

REMEMBERING  
**THEODORE  
ROOSEVELT**

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*Reminiscences of his  
Contemporaries*

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**MICHAEL PATRICK CULLINANE**



# The World of the Roosevelts

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# Remembering Theodore Roosevelt

Reminiscences of his Contemporaries

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Cover illustration: Theodore Roosevelt, sitting on a large stone, at Glacier Point in California. Glacier Point California, ca. 1904. Photograph. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013650922/>

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## Praise for *Remembering Theodore Roosevelt*

“Thought-provoking, engrossing, and entertaining, this book enriches our understanding of Theodore Roosevelt through first-hand accounts from people—the famous and the forgotten—who knew him. The interviewees’ recollections, ably enhanced by Cullinane’s useful historical context, provide a deeper, more nuanced picture of the politician and the private man.”

—Stacy A. Cordery, *author of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, from White House Princess to Washington Power Broker*

“Fascinated by Theodore, Franklin, or Eleanor Roosevelt? Here is an edition of rare interviews full of news and insights unavailable elsewhere. Highly recommended for fans and scholars alike.”

—Kathleen Dalton, *author of Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*

“Roosevelt scholars owe Cullinane a debt of gratitude for tracking down the tapes and digitizing them, creating what seemed impossible: a brand new and valuable source to enrich our understanding of Theodore Roosevelt.”

—Edward P. Kohn, *author of Heir to the Empire City: New York and the Making of Theodore Roosevelt*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

Theodore Roosevelt needs no introduction. The former U.S. president ranks as one of the most recognizable icons in American history. Biographies have scoured every aspect of his life; monuments like Mount Rushmore immortalize him in stone; and popular culture pays tribute in countless ways, from films and fiction to parodies and performance art.

Roosevelt's enduring legacy owes much to one man: Hermann Hagedorn, the long-serving director of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association. For more than four decades, Hagedorn led campaigns to erect monuments, establish foundations, and promote scholarship—anything to keep the former president relevant to successive generations. He also gathered Rooseveltiana for the same purpose, collecting election ephemera, photographs, motion pictures, books, periodicals, newspaper clippings, artwork, and artifacts. Nothing escaped his purview, and the collection he acquired swelled to such an extent that it required a full-time archivist. Even as costs to maintain the collection became prohibitive, Hagedorn continued to accumulate.<sup>1</sup>

It struck me as significant that Hagedorn's first impulse was to collect oral histories. When Roosevelt died in 1919, he scrambled to record the former president's contemporaries. Initially, he intended to write a biography and, as any investigative journalist would, Hagedorn recognized the value of oral history for his research. He equally understood its power for future interpretations of Roosevelt. As sociologist Paul Thompson writes, oral histories, "can be used to change the focus of

history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry,” and it gives voice to “the people who made and experienced history through their own words.”<sup>2</sup> For Hagedorn, no other form of Rooseveltiana compared. Only the memories of Roosevelt’s friends and family could preserve his legacy.

Hagedorn never had singular plans. His interest in recording Roosevelt’s contemporaries had greater utility than source material for his biography and when he contacted Roosevelt’s friends and family, he related a second motive. He wished to make a motion picture about Roosevelt’s beloved home, Sagamore Hill at Oyster Bay, Long Island. Hagedorn planned to cast Roosevelt’s friends and family as reprisers. The footage he collected would preserve their stories as well as the visual landscape of Roosevelt’s life. The idea was ahead of its time. Video testimony would afford vivid portrayals of Roosevelt, his associates, and their surroundings, but when Hagedorn approached participants, he found many unwilling to partake.<sup>3</sup> Friends and family guarded Roosevelt’s legacy, especially in the period immediately after his passing. They worried that opportunistic sorts might contrive an unflattering portrait. Former First Lady Edith Roosevelt kept thousands of documents from prying eyes. She rarely gave interviews and Long Island neighbors and friends took their lead from her. They refused to record statements with Hagedorn. Perhaps as daunting to the participants was the novel and unfamiliar motion picture technology.

Still, Hagedorn refused to abandon the project. Luckily for posterity, he found willing participants in the North Dakota Badlands. These included friends of Roosevelt who met the young New Yorker when he ranched out West in the 1880s. Hagedorn scrapped plans for a sweeping biography and film about Sagamore Hill, and settled on a book about Roosevelt’s frontier experiences. He assembled a film crew and traveled to Medora, a small town near Roosevelt’s Elkhorn ranch on the Little Missouri River. Dozens of friends turned out and told stories, unfazed by the camera. The interviews became the basis for a short, silent film released in 1919 called *Through the Roosevelt Country with Roosevelt’s Friends*. As expected, the interviews also provided the necessary research for Hagedorn’s 1922 book, *Roosevelt in the Badlands*.<sup>4</sup> The biography and film have become valuable resources for historians and treasured artifacts for North Dakotans who can turn back the clock and see what their state looked like before modern civilization advanced it beyond recognition. For Hagedorn, the most gratifying result of the project was that it

legitimized his approach to commemoration. It confirmed the value of oral history.

Hagedorn's expedition to the Badlands predated widespread interest in oral history. The progenitor of the modern oral history movement was the Federal Writers' Project, a 1930's New Deal program that employed writers during the Depression.<sup>5</sup> The project collected thousands of personal testimonies about the Civil War, slavery, the Chicago fire, immigrant life, and the Wild West from a vanishing generation of Americans that could still recall such momentous episodes. The academic community followed suit, led by Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University who called on historians to use stories "fresh and direct from men once prominent," which contain "information that every obituary column shows to be perishing."<sup>6</sup> Nevins feared that telecommunications would deprive historians of evidence found in correspondence and private papers. Oral histories would, accordingly, become a necessary supplement and, in 1948, Nevins founded the Columbia University Center for Oral History. The Center's staff took statements by longhand transcription at first, and began projects funded by external donors to demonstrate viability. Companies like Ford Motors supported Nevins, as did the oil and timber industries, which led to criticism of the project as a repository for the memories of rich, white businessmen.<sup>7</sup> The Center gradually expanded its focus, and the field of oral history flourished. Recording devices replaced handwriting, hastening the process of collection. By the 1950s, a dozen universities from New York to Los Angeles had founded centers like Columbia's.

Hagedorn met Nevins in the early 1940s, when the Roosevelt Memorial Association sought to divest its library due to the cost. Before donating the archive to Harvard in 1943, the Association proposed bestowing it to Columbia. Much to the chagrin of Nevins and Hagedorn, Columbia passed on the offer. Nevertheless, the men forged a connection based on common interests and undertook several collaborations, not least in the realm of oral history research.<sup>8</sup> When Hagedorn learned that the Columbia Oral History Center had coincidentally gathered statements from several of Roosevelt's political friends, it reignited his impulse to collect testimony.<sup>9</sup> In 1953, the Columbia Center and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association interviewed Barclay Harding Farr, a friend of TR's son Kermit Roosevelt.<sup>10</sup> Harlan "Bud" Phillips, a PhD candidate working with Nevins, joined Hagedorn at Sagamore Hill and recorded Farr's childhood memories. The reminiscences had everything that written correspondence could not: emotions, insecurities, adrenaline,

pride, and misgivings. Farr recalls playing tennis with the president, the hijinks of the Roosevelt children, and hosting a Bull Moose campaign reception for the former president. On one occasion, Farr tells how Kermit and his friends—in a prank—consumed all the food in the White House pantry over a holiday weekend, depriving visiting dignitaries. On another instance, they upset Oyster Bay neighbors by setting off fireworks too close to their houses. From these memories an intimate impression emerges.

In typical fashion, Hagedorn made the most of this resource. After he interviewed Farr, he revived plans to write a book about Sagamore Hill. Realizing the undocumented insight neighbors like Farr offered, Hagedorn set about collecting more interviews with Columbia. Timing necessitated quick work. Roosevelt's family and friends were an aging set, many of whom had never shared their memories for posterity. It was Hagedorn's last chance to hear them. By the 1950s, he no longer suffered from a lack of credibility. Having built close relationships with Roosevelt's contemporaries over the decades, Hagedorn took advantage of his reputation to attract prominent figures to the project. For Nevins, the partnership with Hagedorn and the Roosevelt Memorial Association would help expand the Center's archive and build capacity for aspiring historians like Bud Phillips and Louis M. Starr who accompanied Hagedorn on multiple interviews.<sup>11</sup>

Another leading figure in the endeavor was Hagedorn's daughter Mary. Her father encouraged Mary to enroll in Columbia's oral history master's degree program, run by Nevins, Phillips, and Starr. In September 1954, she began learning how to operate a reel-to-reel magnetic tape recorder. The Columbia program put students through their paces by testing their ability to decipher inaudible recordings or drilling them on shorthand dictation.<sup>12</sup> Mary excelled and quickly became her father's assistant. She accompanied him to several interviews with Roosevelt family members, and before long began interviewing them on her own. Without question, she became as vital as her father on the project, even if she often deferred to his boundless knowledge during the interviews.

Female participants particularly took a fondness to Mary, including TR's eldest daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who told Mary to simply ask "straight away ... if you want me to do another [recording], I'll do another. Because, 'Now that I talked to Mary,' I'll say, 'I'm less awkward about it.'"<sup>13</sup> Other participants made it clear that Mary put them at ease during the interview. Whereas her father tended to cross-examine

participants, a tactic that stunted conversation and gave the impression that he knew more than they did, Mary gave participants time to ramble without interruption. Perhaps this was a product of her training at Columbia, but regardless of where she learned the technique, Mary made participants comfortable and allowed them to fill silences with their memories.

In total, Mary and Hermann Hagedorn recorded twenty-one interviews between 1954 and 1956. Some of the interviewees spoke to the Hagedorns individually, some in groups of two or three. The participants included TR's daughters, nieces, nephews, in-laws, political comrades, neighbors, and acquaintances. Some, like Alice Roosevelt Longworth, needed to be talked through the process of recording, being somewhat unacquainted with the technology:

- Mary Hagedorn: Now that is, that is on again.  
 Mrs. Longworth: It's on again? On us or on what?  
 Mary Hagedorn: On us.  
 Mrs. Longworth: On us, but I mean if you turned it on, can it still be someone else?  
 Mary Hagedorn: If you turned it on and, you see now, we're speaking into it.  
 Mrs. Longworth: Yes.  
 Mary Hagedorn: And it erases the past one.  
 Mrs. Longworth: Oh, it does?  
 Mary Hagedorn: As it goes along, and I'll show you.<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Longworth, and others immediately recognized the significance of the recordings for the historical record:

- Mary Hagedorn: The great advantage about a tape recorder is that you can get the personality of the person which you can't always get in writing.  
 Mrs. Longworth: No, you can't get down in paper ... It's very interesting, and extraordinary innovation for getting opinion or to get the person's story, where they mesh and where they're completely different.<sup>15</sup>

Sadly, not all of the recordings survived. Only seven, two-sided reels still exist. The National Park Service (NPS) has maintained the reels since

1963, when the Roosevelt Birthplace at East 20th Street became a government property. Before then, the reels were kept by the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association, which maintained a small archive in the Birthplace. The reels stayed behind after the bulk of the collection went to Harvard. No evidence exists to suggest these reels have been accessed or listened to during the Park Service's administration. Interestingly, the cassette tape became the standard format for recordings soon after the NPS took over in the 1960s and, since then, reel-to-reel devices have become obsolete. The NPS does not even maintain a reel-to-reel recorder at the Birthplace, making it impossible to listen to them. According to park rangers, these reels went completely disregarded for decades. In 2019, with the permission of the Park Service, I had the reels digitized by a professional duplication service. To recover the sound, the reels required cleaning and some cyber-wizardry. For the first time, they are available to researchers in a digital format.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the taped recordings, several transcribed interviews were gathered by the Hagedorns and others, from 1945 to 1970. Half of these transcripts have been available to researchers via special collections at Columbia University, but many of these oral histories were stashed away in the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace archive, and rarely accessed. Since then, the transcripts have been transferred from the Roosevelt Birthplace to the Sagamore Hill archive. In 2018, they have become accessible to researchers and among their assets include Mary Hagedorn's interview with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and a conversation with TR's daughter Ethel Roosevelt Derby and his daughter-in-law Eleanor Butler Roosevelt.

\* \* \*

New sources have the power to change our perception of the past and this motivated Hermann Hagedorn. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Franklin Roosevelt eclipsed his cousin in public consciousness and negative portrayals of TR dominated. Hagedorn saw the 1950s as a period ripe for reappraisal, and under his leadership the memorial association funded several public history projects to revive TR's image.<sup>17</sup> The most prominent was the publication of Roosevelt's correspondence. In 1951, a team of academics published the first of eight volumes of Roosevelt's letters and, when complete, these reference books transformed perceived wisdom.<sup>18</sup> The impression of TR as a boisterous demagogue, hasty and juvenile—a depiction one historian has aptly called the crazy Teddy theory—receded as

historians of the 1950s examined the letters.<sup>19</sup> These eight volumes even changed the view of some firm adherents to the crazy Teddy theory. Richard Hofstadter, the leading historian of American politics in the mid-century, softened his take on Roosevelt as he read more correspondence.<sup>20</sup> The memorial association also commissioned journalist and Roosevelt contemporary John Callan O’Laughlin to write a hagiography. Although O’Laughlin died in 1949, and the memorial association abandoned the project, it continued to support writers with a favorable view of Roosevelt like biographer Carleton Putnam.<sup>21</sup> The oral history project was conceived in the same vein as the letters and these book projects.

The oral history project achieved its end in two ways. First, the testimony from friends and family humanized TR. Instead of portraying a president, the participants retold stories of the father, the uncle, the exuberant boy, the mannerly and kind friend, the private source of inspiration, and the dutiful husband. Of course, the political episodes that defined Roosevelt’s rise to the presidency come out in reminiscences, but these well-worn stories of his public life wither in comparison to the warm portrayal of Roosevelt’s personality and private life. Hagedorn had insisted that “a far deeper reservoir of nostalgic memories of Theodore Roosevelt” existed in the minds of those who knew him, “undimmed by the passage of time.”<sup>22</sup> Relaying these memories, he believed, would spark a revival.

The second way the oral histories prompted reappraisal was in supporting the so-called “consensus” histories of the 1950s. This short-lived school of thought in American history theorized that consistency existed in politics whereby politicians shared ideas, civic-mindedness, and national values.<sup>23</sup> Consensus historians put Theodore Roosevelt in a class of political actors who led the nation since its inception and promoted a mythologized national experience. They diminished the novelty of his presidency. Instead, TR shared the same goals as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and even Dwight Eisenhower. That might seem convoluted in the twenty-first century, but consensus historians writing in the Cold War context could be forgiven for reducing American history in such a way. The polarization of society and the all-consuming nature of the Cold War encouraged Americans to push aside their differences to fight against a common foe. Consensus historians working in this period created a *longue durée* of American progress from the colonial era to the Second World War, and Roosevelt took his place in that narrative.<sup>24</sup>

One useful example of how the oral history project fit the consensus interpretation comes from Frederick Trubee Davison. In 1955, Davison



recalled a moment during World War II when Theodore Roosevelt's ghost appeared in the offices of the Pentagon. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, a contemporary of TR enlisted by FDR to organize the war effort, brought together the nation's top brass in 1944 for a meeting designed to inspire their efforts against the Axis Powers. Stimson read aloud a eulogy to Theodore Roosevelt, and Davison recounts the episode as an "emotional experience" for all those in attendance.<sup>25</sup> Stimson drew a historical line from the 1890s to the 1940s, from Theodore Roosevelt to Franklin Roosevelt, casting all political efforts in-between as the fateful progress toward common national objectives. Similarly, Historian Howard K. Beale constructed a pathway from TR to the Cold War in his 1956 book *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power*. Beale deemed the 1950s a "desperate state" of existence "that threatens to destroy civilization itself," and explained how American foreign policy "started down this road" with TR's internationalism.<sup>26</sup>

Anachronistic as it might be, we remember the past from our vantage in the present. History comes into relief like a camera adjusting its focus, and in the 1950s the Cold War featured heavily in the thoughts and concerns of the project's participants. That tendency to re-order historical events to fit the present appears in the recollections of Progressive Party activist William Savacool who spent one hour with the Hagedorns discussing the 1912 presidential election. The most thought-provoking exchange came when Savacool offered a counterfactual scenario whereby TR won reelection in 1912:

William Savacool: One of the conversations that I had with Mr. Roosevelt was at his house in Oyster Bay in June, 1916. He was very much concerned because we didn't do something about the situation in Europe at the time. He said, "If we didn't get into this war now, Russia is going to blow up and you'll have Bolshevism, Communism, spreading all over the world."

That was the reason he gave me for not running on a third ticket in 1916, which would elect Woodrow Wilson president again, and he did not agree with Wilson's foreign policy at all. He thought that if we got into the War much sooner it would be over sooner, fewer lives would be lost—and now, as I think back over it, I feel he was right ...

- Mary Hagedorn: Do you feel that if Mr. Roosevelt had been President in 1912, he would not only have prevented World War I but there might not have been World War II?
- William Savacool: That is my belief. I know positively that Mr. Roosevelt told the Kaiser before any war, that in case of a war against England that he would be on the side of England. The Kaiser sent over an Ambassador [to Wilson] who *assured* him that we would not go into the War. That's why he struck.<sup>27</sup>

Naturally, hindsight can lead to counterfactual fantasies, and several interviews digress in a similar way as Savacool. Oral histories suffer from misremembering, and every participant falls prey to some degree of obfuscation. As Bertrand Russell once wrote, "When a man tells you that he knows the exact truth about anything, you are safe in inferring that he is an inexact man."<sup>28</sup>

In addition to misremembering, the Cold War had another noticeable influence on the participants.<sup>29</sup> As McCarthyism reached its zenith in the mid-1950s, anti-communism led to a reinvigorated commitment to American democracy and nationalism. Hagedorn tethered Roosevelt's legacy to such concepts and, not surprisingly, some of the oral history dialogue reflects the surge in nationalism and exceptionalism. New York politician Ezra Prentice told Mary Hagedorn that Roosevelt could be likened to a god, and that his supporters "thought Roosevelt was infallible ... as though it were a religious belief."<sup>30</sup> Alice Roosevelt Longworth relates how the threat of communism required a fearless leader, namely a man like her father. Karl H. Behr hopes his children will read more about Roosevelt to be prepared for the international strife and to lead a more patriotic life. Marie Bissell thought her steadfast patriotism had its roots in an "upbringing and education" in the early twentieth century, of which Roosevelt stood out like a role model.

Other participants avoided proleptic forecasting. Samuel McCune Lindsay, a Roosevelt-appointee to the Philippine Executive, recalls his work as an educator in the American colony. He restricted conversation to factual recollections and avoids casting Roosevelt as an unblemished idol or imagining how he would fare as a cold warrior. Consequently, the Hagedorns seem to lose interest. At one juncture Lindsay abruptly turns to a moment when TR asked him and others in his company: "Do you gentlemen know whom I would select if I had the power to name my

successor?” This seemed a chance to glean an insight into one of Roosevelt’s most important decisions as president and should have jolted the Hagedorns out of their seat. Lindsay reported that Roosevelt plainly announced: “It would be Elihu Root whom I consider the best qualified man I know but probably you couldn’t elect him dog catcher, because he is chiefly known as a corporation lawyer, and has never ridden in the cab of a locomotive. My choice will be Taft.”<sup>31</sup> Then, almost as soon as Lindsay completed the story, the interview moved on to a tedious reminiscence of TR’s reading habits. The Hagedorns, disappointingly, did not press Lindsay to elaborate.

Indeed, many of the interviews leave readers with more questions. Several detail important political relationships that would prompt historical reconsideration if we believe the testimony. The 1916 Republican presidential nominee Charles Evans Hughes and New York Republican Party boss Thomas Collier Platt—often mooted as political foes—appear as key collaborators in some accounts. A friendly relationship between Platt and Hughes would certainly change the way we think about New York politics in the Progressive Era. And some interviews produce new perspectives on the Roosevelt family. Of particular interest will be Elliott Roosevelt (TR’s brother and father to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt) and James “Tadd” Roosevelt (FDR’s nephew). Elliott and Tadd have been presented as family deviants, outcast for their waywardness. Historians cite Elliott’s alcoholism and substance abuse, while Tadd’s marriage to a prostitute came as such a shock that his father disowned him. FDR, according to many biographies, blamed Tadd for his father taking ill and dying.<sup>32</sup> The oral histories add new contours to the lives of Elliott and Tadd, and perhaps change our take on the family dynamics. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, for one, tells the Hagedorns of her affection for Elliott. In her recollection, Elliott had debilitating epilepsy, a condition which provoked his abuse of alcohol and opium. Elliott’s poor physical health preceded his addiction, she attests. For Tadd, Oyster Bay and Hyde Park relatives reference him as a sensitive man who separated from his wife within a year of their marriage. He moved to Florida where he became a mechanic. Tadd was a recluse, rather than an outcast, and he occasionally met his sister Helen Roosevelt Robinson in New York. These stories refute the harsh opinion of historians like William J. Mann who argues that “no room was made for their idiosyncrasies.”<sup>33</sup> In the reminiscences it becomes evident that the Roosevelts grappled with Tadd’s eccentricities and Elliott’s illness.

The testimonies of the Roosevelt family also relate an unyielding devotion to their relatives, despite considerable differences among disagreeable

characters. As relations frayed between the Oyster Bay and Hyde Park clans, often over politics as much as personality, family relations soured. Those Roosevelts interviewed for the oral history project nevertheless concede a constant “devotion” to their family. In fact, the word “devotion” comes up in nearly every account as if it had special meaning for the Roosevelts. Corinne Robinson Alsop uses the word frequently in her interview, fearing that her recollections of Eleanor will unfairly depict the former first lady. She impulsively tells Mary Hagedorn several times how much she adores Eleanor before taking shots at her character. Mrs. Longworth, who had an infamously strained relationship with Eleanor and Franklin, tells how much affection she has for them, and only then does she relate the unpleasant stories.<sup>34</sup> The abuse of alcohol, which claimed the lives of many Roosevelt family members, gets ample attention. So do infidelities. The Cowleses tell of Mrs. Longworth’s love affair with Senator William Borah and how her only child Paulina derived from that relationship rather than her marriage. Mrs. Longworth tells of her nephew Theodore Douglas Robinson’s habitual rendezvouses with prostitutes. Nieces and nephews remark on Edith Roosevelt’s stern and cold demeanor. Yet for each charge levied, the speakers reiterate their love, affection, and admiration.

Heed two things when reading these interviews. First, the Roosevelt family is like almost any other. Although certainly wealthier and more famous than most, the Roosevelts have black sheep and high achievers. Mrs. Longworth remarked in one of her interviews that “when you go into them, almost all families are odd.”<sup>35</sup> Second, readers should consider the partiality of the Roosevelts. Mrs. Longworth made reference to her father’s “posterity letters” in one interview. TR wrote these “to inoculate against the future,” she said, and readers can assume that participants like Mrs. Longworth had fully considered that the oral history transcripts would find their way into archives and eventually pass by the desks of researchers.<sup>36</sup> In some cases, participants asked archivists to seal transcripts, knowing that their reminiscences would become part of the historical record. The recordings and transcripts contain a mix of candid description as well as cagey restraint. We can assume the recordings afford the best view into the participants’ opinions. Unlike the typescript testimonies that went through two rounds of edits (one from the Hagedorns, and another from the participants), the recordings remain unedited.

This book has not reproduced all the oral histories the Hagedorns collected. In total, they exceed more than 200,000 words. Instead, I have made strategic omissions. Several accounts have been omitted entirely,

including some never before heard recordings, with good reason. Some overlapped considerably with others and repetition dilutes the potency of these accounts. For instance, only two of Roosevelt's neighbors—Barclay Farr and Georgiana Farr Sibley—feature in the book, and yet four more contributed to the project (Marie Bissell, Marian Knight Garrison, Helen Sargant Hitchcock, and Augusta Munn Tilney). Mrs. Garrison and Mrs. Tilney interviewed together and made similar observations as the Farrs, particularly about Stewart Robinson's death, the exuberant spirit of the Roosevelt family, and the awkward childhood of Eleanor Roosevelt. Tilney calls Eleanor "a living freak," which is a harsh missive echoed in some of the testimony made by Eleanor's cousins.<sup>37</sup> Tilney also recalls a supernatural moment when TR's sister Corinne met an apparition of her deceased brother Elliott:

Mrs. Robinson told me herself that she was up at Herkimer [New York] and that she was walking through the woods. Suddenly, she saw the figure she identified as her brother Elliott, walking ahead of her. She never could catch up to him, and this shadowy figure she followed to the front door. When they arrived there the figure vanished through the door. The door was then opened and she was handed a cable of a telegram or a message saying her brother Elliott had died ... She told me this herself.<sup>38</sup>

The neighbors reveal humorous stories of Alice Roosevelt Longworth's rocky relationship with her father. When TR instructed his daughter to call on Senator John Kean when she visited Washington, Mrs. Longworth protested, but TR demanded that she leave calling cards, at least. "I will, but you'll be sorry," she told her father. Mrs. Garrison reported that Mrs. Longworth "left three cards: a knave and two old maid cards!"<sup>39</sup>

Outside of a few exceptional revelations, the neighbors share overlapping impressions with other participants.<sup>40</sup> Among the other interviews, common portrayals of Roosevelt make reference to the president's gracious hosting or the abundant attention he gave his children. It certainly does seem remarkable that a sitting president could devote so much time to his friends and family, as well as the country's demands. The participants also tell of Roosevelt's personal talents, some of which seem like fantastical parlor tricks like his ability to read and talk at the same time, his memory of people and events, or his general exuberance. In some omitted interviews, participants make unsubstantiated statements or concede that they could not recall aspects of the past. Some participants were simply less

interesting. The interviews with William Savacool, Samuel McCune Linsey, and Ezra Prentice mentioned in this introduction do not appear elsewhere. The few germane aspects of their interviews did not justify adding dozens of pages to the book. Judgment on what to edit and omit followed the same rationale as the academic letters project in the 1950s. The goal of the editing team sifting through 150,000 letters was “to make easily accessible all the available [material] that seem[ed] necessary to reveal” the subject of study.<sup>41</sup> I took the same approach with the oral histories. No doubt other researchers will see value in recordings and transcripts I have excluded, however, as much as 70% of the oral histories have been reproduced in this book.

One aspect of the project warrants further comment: the immense role of women in Theodore Roosevelt’s life and legacy. Hermann Hagedorn summed it up best, calling the testimony “perfectly extraordinary,” because it described a “group of brilliant, able, powerful, effective women!” Hagedorn referred specifically to four women—Anna Roosevelt Cowles, Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Sara Delano Roosevelt—but equally wished to recognize “a half dozen other women who figure in the story [and] are all important women in themselves, quite apart from their connections with TR.”<sup>42</sup> And the Roosevelt women are anything but monolithic. TR’s eldest sister Anna Roosevelt Cowles comes across as charming, businesslike and, as a potential presidential candidate had the laws disqualifying women for high office not existed or had she desired to run (she did not). TR’s youngest sister Corinne Roosevelt Robinson seems a syrupy, sensitive poet, as indomitable as her brother. Despite their many differences, Mrs. Cowles and Mrs. Robinson agreed that women should not get the right to vote, a curiosity for two politically active women, and while this seems implausible, the oral history interviews explain how Victorian ideas about women allowed TR’s sisters to find political agency through traditional gender roles and their class. Of equivalent interest, TR’s eldest daughter broke all the era’s gender roles it seems, while his youngest daughter Ethel conformed to them. One hope in publishing the oral histories is that the Roosevelt women come to the fore, as Betty Boyd Caroli accomplished in her landmark book. This book also observes what “made them ‘special’ and, at the same time, show what they shared with other families facing similar challenges outside the public eye.”<sup>43</sup>

Much more awaits the reader. Family life at Sagamore Hill—what the Roosevelts ate, how they played, who helped raise the children, and why

they loved Long Island—is available in abundance. The political landscape of New York in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era emerges from city and state politicians that held office for decades after TR’s death. The Wilson-Roosevelt rivalry that dominated national politics helps to reconstruct an image of the World War I period and the sharp divergences in domestic and foreign policies between Republicans and Democrats. We can even travel along with the Rough Riders as they battle up San Juan Heights to glory.

Hermann Hagedorn regarded oral history as a resource that sparks reconsideration. In 1957, at his 75th birthday party, he reportedly pushed aside his birthday cake to explain how he would make Roosevelt’s 100th birthday a pivotal moment.<sup>44</sup> Hagedorn traipsed through the corridors of Congress, petitioning for a government-sponsored celebration and his efforts eventually led to a presidential commission, ostensibly led by President Eisenhower. But all the while, Hagedorn lurked as the figurehead, the maestro of Roosevelt’s legacy conducting the celebrations. He organized events across the country, and even internationally.<sup>45</sup> And his efforts did prompt reimagination. In history books, comics, radio shows, films and television, even theater productions, popular depictions of Theodore Roosevelt emphasized his patriotism, nationalism, heroism, and dedication to the environment. By 1958, the year Roosevelt would have turned 100, Hagedorn had successfully reignited public interest in his hero.

Oddly, the oral histories played a negligible part in the revival. Hagedorn made little use of them and the recordings remained locked away for decades. This book affords those with an interest in Roosevelt an opportunity to learn more from his family and friends. I determined to publish the collection in the hope that readers will find the interviews an additional source, akin to the published letters. The interviews present a colorful portrait of the Roosevelts and their times. Most importantly, it puts history in the words of those who lived it.

### A NOTE ON THE SOURCES

The typescripts produced by the Hagedorns include edits to make them read more fluidly, and in some cases the Hagedorns reordered the answers supplied by participants. “You’ll find that quite a bit has been done to rearrange the material since the original transcript was made,” Mary Hagedorn wrote to Corinne Robinson Alsop, “Dad and I jumped around

quite a bit in our questions, which did not make for good continuity!”<sup>46</sup> After the Hagedorns edited the transcripts, they sent them to participants for their approval, and in many cases the participants edited them again before lodging the interview with Columbia or the Theodore Roosevelt Association. Marie Bissell asked that a story she told be omitted from the final transcript, and this type of editing may have occurred in other testimonies. The administrative files of the project indicate that, in several cases, participants self-selected what the final transcript would emphasize or omit. The Hagedorns obliged participants wishing to make edits, but they also kept a master copy in their personal files.<sup>47</sup> Retrieving these files has led me to several archives, all of which are listed in the works consulted. The surviving audio recordings also prove that the Hagedorns made many minor adulterations to the transcripts, and some substantial revisions or omissions.

Oral history purists will balk at any editing as an unnecessary alteration that leaves too much an imprimatur of the interviewer or interviewee. While I agree, the Hagedorns would not have collected these testimonies without concessions like this because participants had deep apprehensions about recording in the first place. Corinne Robinson Alsop, for instance, limited access to her testimony for decades. Only the Hagedorns could access her transcript, until such a time as Mrs. Alsop unsealed the file. Mrs. Alsop also forbade transcripts going to Columbia, unless by special permission. She worried about her opinions being misconstrued. Likewise, Alice Roosevelt Longworth restricted access to her audio recordings and asked Mary Hagedorn if Allan Nevins would honor her request to keep them private. Unperturbed by what others inferred from her commentary, Mrs. Longworth instead complained of her diction, believing it unintelligible.

This book presents an honest reproduction, if not a perfect recreation of the interviews.<sup>48</sup> Each chapter explains what modifications have been made to original recordings or transcripts, and brackets any edits made to the original. Naturally, given the age of the recordings, some audio remains inaudible. Participants repeat words, as we do in speech, or make corrections. In these cases, the Hagedorns, or I, have edited the testimony to convey what the speaker had intended. If researchers seek the originals, they are now easy to locate. Following this note on sources, I have included a glossary of the interviews. The list will point a determined researcher to the original source material. Who knows, perhaps a keener ear can decipher Hermann Hagedorn’s baritone mumbling or Alice Roosevelt



Longworth's ramblings. What I can be confident about is that the material included in this book accurately reflects the testimony.

Oral history researchers make the point of investigating participants, as much as their testimony, and each chapter in this volume begins with an introduction of the speakers, their relationship to Roosevelt, and the key moments in the interview. The introductions also explain where testimony makes a contribution to historiographical debates surrounding Roosevelt's life and times.

## GLOSSARY OF INTERVIEWS

### *Corinne Robinson Alsop*

Theodore Roosevelt's niece

*Interview:* 23 November 1954, Avon, Connecticut, by Hermann and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Interview:* 9 December 1954, Avon, Connecticut, by Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Interview:* 28 December 1954, with William Sheffield Cowles and Margaret Krech Cowles, Farmington, Connecticut, by Herman and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives); Recording, 64 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

### *Karl Howell Behr*

Professional tennis player, banker, Roosevelt Non-partisan League

*Memoirs:* 1945, dictated to his daughter Sally Behr Pettit

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

### *Marie Truesdale Bissell*

Neighbor of Anna Roosevelt Cowles

*Interview:* November 1954, Farmington, Connecticut, by Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives); Recording, 25 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*William Merriam Chadbourne*

New York City Republican politician and lawyer; Fiorello LaGuardia's campaign manager

*Interview:* 8 May 1955, by Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History); Recording, 60 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Margaret Krech Cowles*

Theodore Roosevelt's niece (by marriage)

*Interview:* 22 November 1954, with William Sheffield Cowles Farmington, Connecticut, by Hermann and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History and Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Interview:* 28 December 1954, with William Sheffield Cowles and Corinne Robinson Alsop, Farmington, Connecticut, by Herman and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives); Recording, 64 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*William Sheffield Cowles*

Theodore Roosevelt's nephew

*Interview:* 22 November 1954, with Margaret Krech Cowles, Farmington, Connecticut, by Hermann and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History and Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Interview:* 28 December 1954, with Corinne Robinson Alsop and Margaret Krech Cowles, Farmington, Connecticut, by Herman and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives); Recording, 64 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Frederick Trubee Davison*

Friend of Theodore Roosevelt's youngest son Quentin Roosevelt  
*Interview:* 30 March 1955, New York City, by Hermann and  
Mary Hagedorn  
Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

*Ethel Roosevelt Derby*

Theodore Roosevelt's daughter  
*Interview:* n.d. [likely 1955], with Eleanor Butler Roosevelt, by Hermann  
and Mary Hagedorn  
Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Barclay H. Farr*

Neighbor of Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, friend of Theodore Roosevelt's  
son, Kermit Roosevelt  
*Interview:* 5 May 1953, Sagamore Hill, New York, by Hermann Hagedorn  
and Harlan Phillips  
Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

*Marian Knight Garrison*

Neighbor of Corinne Roosevelt Robinson; suffragist  
*Interview:* 25 April 1955, with Augusta Munn Tilney, Orange, New  
Jersey, by Mary Hagedorn  
Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Helen Sargant Hitchcock*

Neighbor of Corinne Roosevelt Robinson  
*Interview:* 25 August 1956, by Mary Hagedorn  
Recording, 32 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Stanley Myer Isaacs*

New York City politician

*Interview:* 1955, by Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

*Jesse Langdon*

Rough Rider, inventor

*Interview:* 10 July 1970, Lafayetteville, New York, by Douglas Scott

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

*Samuel McCune Lindsay*

Sociologist, Commissioner for Education (Puerto Rico)

*Interview:* April 1955, Winter Park, Florida

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

*Alice Roosevelt Longworth*

Theodore Roosevelt's daughter

*Interview:* 9 November 1954, Washington, D.C., by Herman and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)

*Interview:* 2 October 1955, Washington, D.C., by Mary Hagedorn  
Recording, 93 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Interview:* 2 January 1956, Washington, D.C., by Mary Hagedorn  
Partial transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives); Recording, 60 mins.  
(Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Philip J. McCook*

New York Supreme Court justice

*Interview:* 29 March 1955, New York City, by Mary Hagedorn

Recording, 33 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Ezra Parmalee Prentice*

New York politician

*Interview:* 28 June 1956, by Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History); Recording,  
9 mins. (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

*Helen Roosevelt Robinson*

Theodore Roosevelt's niece (by marriage); Franklin Roosevelt's cousin

*Interview:* 17 November 1955, by Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History or Sagamore  
Hill NPS Archives)

*Anna Eleanor Roosevelt*

Theodore Roosevelt's niece; First Lady of the United States

*Interview:* 18 January 1955, New York City, by Hermann and  
Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Eleanor Butler Roosevelt*

Theodore Roosevelt's daughter-in-law (married to Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.)

*Interview:* n.d. [likely 1955], with Ethel Roosevelt Derby, by Hermann  
and Mary Hagedorn

Transcript (Sagamore Hill NPS Archives)

*Murray T. Quigg*

Newspaper editor; son of Republican Party boss Lemuel Quigg

*Interview:* February 1950, by Owen Bombard

Transcript (Columbia University Center for Oral History)