

# DRIVING WITH FDR

## FDR'S COURAGE AND INGENUITY INSPIRE US STILL

A MINIBOOK™ BY STEFAN LONCE

Ninety years ago, on August 10, 1921, a date which will live in world history, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was suddenly attacked... by the polio virus.

Polio paralyzed FDR from the waist down. From August 11, 1921, until he died on April 12, 1945, FDR could "walk" only if he wore cumbersome metal leg braces and held onto someone's arm, while using a cane.

I know a lot about FDR because I grew up in Buchanan, NY, a Hudson River town 35 miles south of Hyde Park, where FDR was born on January 30, 1882. I went on many school trips to the FDR Library & Museum in Hyde Park, which the 32nd President of the United States designed himself!

That's how I knew that, even after he was paralyzed by polio, FDR could drive. I had seen FDR's 1936 Ford convertible, with hand controls for the accelerator, brakes and clutch, at the FDR Library. The car also has a cool 1930's gadget that dispenses lit cigarettes, which FDR chain smoked, using a cigarette holder clenched jauntily between his teeth.

However, it wasn't until I started working on a book about vanity license plates entitled "LCNS2ROM – LICENSE TO ROAM," that I learned FDR had vanity PL8S on his hand-



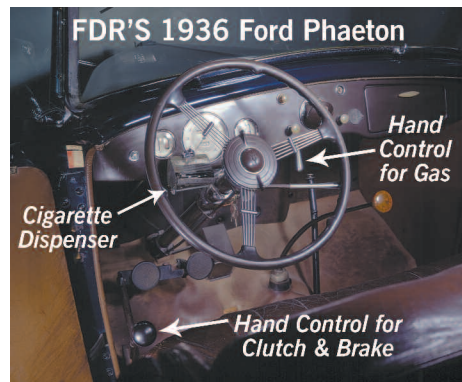
controlled cars in Warm Springs, Georgia, where he founded a polio clinic.

I also learned that FDR had designed the hand controls! Being able to drive again, even though he couldn't walk, gave FDR hope, and confidence. For FDR, every day from August 10, 1921, until April 12, 1945, was a physical struggle.



Winston Churchill meets FDR, aided in walking by his son, Elliott, at the "Atlantic Conference."

U.S. Navy Historical Center



Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

"Driving his own car was the ultimate freedom for FDR. Unable to get out of bed without assistance, driving was one of the few moving things he could accomplish by himself, and be completely independent," Lynn Bassanese, the Acting Director of the FDR Library, explains.

"Driving the specially equipped cars was liberating for FDR," says Dr. Christopher Breiseth, the former president of the Roosevelt Institute, which preserves the legacy and values of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

"Driving provided [FDR with] freedom, relaxation and mobility, and a welcome change of scene for an often harassed man otherwise reliant on a wheelchair," Geoff Ward wrote in *Closest Companion*.

Driving, while simultaneously smoking, talking, and operating the hand controls, relaxed FDR, but it upset some of his passengers.

Britain's King George VI and Queen Elizabeth came to Hyde Park for the famous "Hot Dog Picnic" on June 11, 1939, and went **DRIVING WITH FDR**. "There were several times when I thought we could go right off the road and tumble down the hills. It was frightening, but quite exhilarating," the Queen told Conrad Black, who wrote *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*. Everyone knew that war was coming. The Royals knew that, without America's help, Britain could not defeat Nazi Germany.



FDR drives the Royals in Hyde Park.

FDR Presidential Library

FDR sent the British the weapons and supplies they needed because he understood the menace that Hitler posed to *everyone*. Because he spoke and read German fluently, FDR wasn't dependent on watered-down English translations that softened the hateful Nazi venom Hitler spewed. Hitler was contemptuous of FDR, whom he dismissed as a cripple.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill also understood, before almost anyone else, the menace that Hitler posed. Churchill became FDR's GR8 friend and WW2 ally. Of course, Churchill went **DRIVING WITH FDR** in Hyde Park.

"Churchill was impressed with Roosevelt's driving but was a bit uneasy when the president would roar up to the 'grass verges of the precipices over the Hudson.' The prime minister offered a silent prayer: 'I hoped,' Churchill recalled, 'the mechanical devices and brakes would show no defects,'" Jon Meacham wrote in *Franklin and Winston*.

Frances Perkins, whom FDR appointed as Secretary of Labor – the first female Cabinet officer – also went **DRIVING WITH FDR**. The President "took great

pleasure in taking a visitor around in his car. He loved the road to the [Hudson] river, down a steep embankment through beautiful woodland,” Perkins wrote.

Together, Perkins and Roosevelt masterminded the Social Security Act, the New Deal’s most important and enduring legislative legacy. I will be forever grateful to Secretary Perkins and President Roosevelt, because the Social Security survivors’ benefits that my mother, my 5 brothers, and I received after my father died made it possible for my mother to preserve our family.

FDR and his family – his remarkable wife, Eleanor, their children Anna, James, FDR Jr., Elliott and John, and FDR’s domineering but devoted mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt -- loved driving and dining *alfresco*. The Roosevelts would climb into FDR’s Ford Phaeton, put the top down, and drive around, stopping to talk with people they met along the way, and to picnic.

Franklin and Eleanor, who were fifth cousins, were very different. He was secure and gregarious; she was insecure and shy. He loved gossip and small talk; she was all business. He loved cocktails; she abhorred liquor (her father was an alcoholic).

FDR and ER were alike, in certain ways, however. They both were tall (he was 6’ 2”; she was 5’10”); they both loved to dance, to ride horses, to swim, and to read. They both loved animals, especially FDR’s dog, Fala. FDR was also an avid angler, philatelist, and a superb sailor.

Neither FDR, nor ER, cared much about what they wore or what they ate. The Roosevelt White House “cuisine” was notoriously inedible; guests learned to eat *before* they arrived. The conversation, however, was always scintillating. FDR was a GRØ story-teller and actor; he was a talented mimic, who was naturally funny; FDR was fun!

Although they lived in an age of rampant racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, FDR and ER were remarkably unprejudiced. They saw people for *who* they were, not *what* they were.

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent,” ER said.

“Whoever seeks to set one religion against another seeks to destroy all religions,” FDR said. FDR was a profoundly religious and spiritual Episcopalian. When a young reporter asked President Roosevelt what his philosophy was, he replied, “Philosophy? I am a Christian and a Democrat, that’s all.”



On August 14, 1935, FDR signed the Social Security Act into law. Frances Perkins is standing behind FDR.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” President Roosevelt famously said in his first inaugural address. The next day, FDR temporarily closed the banks. On March 9th, he signed the Emergency Banking Act, which authorized the U.S. Government to inspect the banks’ books, permanently close the insolvent banks, and help the surviving banks reopen.

On March 12th, FDR broadcast his first radio Fireside Chat, speaking conversationally, as if he were chatting with an old friend. “I can assure you that it is safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than under the mattress,” he said. It worked! When the banks reopened, deposits exceeded withdrawals, because Americans trusted President Roosevelt!

FDR gave only 31 Fireside Chats during his 12 years as President. “Almost everyone listened to FDR’s Fireside Chats; he made Americans feel confident once again,” Chris Breiseth explains.

The New Deal put Americans back to work. On April 5, 1933, FDR created the Civilian Conservation Corps, which “brought together two of Roosevelt’s most deeply held values: work and conservation,” Jonathan Alter wrote in *The Defining Moment*. By July 1st, almost 275,000 recently unemployed men were working for the CCC, planting trees and restoring the degraded American environment.

A huge public works program built new highways, bridges, airports, parks, schools, and government buildings (including 5 post offices FDR designed)!



Inauguration Day, March 4, 1933



FDR at his Birthday “Toga Party” on January 30, 1934 flanked by ER and daughter Anna.



FDR visiting a Civilian Conservation Corps camp on August 12, 1933.

FDR persuaded Americans to hope again, but the Depression continued; prices and wages continued to drop. No one knew how to stop deflation, so FDR got Congress to pass the National Industrial Recovery Act, which tried to limit competition in business, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which paid farmers not to grow food or livestock. Both laws tried to raise prices and wages, but the Supreme Court ruled they were unconstitutional (on May 27, 1935, and on January 6, 1936, respectively). FDR feared that the Court would invalidate other New Deal laws.

On November 3, 1936, FDR was re-elected, in a 46-state landslide. On February 5, 1937, he announced a plan to expand the Supreme Court by naming a new justice for every justice who was over 70.5 years old, up to 6 new justices. FDR disingenuously claimed that the 9 old men who were the Supreme Court justices couldn't keep up with their dockets.

Had he paid more attention when he was a student at Columbia Law School, the President would have realized that his "Court Packing Plan" was unworkable. Conservative Democrats teamed up with Republicans to kill the Plan, creating an alliance that would defeat most new New Deal legislation. Then, on April 12, 1937, the Supreme Court upheld the National Labor Relations Act, which allowed workers to unionize. FDR withdrew his Plan.

In 1938, President Roosevelt tried to purge recalcitrant Democratic Senators and Representatives. With one exception, however, the incumbents all won their primaries. Politically, FDR appeared weak; physically, he was frustrated, tired, and tense.

To escape the tension in Washington, FDR would go to Warm Springs or Hyde Park, where he could drive. By the way, FDR's license plate on his 1936 Ford in Hyde Park says 3 (in NY, the Governor's plate says 1 and the Lieutenant Governor's plate says 2). When Hyde Parkers, or the police, saw the dark blue Ford with that plate, they knew whose car it was. FDR *wanted* people to recognize him by his license PL8.

The tension in the White House got much worse in 1939. Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1st, starting WW2. Most Americans virulently opposed getting involved.

FDR "believed, in direct contrast to the opinion of his military chiefs... that if the U.S. did everything in its power to help, the Allies would somehow survive until... America could get itself into... the war," Doris Kearns



U.S. National Archives

Goodwin wrote in *No Ordinary Time*.

Selling weapons to the British and the French also created jobs for Americans. From 1933 – 1936, the economy had grown. But FDR hated budget deficits, so, in early 1937, he cut spending, unwittingly precipitating the "Roosevelt Recession." He had to reverse course and increase spending again.

The New Deal left a lasting legislative legacy, including laws establishing the federal minimum wage, the 40 hour workweek, and unemployment insurance. Other laws created bank deposit insurance, and required accurate financial disclosures by issuers of stocks and bonds. President Roosevelt ended Prohibition, which made many people very happy, but made FDR (who loved Martinis) happier still: alcoholic beverage taxes are very lucrative for the federal and state governments.

The New Deal didn't end the Depression, however; WW2 did.

On November 5, 1940, FDR was re-elected to a 3rd term. On December 7, 1941, headlines screamed, "JAPS BOMB HAWAII!" FDR was distraught by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but he stayed calm, as always. He radiated confidence the next day, when he told Congress, "The American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."

"Roosevelt used simple words, concrete examples and everyday analogies to make his points," Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote. For example, on December 17, 1940 FDR announced "Lend-Lease," the plan he had devised after England couldn't pay for the weapons and supplies FDR was sending, without which they would have lost the War. FDR told reporters, "Suppose my neighbor's home catches on fire.... If he can take my garden hose...I may help to put out his fire. If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it." Congress passed Lend-Lease!

To win the War, America had to become the "great arsenal of democracy," as FDR put it. Americans had to produce far more planes, ships, tanks, guns, etc. than our enemies did. That meant FDR had to make peace with the many American businessmen who loathed him and his New Deal, so they would make all the planes, ships, tanks, guns, etc. that we needed to win the War.

"Roosevelt never understood the... business community, nor could he make out why it didn't like him," Frances Perkins wrote. However, during WW2, FDR learned to work with businessmen -- they were almost all men, then -- to produce what the Allies -- the U.S., Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Soviet Union -- needed to win the War.



FDR was a masterful Commander-in-Chief who chose his generals wisely and didn't micro-manage them. He appointed General George Marshall as Army Chief-of-Staff. He promoted General Dwight Eisenhower three times until, as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Eisenhower masterminded the D-Day Normandy Landings on June 6, 1944, which liberated Western Europe from Nazi tyranny.



FDR & General Dwight D. Eisenhower

Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library

FDR "should have been far bolder in 1942 and 1943 after the U.S. government began learning about Hitler's death camps," Michael Beschloss wrote in *The Conquerors*. President Roosevelt should have admitted more Jewish refugees, but should he have bombed Auschwitz and the other Nazi death camps?

"Mainstream Jewish opinion was against the whole idea of bombing Auschwitz. The very thought of the Allied forces deliberately killing Jews – to open the gates of Auschwitz so the survivors could run where? – was abhorrent then as it is now," Ambassador William vanden Heuvel, the former chair of the Roosevelt Institute, wrote. FDR had said that the best way to save the Jews of Europe was to win the War.

During WW2, FDR would escape from Washington and go to Warm Springs or Hyde Park, where he could relax... and where he could drive. When Churchill went **DRIVING WITH FDR** at Hyde Park, they would decide what to do next about the war, which the PM thought was a very efficient way to hold a meeting.

What hasn't been recognized, until now, however, is how important being able to drive, after he could no longer walk, was to FDR, and to world history.

Here's what I mean. If FDR had not been able to drive, then he would not have run for Governor of New York in 1928. FDR had not wanted to run that year; he was still working on his walking in Warm Springs. But the NY Democrats drafted him, so he ran. To dispel Republican attacks that he was a "cripple," FDR campaigned vigorously; photographs of FDR driving helped prove his virility and helped him win the election.

Being able to drive, using hand controls he designed, also gave FDR confidence that he could overcome his disability, which undoubtedly helped persuade him to run 1928. If FDR had not been elected Governor in 1928, he would not have been elected President in 1932, and he would not have been able to arm America and aid the Allies in 1940 and 1941.

Hitler would have won the War.

I wish I could tell you more about FDR and the War... but I'm running

out of space. Suffice it to say that FDR's courage and ingenuity inspire me. When I need to think creatively, I often ask myself, "What Would FDR Do?"

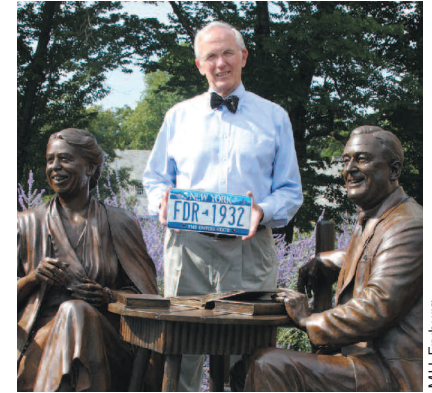
I agree with Chris Breiseth, who says, "We live in a world that Franklin Roosevelt largely made." Chris is the editor, with Kirstin Downey, of *A Promise to All Generations: Stories & Essays about Social Security & Frances Perkins*, which includes my essay, "Social Security Preserved My Family."

"FDR's vanity plates were a form of self-expression for him. You get a vanity plate to send a message," Chris explains. Like FDR, Chris is vanitized: his NY vanity PL8 says, FDR 1932.

To make this calendar more fun, and to encourage you to study the photographs carefully, I hid a simplified image of Chris's PL8 in each photo. See how long it takes you to find it.

People who see Chris's vanity PL8 often stop to chat with him about Social Security, or the New Deal, or the War, or Eleanor, or Fala. After all, Chris vanitized so that people who see his PL8 would stop to chat with him about FDR.

FDR would have liked that.



Chris Breiseth, proudly displays his vanity PL8 at the FDR Library.

MH Fryburg



## DRIVING WITH FDR 2012 COLLECTIBLE CALENDAR

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Please read the back cover to learn how to use this calendar, and visit my web site: [www.DrivingWithFDR.com](http://www.DrivingWithFDR.com)

### Here are some GR8 places to visit:

- FDR Library (Hyde Park, NY): [www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu)
- Roosevelt Institute (Hyde Park, NY): [www.RooseveltInstitute.org](http://www.RooseveltInstitute.org)
- Little White House (Warm Springs, GA): [www.gastateparks.org/LittleWhiteHouse](http://www.gastateparks.org/LittleWhiteHouse)
- Roosevelt Campobello International Park (Maine/NS): [www.nps.gov/roca/index](http://www.nps.gov/roca/index)
- Frances Perkins Center (New Castle, ME): [www.FrancesPerkinsCenter.org](http://www.FrancesPerkinsCenter.org)
- Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, KS): [www.eisenhower.archives.gov](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov)