs. Roosevelt would usually just keep walking. At first, she thought she was hard of hearing but then realized it was something else.

"She really didn't care about thank you's at all," Mrs. Gurewitsch said. "She only cared about what had to be done now."

The statue of Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) has no pedestal.