

Alice Roosevelt Longworth--A Legend

Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of four articles on famous women in the nation's capital.

By Margaret McManus

WASHINGTON, D.C.— No one here in Washington, D.C., is more Old Guard than Alice Roosevelt Longworth, 93, oldest child of President Theodore Roosevelt, the Republican in the White House from 1901 to 1908. No one here is more New Guard, and more proudly so, than the recently moved-in residents of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, Democrats.

But don't cross them off as totally incompatible. There is a strong thread of similarity between the social dowager emeritus of the nation's capital and the relatively young newcomers from Plains, Ga. Uniqueness runs dominantly in the bloodstreams of all three of them. Not one of them has been stamped from a mold. They are three isolated souls.

For more than 75 years of this 20th century, with the exception of the years she lived intermittently in Cincinnati, after her marriage in the White House in 1906 to Nicholas Longworth, later to become Speaker of the House, Mrs. Longworth has been a formidable figure on the Washington social and political scene. She still lives today in the yellow sandstone town house at 1009 Massachusetts Avenue, where she has lived for the past 40 years.

The city is closing in on her. The house is almost obscured by a high-rise apartment hotel on the left. There is a drugstore catercorner across the street. Her front door is upright to the pavement, where clusters of people wait for the bus.

Within the house, the dim, sweet shadows of faded elegance are engulfing. The shadows are everywhere, on the walls the color of dust, on the faded paintings, on the fraying, splitting silk coverings of the fine, antique chairs and sofas.

To go to tea with Mrs. Longworth, at five o'clock of a winter's late afternoon, is to drop back into

the past to sit face to face with a living legend, and yet, somehow, to feel that the past is in tune with 1977. There is no Faulkner feeling of waning aristocracy, of time standing still.

A very neat maid, in a proper gray silk uniform, with white collar and cuffs and a white apron, opens the door to a spacious, high-ceilinged, dim entrance hall and motions to go up a wide staircase, about three times as wide as the stairways of today. It is a quiet house. At this moment, there is no sound at all, no evidence that someone is at home, but there is a strange feeling of activity. There is nothing depressing about this house, no sense of desertion.

In a drawing room at the top of the stairs, the first thing one notices is a portrait of Mrs. Longworth, wearing one of the large picture hats she made famous. To the left of this room is a small sitting room, with a fire blazing, and a tea tray set with Chinese porcelain cups and plates, the thinnest buttered white bread and home-made cookies.

She, who was so frequently referred to in years gone by as Princess Alice, made her entrance shortly after five o'clock. She is a small, fragile figure, erect, with white hair piled up, with eyes direct, still questioning, and laughing, absolutely laughing. She wore a maroon dress, a gold brooch at the neck, and a little mink scarf around her shoulders. The house was freezing cold. *The furnace had gone off, as old furnaces do.*

"My teeth are chattering," she said. "Can you hear my teeth chattering? Not very amusing, is it? Oh well, the fire is warm, and so is the tea."

She sat in front of the tray but did not pour. A friend poured, and while the others drank tea from cups, she drank her tea from a glass, "an old family custom." She is a believable legend. All the endless stories of her charm and wit, her high spirits and gay escapades, her wicked tongue and sharp eyes, are totally believable of this 93-year-old lady, who can still be entertained, and entertaining.

Of all the much-told stories about her, the most famous is certainly the story of the indignant senator who came to call on President Theodore Roosevelt, to complain about Alice's shenanigans. The President is reported to have said, "Sir, I can govern the country, or I can try to manage Alice. I cannot do both."

She was a household word. Her big picture hats—the color blue she wore, referred to in the old song, "in your sweet little Alice blue gown, when you first wandered down into town"—were imitated by millions of women in this country. They are ingrained in America's history.

It's all so long ago," she said. "It doesn't matter anymore. Today is what matters." She did not attend



Alice Roosevelt Longworth, seated in front of a portrait (painted by Peter Hurd within the last 10 years) in the living room of her home in Washington, D.C. The picture was taken by Alexandra Roosevelt, her great niece, to mark her aunt's 93rd birthday, Feb. 12. Miss Roosevelt, a professional photographer in New York, is the daughter of the late Quentin Roosevelt, one of President Theodore Roosevelt's grandsons.

Alice Roosevelt Longworth

Continued From Pg. 1 E

the inauguration ceremonies.

"I suppose I was invited," she said. "I don't remember things terribly well anymore. They always invite the wives and children of former presidents, if they're still around, don't they? Can't remember why I didn't go. Probably too cold. I've been to too many inaugurations anyway. Can you imagine? I remember Presidents before my father. I knew McKinley."

Alice Roosevelt Longworth has probably known more Presidents of the United States than any other person alive. Two political sages, writing recently in separate columns out of Washington, said, in effect, Mrs. Longworth is still one of the wisest and wittiest women in the capital. Perhaps she would have some advice to give President Carter.

At this suggestion, Mrs. Longworth threw back her head and laughed. It is a deep-throated, merry laugh, closer to a chuckle.

"What advice could I possibly give the Carters? That's silly. I wouldn't think of giving anyone advice, except to be themselves. If I should meet the President and Mrs. Carter, and should they ask me, that's exactly what I'd say to them. Be yourselves. Everyone has to learn for himself. Everyone has to do it his way.

So far, that is exactly what the President and Mrs. Carter appear to be doing.

"I'm sure I would certainly enjoy meeting them. I like to meet new and interesting people. If the President and his wife should be civil enough to invite me to the White House, I would be pleased to go. I don't go out much anymore. I'm a doddering old crone, surrounded here by doddering old-crone things. See my African masks? There are some interesting stories about these things. My father probably brought them home, but I don't remember terribly well anymore."

She reports this frequently, but nonetheless, she does remember. She remembers in flashes, and just quite possibly, she remembers what she wants to remember. She said she recalls very little about the presidents of the past two decades, except President Kennedy.

"I liked Jack so much," she said. "He was a witty, amusing Irishman and it was fun to talk to him. He saw all the absurdities. He knew how foolish most things are. And I liked his brother, Bobby, too. And they had a lot of handsome sisters, all with dark hair. I liked Harry Truman very much. He was a good man."

She does remember her cousin, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and of course, Eleanor, with whom she was never close friends. "Franklin could see the light side. He had a wonderful laugh. He wasn't always so serious as Eleanor."

Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, and her daughter, Lynda, came quite often to tea with Mrs. Longworth, and her granddaughter, Joanna Sturm, who comes and goes, but makes her home base with her grandmother, at 2009 Massachusetts Avenue, NW.

Joanna, 30, is the only child of Mrs. Longworth's only child, a daughter, Paulina, who was Mrs. Alexander Sturm. She died when Joanna was 10 years old. Joanna's father died when she was only five.

"I don't mind," she said. "I don't feel deprived. It worked out alright."

She is an interesting, attractive woman, reserved, possibly shy, but she speaks with the same direct candor of her grandmother and she

is endowed with the identical high spirits and sense of adventure of her grandmother and her presidential great-grandfather. Last summer she swam across the Bosphorus.

At the now-defunct Newton College, outside Boston, she majored in philosophy, but she has always been interested in medieval history, so last summer, she and a cousin, Robin Roosevelt, retraced the steps of the First Crusade.

The two started in Zurich, proceeded to Yugoslavia, went on to Greece, pushed to Istanbul, where they swam the river, "It's really nothing; just a little thing the Americans do. The Turks think it is hilarious." Joanna is now writing a book on the First Crusade.

She appears to enjoy her grandmother, "she is especially fun in the middle of the night, when we meet by the fireplace. She always liked to stay up late. She's fun to talk to. We have a good deal in common. You may notice, my grandmother cares nothing about maintenance and neither do I. If a little plaster falls down, we just brush it up. I don't think one should force one's self to care about something one just doesn't care about."

As a lady almost a century ahead of her time, in her determination to live her life her way, to speak freely and to urge women to be free and independent, Mrs. Longworth denied that she has any sympathy or interest in the feminist movement.

"Too bleak, too dreary, depressing," she said. "It's too boring to even discuss."

Right here, Joanna stepped into the conversation. She is very much a feminist.

"Grandmother, you don't mean that. Your objections are aesthetic. You would find it offensive to carry a placard, but you believe most of the things those women believe. You just don't care for the ranting and the shoddy side of it."

"Do I believe the same things?" said Mrs. Longworth. "Perhaps, if they're doing what they want to do, if they're enjoying their lives. They never look as if they're having much fun to me. I certainly believe in going forward."

She said there is no way she would want to go back in time. She would not want to trade with the Carters and to have just moved into the White House.

"I've done all that, you see, so it would be so boring to do it all over again, but I do love politics. It's as natural to me as breathing. I've never been a great Washington hostess. That's a myth, but I've liked entertaining here. Such a variety of people. I do like variety. I could never imagine living anywhere else. My entire life has been here."

She continued to emphasize that she is not important in the capital anymore.

"I'm part of the remote past, my father's past. He was very alive. He had a great zest and excitement for life. He was never boring." She spoke so cheerfully, with no regrets, no looking back, and not much looking forward either. She simply lives each day.

I don't think about whether or not I have a soul. I don't know what I believe about mortality and life hereafter. Gloomy thoughts. I put things like that right out of my mind. I always try to be cheerful."

It is to remember, Alice Longworth had enjoyed her life, and is still trying. She will endure in Washington so long as she lives, a genuine grande dame, a vital part of the remote past, brought to the present tense. This is her contribution and her weight. She has a legacy with history, but she is still in the phone book.