

... MEMOIRS OF FDR'S CLOSEST COMPANION'

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July 3, 1996

Like many others, some of whom have written recently in the argument over the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial, I always had felt that FDR's battle against polio in 1921 -- when he was 39 years of age -- was the defining moment of his life, the crisis that made him the man history remembers.

But it wasn't quite so. The story told in the book "Closest Companion" -- especially when considered together with Doris Kearns Goodwin's splendid "No Ordinary Time" -- establishes beyond doubt that FDR's life, as much as that of his wife, Eleanor, was deeply shaped by the fallout from his pre-polio dalliance with Mrs. Roosevelt's young social secretary, Lucy Mercer. That episode marked the end of the usual intimacy and affection between man and wife for the Roosevelts and created a void in FDR's life that many loving women tried to fill over the years.

"Closest Companion," edited and annotated by historian Geoffrey C. Ward, is the story of Margaret Suckley (pronounced Sook-ly), a sixth cousin of FDR 10 years his junior. When "Daisy," as she was known, died in 1991 at the age of 99, it became known that she had kept a lengthy diary and had saved handwritten letters Franklin Roosevelt had written her. What they tell us is that Daisy, who never married, spent a vast amount of time with the president from his first inauguration in 1933 until the day she saw him die in 1945. Because Eleanor was so often "off to her train somewhere," as Daisy recorded, Suckley became a substitute hostess, even the sole companion when FDR was left alone. Once his doctor instructed her to give him "two aspirins and soda at 8:30," and she said, "When I gave him the aspirin, he suddenly said: Do you know that I have never had anyone just sit around and take care of me like this before.' "

Early on, by the fall of 1935, FDR and Daisy had so come to enjoy each other's company that they both began to call the secluded area on the Hyde Park estate where he talked of building a cottage "our hill." That same year FDR put Daisy on his presidential library payroll (half-time, \$1,000 a year), which provided a legitimate reason for her to be around so much. And it was Daisy who gave him "my little dog Fala" as a Christmas present in 1940.

Daisy was a lady. She would suggest, for example, that the president ask Eleanor to take a drive with him, to which he once rejoined: "I would have to make an appointment a week ahead!" Franklin chose instead to share his confidences with Daisy: D-Day, the trips to meet Stalin and Churchill. He took both Daisy and another distant cousin, Laura "Polly" Delano, with him on his secret wartime cross-country inspection trips by train. "I don't have to talk to you or entertain you," he said. And unlike Eleanor, Daisy never asked him to take or alter any public position.

Daisy came to know, and like, Lucy Mercer. She was on FDR's train when he had it stopped for a visit to the by-then-widowed woman at her New Jersey estate. (Daisy evidently was ignorant of the pre-polio romance.) As FDR's health deteriorated, "We got to the point of literally weeping on each other's shoulder & we kissed each other," Daisy said of Lucy Mercer, "I think just because we each felt thankful that the other understood and wants to help Franklin!"

Daisy, Laura, Lucy and Lucy's artist friend were all in the room at Warm Springs as the artist was doing an FDR portrait for Lucy. It was Daisy to whom he spoke his last words: "I have a terrific pain in the back of my head."

I doubt that physical intimacy was possible for FDR and the various women who shared his life. But as companions, they provided the affection the gregarious FDR so desperately needed and continually sought. With Daisy -- as with Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, Crown Princess Martha of Norway, Laura Delano -- FDR could relax, flirt, tease, share confidences. He once told Daisy, "I'm either Exhibit A, or left completely alone." Much of his life, and perhaps a good deal of history, was shaped by his efforts to avoid that hard condition.