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Warm Springs Remembers a Presidential Past

By Tom Watson
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WARM SPRINGS, Ga.

Dale Johns froze before the portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that was being completed at the moment the former president died. She stared, winced and breathed an anguished sigh.

"It's so sad to see this picture that was the final hour of such a great man," said Johns, 62, of Morgantown, W.Va. "To me, he was the greatest president the United States ever had. He turned this country around."

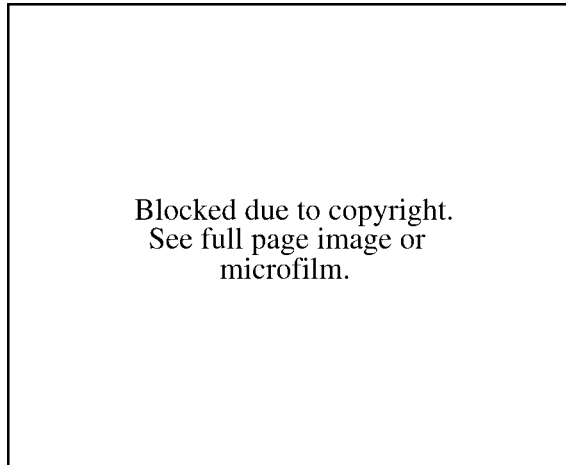
Forty-five years after FDR died here suddenly of a massive brain hemorrhage, about 130,000 people annually visit the "Little White House," his retreat that has become a shrine to a beloved president. For those old enough, the visit often is overwhelming as forgotten emotions surface along with memories of the four-term president who led the nation out of the Great Depression and through World War II.

Although he was in poor health and crippled with polio for the last 24 years of his life, FDR's death at age 63 shocked the world. On that day, April 12, 1945, time stood still.

"People come here, and they remember it all, where they were, what they felt, and many leave with tears in their eyes," said Mary Thrash, 50, a state ranger at the Little White House. "People really felt like the world had come to an end."

FDR first came to Warm Springs in 1924, four years after he ran for vice president in the Democrats' losing campaign and three years after contracting polio, for which he sought treatment in the village's natural hot springs. Finding relief in the buoyant, 88-degree waters, Roosevelt bought the declining resort that owned the springs and established the Warm Springs Foundation for treatment of polio.

Roosevelt solicited the help of Leroy Hubbard, a New York orthopedic surgeon, and the two pioneered the use of hydrotherapy, a



BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST
Mayor Joe Butts and state ranger Mary Thrash at the Little White House.

means of rejuvenating muscles in shallow pools of the spring's water. The foundation soon became the world's foremost research and treatment center for what was then a baffling disease. Part of the center was a shop whose workers invented automobile hand controls and perfected adaptive aids such as braces.

Some historians contend that Roosevelt's treatments in the springs gave him the strength to become governor of New York and president. But Thrash, who has studied his life and conducts tours of his house, feels that he was motivated more by being able to attack polio and draw around him a close-knit community of other polio victims that he called the "Foundation Gang."

"Mr. Roosevelt . . . inspired the other patients to follow in his footsteps and not give up," Thrash said. "It was not in spite of polio that he became president but probably because of it."

As president, Roosevelt built the modest, six-room, white-frame Little White House adjacent to the foundation grounds. He tried to visit twice a year, always arriving to have Thanksgiving dinner with the foundation's child patients. He enjoyed driving a 1938 Ford equipped with hand

controls through the rolling countryside at the tapering end of the Appalachian Mountain chain and talking to local residents.

Warm Springs Mayor Joe Butts, 64, recalls the village as vibrant, living in anticipation of FDR's visits. He remembers the boyhood excitement of talking to Secret Service men at the gasoline station and of having a security clearance to sell newspapers at the Marine camp beside the Little White House.

"He was just liable to stop in the drug store for a soda back then," Butts said. "He'd sometimes slip off from the Secret Service men, and they'd come find him."

According to Elliott Roosevelt, 79, one of two surviving Roosevelt children, FDR heavily relied on information gained from his discussions with local farmers in formulating agricultural policies. "He immersed himself in their welfare to the extent that, when he studied the agricultural problems of the United States, he drew from his experience and knowledge of what the farmers faced in Georgia," said Roosevelt, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz.

After FDR's death, the square-mile village of turn-of-the-century buildings gradually became a ghost town. Although Warm

Springs has maintained its population of 450, businesses such as the Hotel Tuscawilla that had housed Secret Service men and visiting dignitaries sat abandoned.

Seven years ago, Jean Kidd, 59, an area antiques dealer, arrived with a vision of revitalization. She and two partners bought most of the town's rundown buildings, and she set about filling Warm Springs with antique and craft shops, which now number about 65. With the recent restoration of the hotel and four restaurants, the town is attracting tourists as it did in Roosevelt's era.

"For 25 years, you couldn't even get a cup of coffee in Warm Springs," Kidd said. "When the president died, this town just closed up."

When the Salk vaccine eliminated the specter of polio in the 1950s, the Warm Springs Foundation turned to aiding the severely disabled, with emphasis on birth defects and crippling accidents. It is now operated by the state of Georgia as the Roosevelt/Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation, with an \$18 million annual budget from state and private funds. Situated on 900 acres with more than 50 buildings, it helped 5,000 disabled patients achieve greater independence through physical therapy, adaptive aids and job training last year.

The institute's brace shop has maintained its prominence as an innovator of adaptive aids, expanding research into artificial limbs and equipment for spinal-cord and head-injury patients. With a staff of 400, the institute is one of the area's largest employers.

Local residents long have believed that Roosevelt sensed that his death was near and chose to spend his last afternoon at Dowdell's Knob, a high knoll overlooking the Pine Mountain valley and his favorite place for reflection.

"He got so much out of Warm Springs in the way of a real will to live. . . I don't think he could have done it all without the impetus that he gained" there, his son said. "He was very, very proud of his connection with that part of the country and his affinity with the people there."