

PROLOGUE

A PICNIC SAVORED AROUND THE WORLD

It was Sunday June 11, 1939, supposedly a day of rest at Hyde Park for King George and Queen Elizabeth, who were completing a spectacular and grueling thirty-day, ten-thousand mile journey through Canada, Washington, D.C., and New York City, where they had brought the Crown closer to the people than ever before. Instead, it would be one of the most pivotal days of their reign as king and queen; it would become a landmark moment in Anglo-American relations, and would solidify the royal couple's fresh friendship with America's leading public couple of their era, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. All because of hot dogs.

On such an intensely paced tour, a "day of rest" meant that the surprisingly shy royal couple had nothing to do but attend a local church service featuring the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, meet a hundred and fifty of the Roosevelts' friends, neighbors, and staff, and endure the ministrations of the president's mother Sara, who fancied herself the American Queen Mary. Sara was scandalized—like much of America—that her daughter-in-law the First Lady intended to serve the royal couple hot dogs during a Sunday afternoon picnic.

After church, FDR drove the king around his Hyde Park property in the car the president had equipped with hand controls, which allowed him to swiftly negotiate the wooded, winding roads. The two men, one a gregarious if guarded American aristocrat

whose paralysis from polio had shattered his life and solidified his character, the other a shy Englishman still settling into the unexpected royal role he had neither desired nor thought he deserved, related easily—two country squires who loved the wooded vistas, the gardens, the crops and the pleasures of developing their own property. FDR had used his knowledge of husbandry and forestry to develop and profit from his twelve-hundred-acre property, passionately supervising the design of the estate, from the planting of trees to the layout of the roads, all of which he proudly showed off to an easily attentive king.

As they drove, the president and the king spoke of the role the United States would take in the war they knew would inevitably envelop Europe. In their private conversation, FDR went further in his support of England than he ever had in his delicate public pronouncements. If the U.S. navy spotted a U-boat, he promised, it would “sink her at once” and “wait for the consequences.” The president also confided his plan to enter the war if Germany started bombing London. These assurances surprised and pleased the king, a monarch keenly engaged with his country’s foreign affairs—far more than Americans or even his fellow Britons ever would have surmised.

There followed the most famous picnic in American history, a powerfully symbolic event that FDR was delighted to host at Top Cottage, the newly erected Dutch-style fieldstone house he had designed himself. FDR happily drove the king and queen and his mother through the woods in his blue Ford roadster, up the hill to the back end of his narrow three miles of property that stretched from the Hudson River to Cream Street, the site of his dairy farms. Only in recent years did the British ambassador reveal to the public how frightened the queen was by the harrowing and fast uphill trek through the woods. The queen had a moment to recover before Their Majesties met all one hundred

and fifty guests in a receiving line, including the nine Draiss children, whose father worked on the estate—and a neighbor who had crashed the party, despite the declaration by the head of security that without authorization not even an ant could get in. Security was intense at this juncture in time when an Irish Republican assassination plot had been uncovered in Detroit, the Duchess of Kent had been shot at in London, and the Nazis were making plans to kidnap and co-opt the Duke of Windsor as a puppet king.

The king and queen and the most prominent guests were seated at seven tables on the veranda looking west, with breathtaking views of the Catskill and Shawangunk mountains, surrounded by such luminaries as the New York governor and the Treasury secretary and their wives; below them, at tables less protected from the heat, sat a mix of staff, neighbors, and government officials, including the Roosevelts' maids, gardeners, chauffeurs, butlers, cooks, secretaries, and farmers. Along with the hot dogs, guests were also served smoked turkey, potato salad, cured hams, and baked beans. Steaks and other fancier foods on the menu were downplayed for the press. Dessert included Dutchess County strawberries from the estate of Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr.

The president broke all protocol when he proposed a toast to the queen. She was so taken aback that she drank to herself. His son Franklin Jr. was given the “honor” of presenting the first hot dog on a silver platter to the queen. She immediately turned to FDR and asked, “How do you eat it?”

“Very simple,” FDR answered. “Push it into your mouth and keep pushing it until it is all gone.”

Newspaper reports announced that the royal couple had followed the president's lead in eating the hot dogs with the “overhand delivery” to the mouth. The king

smothered the hot dog with mustard and “devoured his with gusto.” Only when he got mustard on his pants did he lose interest in the hot dogs. After dessert FDR caught the king’s eye and asked “Sir, may we smoke?”

That Sunday night as they huddled over their radios, Americans waited impatiently to hear whether or not the royal couple had actually eaten those hot dogs. By now, they had taken on mythic power as the great symbol of democracy. The royal staff was reluctant at first to admit that the king and queen had, indeed, dined on this democratizing food. It was not until the evening of their departure that the newspapermen were confident enough to report that they had done so. The headlines in the next day’s *New York Times* caught the flavor: “King Eats Hot Dog, Asks for More.”

More than sixty years after the picnic, in early December 2001—just four months before her death--the Queen Mother, at the age of 101, could still recall what she felt that June Sunday in Hyde Park. Many of her specific memories of that life-changing 1939 trip had faded over an extraordinary lifetime, but to her private secretary, Sir Alastair Aird, she spoke of the “kindness and courtesy” of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, a “wonderful host and hostess.” They were, she declared in a typically gracious phrase, “true American gentlefolk.”