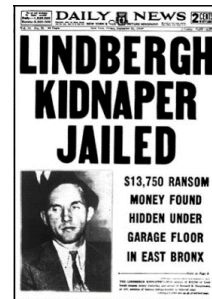
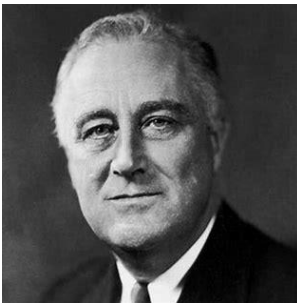


Another Look at March 1936

By: Cary Pederson

1936



Presented to the Torch Club of Hagerstown, MD

December 19, 2017

Another Look at March 1936

Several years ago when I delivered a paper titled “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Perspective,” it included the line “this will be my third and final paper on this month of March 1936.” I was mistaken. This will be the fourth and final paper on the month of March 1936.

It all began almost twenty years ago when I delivered a paper about the 1936 flood of the Potomac River. It wasn't a very good paper, about 5500 words long that took almost an hour to read and included the names and locations of all twenty-three bridges washed away by the flood. I found those details by reading every newspaper published along the river that I could find from that month. In addition to the papers, I also had help from an elderly gentleman who frequently visited the Cushwa Visitor Center where I was volunteering. He personally knew many of the families involved with the canal and remembered many details about the day of the flood, and I once said to him “So, you've lived in Williamsport all your life”?

“No” he said, “I just lived here until I got out of school, and then I moved back after I retired.”

“When did you live in the interim”?

“Hagerstown.”

He also told me about the canal boat that knocked out the wall of Conococheague Aqueduct in 1920 and ended up in the stream below. It sat there in full view until the 1936 flood washed it several miles down the canal. In less than a year, all traces of the boat disappeared, and half the homes in Williamsport now boast having a piece of lumber from that boat somewhere in the building.

The second paper about that month was an attempt to resolve conflicting articles in the papers about Eleanor's activities at the time of the flood. One paper reported that she would see-off the president at Union Station, from where he was leaving on a fishing vacation, and then go to Constitution Hall to speak at a luncheon honoring Helen Keller. Another paper reported that she boarded the train for Florida with the president. I contacted the Hyde Park Presidential Library and learned that they had searchable records from that day, traveled there and read through boxes of correspondence and learned that the first article was based on a press release, but because of the flood coming down the river, the train departure was delayed, Eleanor was free, and “hitched” a ride on the train to Florida. That resulted in a second Torch paper covering ‘the month of March 1936.’

The third paper was of course a study of Eleanor's newspaper columns from the month of March 1936, resulting in a paper that some of you may have heard.

Now that I've explained how I stumbled into becoming interested in the month of March 1936, let me recap the five major stories I found in doing that research so many years ago. I should also caution you that I no longer have copies of those articles, but will primarily rely on my memory and records now available on the internet.

FLOODS

The dominant stories in the press that month were floods. I say floods in the plural, because there were floods throughout the northeast. Common terms in the stories referred to the as “Hundred-year flood,” or “Storm of the Century.” Record highs were achieved not only along the Potomac, but also many northeast cities.

Books have been written about the devastation in Pittsburgh. If any of you have not visited the Park

Service Cushwa Center at the foot of Rte. 11, you should go down and note the flood level markings inscribed on the back of the building at the time of each flood. You need to look up under the eaves to find the 1936 marking. No other flood comes close, in spite of the Corp of Engineers prediction of a greater flood within a hundred years. In addition to U.S. floods, there was also a mention of a flood in China that was estimated to have lost 1,000,000 lives. That mention put clearly into perspective the role of the Corp of Engineers who monitor rainfall and rivers flood levels in the U.S. and limited loss of life in the Potomac flood to single digits.

THE ROOSEVELTS

The second topic occupying newspapers space that month was the Roosevelts. It was amazing that so many details of their lives were reported. Of course, most of the stories about FDR were on the front page, while Eleanor’s mentions were chiefly found on the Woman’s Page, sometimes called the “Society Page.” Well, after all, it was 1936.

There were two specific stories about FDR worthy of further comment. On March 16th, the Washington Post reported that FDR say down at his desk on the afternoon of March 15th and computed his income taxes for 1935. Some of us are old enough to remember the time when federal income taxes were due on March 15th, and were simple enough to figure without advice from an accountant or lawyer.

The other story worth mentioning was an article in the Washington Sun describing an incident in Union Station the day FDR left on his fishing vacation. There were two photographers with cameras mounted on tripods on the platform ready to photograph him when he boarded the train. They were approached by a Secret Service agent and told, “Sorry boys, no photos today.” The president sat in his car and glared at the photographers until they dismounted their equipment. This article is interesting, because Doris Kerns Goodwin reports in her book “No Ordinary Time” that photographers had so much respect for FDR that they never tried to photograph and reveal the extent of his disability. In fact, the only known photos of FDR in a wheelchair, were taken by his cousin Daisy Suckley. However, this article seems to indicate that professional photographers tried to take wheelchair photos, but were denied the opportunity by FDR.

GERMANY

The third major story that month was about Germany. I can’t explain why, but most of my life I was of the impression that we didn’t know much about what was going on in Germany during the 1930’s. Hitler, the Nazi’s and German politics were reported almost daily. Admittedly, it was two years before Krystal Nacht, but I was surprised to find so much detail about daily activities in Germany reported in the American press.

One small article which has struck with me over the years, concerned the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of Berlin who attended a Communist Conference in London. At the end of the conference, Germany denied her re-entry. From this perspective, you would think she was lucky, but the article seemed to be critical of Germany for denying her re-entry.

BRUNO HAUPTMAN

The fourth most mentioned story in the press that month was Bruno Hauptman. He had been convicted of kidnapping the Lindberg baby and was scheduled to be executed on March 31st, 1936. New Jersey Governor Hoffman was having second thoughts about his guilt and was considering staying the execution. The Lindberg baby was kidnapped in March 1932 and frequently described as “the crime of the century.” Hauptman was captured in 1934 and tried in Flemington, New Jersey in what was frequently called “the trial of the century.” \$20,000 of the marked ransom money was found in his garage and he had quit his job the day after the ransom was paid, but he and his wife insisted that he was innocent. He was finally electrocuted at the Rahway Reformatory on April 3, 1936.

GLORIA VANDERBILT

Gloria Vanderbilt’s name appeared frequently during the month. The “poor little rich girl” was twelve years old and the focus of a custody battle between her aunt Gertrude Whitney and her mother Gloria Morgan. Her father, Reggie Vanderbilt, had died and left a trust fund for Gloria which her mother was using to enjoy the life style of the “rich and famous.” Many of the stories used the words “most lurid trial” in history. The trial was frequently stopped to explain some of these antics to the judge. The details of those lurid episodes were never revealed in the press.

POST SCRIPT

In doing my original research for the 1936 flood, I visited eight libraries and rolled through reels of microfilm to recapture the past. I started in Cumberland, than Hancock, Hagerstown, Martinsville, Shepherdstown, Frederick, the National Archives in D.C. All of them had everything on microfilm and Hyde Park also told me that they had every copy of the New York Times published during FDR’s tenure printed on linen. Can you imagine the cost of maintaining that archive?

In researching Eleanor’s columns for the month of March 1936, I found an error. There was a column for March 1st, but March 1st was a Sunday, and Eleanor didn’t write a Sunday column. In further checking, I realized that 1936 was a Leap Year, but there was no column for February 29th. I called Hyde Park and reported the error, only to be told I was mistaken. I asked the person with whom I was speaking to let me speak to her superior. She hung up the phone. Today, everything is available on the internet, so I rechecked and discovered that the Archives index, now lists a column for February 29th, but if you click it, it opens a column titled March 1st. So much for the government making no mistakes.

One of the interesting aspects of reading newspapers of eighty years ago was the frequent use of superlatives. Perhaps you noticed in this presentation how often events were described a “greatest,” “most lurid,” hundred year flood,” “trial of the century.” Has it occurred to you that every time we have a hurricane, flood, or forest fire, the press still can’t resist using superlatives? I had to read papers from 1936 to come to that realization.

CONCLUSION

Most people in this room were not even born in 1936. I was only six years old, but it was an interesting exercise to look back so carefully at a time eighty years ago and understand the effect that events of that time have on us today. I was encouraged by the Torch experience to take the time and consider that perspective. I would encourage each of you to find a similar period and take another long look.