

Public Arrives to Ponder, Play at FDR Memorial; Thousands Visit on First Unceremonious Day

Argetsinger, Amy. The Washington Post: Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C] 04 May 1997

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Scampering through the crowd at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial yesterday, the three girls ran up to caress the bronze likeness of the most famous first dog in White House history.

They were with thousands of visitors who turned out yesterday to see the new FDR Memorial on its first day as just another landmark in Washington's stately playground of monuments. With the formality of Friday's opening ceremony completed, the granite promenade on the banks of the Tidal Basin became a place to stroll, to play, to rest up and enjoy the parade of tourists.

They sent coins rippling through the eerily still waters of the pond marking Roosevelt's death. They hung their jackets on the bronze statues of men in a Depression bread line and posed for jaunty photos.

FULL TEXT

As soon as they saw Fala, the Dietzek sisters of Long Island just had to pet him.

Scampering through the crowd at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial yesterday, the three girls ran up to caress the bronze likeness of the most famous first dog in White House history.

"Is this the dog that died?" asked Danielle, 6. Older sisters Alison and Elizabeth glanced at her, horrified. "Don't stick your finger in his nose!" they cried.

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National Park Service officials declined to offer a crowd estimate yesterday because they have not perfected a method for counting visitors to the site.

In keeping with the designers' intent to create an "interactive" environment, visitors made themselves at home -- and made themselves a part of the place.

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They climbed the jumble of granite blocks that symbolize the chaos of the second World War. They poked their

noses into the bush of pale orange Franklin Delano Roosevelt roses -- no scent, but pretty just the same.

Most first-day visitors dutifully walked from start to finish of the path that chronicles Roosevelt's 12 years in office. As Iva Lou Baldwin, 67, of Provo, Utah, rounded a corner into a meditative garden and saw the expanse before her, she gasped.

"There's more?" she exclaimed. Oh, yes. At that point, she was only midway through Roosevelt's second term. "We think it's quite a bit for one president," joked her husband, Richard, also 67.

"It could have been shared by a few presidents," Iva Lou Baldwin added.

Others enjoyed the walk, with its fountains and statues symbolizing the Great Depression and World War II.

"It's a good way to explain about his life," Moish Peltz, 11, of Miami, said thoughtfully, as he perused the granite steps inscribed with dates of major events in Roosevelt's life. "They have a lot of information."

At the monument's "Grand Finale" waterfall, Kimberly Meyer stepped hesitantly onto the flat rocks that led into the center of the fountain. Her friend John Tyler followed.

"I didn't dare do it at first," said Tyler, 44, of Alexandria, "but they practically invite you!"

Meyer, 28, also of Alexandria, found the splash of the fountains a particularly moving reminder of the disabled president's later years. "He spent so much time in the bath, in the warm water for healing," she said.

At the 9-foot statue of Roosevelt that is the centerpiece of the monument, Lanny McBroom got up close and personal with the late president, peeking under his bronze arm, crouching down to look behind his chair, wiping away the rainwater on the hem of his cape to read the sculptor's signature.

"There has been so much written about how he's not shown sitting in a wheelchair," said McBroom, 37, of Capitol Hill. "But back there," he said, pointing at the tiny wheels on the base of the president's chair, "there are the casters. It's kind of a paradox."

A bottleneck of tourists formed in the Depression pavilion, as visitors took turns posing for pictures with the life size statues of five men waiting in line for free bread.

But just off to the left, the haunting figures of a haggard rural couple -- a man standing next to his seated wife -- commanded more respect.

David Simpkins and Dan Ferry, 28-year-old tourists from Philadelphia, joked briefly about sitting on the woman's lap. They decided, however, to let some future visitors make that irreverent move first.

"It's too soon," Simpkins said.

Illustration

PHOTO ,James M. Thresher CAPTION: Visitors make their way through the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, which chronicles the president's 12 years in office and major events in his life.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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