



Franklin D. Roosevelt American Heritage Center Museum

The Frances Perkins I Knew

Originally Written in 1966 by

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Dr. Christopher N. Breiseth in 1966 was a young assistant professor at Williams College when he wrote the following, previously unpublished essay, "The Frances Perkins I Knew," the year following her death. The essay explains the opportunity Breiseth had during his graduate school days at Cornell University to live with Frances Perkins at the Telluride House on campus with a group of thirty male students. She accepted and spent the final five years of her life in the house while continuing her teaching in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

During Breiseth's time at Williams College, he had two leaves of absence, the first to serve as a policy officer in the Community Action Program of the War on Poverty in 1967 and 1968. He then received a post doctoral fellowship in Black Studies from the Danforth Foundation for study at the University of Chicago in 1970-1971. From Chicago he went to the new Sangamon State University in Springfield, Illinois (now the University of Illinois at Springfield) where he taught history from 1971 to 1984, save for three years (1980-1983) when he served as president of Deep Springs College in California. From 1984 to 2001 he was president of Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. After announcing his retirement from Wilkes in 2000, he was asked to be the first president and CEO in residence in Hyde Park, New York of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. He served in that capacity from September 4, 2001 until March 1, 2006. At present he is president emeritus of the Roosevelt Institute and continues to be actively involved in the Institute's programs.

Many Americans remember Frances Perkins for her tri-corn hats, or for her bristling relations with the press during more than twelve years as Secretary of Labor and first woman cabinet member, or for her authorship of the Social Security Act. Few realized, however, when they read in May 1965 of her death at 83, that Miss Perkins lived the last years of her life with students. She not only taught in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, but actually lived with thirty young men at Telluride House on the Cornell campus. Those of us who lived in the house at any time between 1960 and 1965 had the rare opportunity of knowing one of America's most remarkable reformers.



She was not the first celebrity to live at Telluride House. Since its founding in 1910 by L. L. Nunn, a pioneer in the development of electrical power in the West, the house has been host to great scientists, philosophers, historians, writers, theologians, politicians and artists. Through the Telluride Association Nunn hoped to encourage qualities of leadership by exposing his student trustees to the practical responsibilities of protecting and perpetuating the Association's original \$500,000 endowment. Central to the young Association members' education was the opportunity to live with accomplished men and women and from intimate contact with them to be inspired for lives of service. Only three of the distinguished visitors became permanent guests – George Lincoln Burr, George Holland Sabine and Frances Perkins, all of whom spent their last years at Telluride House.

Miss Perkins had already been a faculty member at Cornell for three years when we summoned the courage to invite her to live with us in the spring of 1960. We tendered our invitation at "rushing" dinner where we showed our "pledge" the small yellow room with private bath in the northwest corner of the second floor which could be hers, "How much would it cost?" she asked. Like everybody else at Telluride, I assured her, she would be on room and board scholarship, a fact that surprised and pleased her. As she drove off to the quiet residential club where she lived, Miss Perkins turned to her friends, Maurice and Hinda Neufeld. "Do you know what those boys have done?" Neufeld indicated they had known of our plans for some time. "What am I going to do?" "You have to accept of course," he replied. "Why," she observed, "I feel like a bride on her wedding night."

The marriage was a success from the first day. All fears we had of maintaining our student vices in the presence of a 78 year-old Boston lady were quickly dispelled. With no house-motherly inclinations, she entered fully into house activities and at our parties drank bourbon with the boys. Exceptionally alert to all issues, from dating to foreign policy, Miss Perkins found the intimate contact with students stimulating despite the inevitable inconveniences of living amongst the debris of student life, not to mention the Bach, Bartok and Brubeck blaring forth from the stereo beneath her bedroom. Never did she expect us to change because of her. She watched the process of self government in our small community with respect, albeit with occasional amusement. She was dubious when the students decided to give up the houseman to save money. After the experiment had lasted a few weeks, she wrote to me that "the boys make a gallant effort to *clean* but by Sunday night [the house] is likely to be a shambles." Another houseman was soon hired. She herself took charge of the gardening around the front of the house. With her crew she weeded, set in new plants, and was the first to go searching in spring for the crocuses and daffodils she had planted in the fall.

She faithfully attended Monday night house meetings, even though she rarely spoke (except in loud, influential whispers to the students next to her). Her official relations with the house were scrupulous; she always went through the house president or the appropriate committee chairman when she had a request or a suggestion. In turn we consulted her on questions of protocol and our labor-management relations. "You only find out how valuable a competent servant is after he has left," she warned us when we were discussing our cook's request for a wage increase. She even sat in on our membership selection discussions with a combination of bravery and gruesome fascination. Although never openly critical of our procedures in this or any other area, she admitted when asked for her opinion that she was distressed by the tendency at Telluride, and in the best colleges and universities, to limit admission to those who have excelled academically, while giving only secondary consideration to the C student who may have great character and leadership potential. "Franklin Roosevelt would never be admitted to a first-class college today," she declared in our last conversation. This was no less disturbing for American society, she indicated, than for the Franklin Roosevelts who are lightweights when young but become heavyweights as they face personal tragedies and unexpected heavy responsibilities.



Whatever her thoughts about our selection criteria, she watched the development of individuals at Telluride with great interest and became a close friend to many. She faced each new house with a sense of nostalgia for those lost to graduation the previous June, but with a keen interest in the new recruits. In September 1963 she wrote to me that “Telluride is a strange place with a lot of little boys, a couple of graduate students, and two seniors. I dare say we shall soon begin to identify each other by distinguishing marks of mental and physical shape but at present we are still mulling around. The recently married men have begun to bring their ladies for introduction and so all is gradually becoming familiar.” Her interest in us as individuals extended to our families and the girls we dated. She gave a two-week series of seminars at U.C.L.A. in early 1963 and visited my parents at their home in West Los Angeles. They prepared for the visit by purchasing new glasses and the best sherry they could find. When offered the special treat, proper for proper ladies, she looked a bit disappointed. “Well, if that’s all you have,” she replied. “I usually have bourbon and branchwater.”

To my wife and me upon our marriage – a union she had been encouraging from the sidelines – she wrote: “Dear Jane and Chris, My best wishes to you as you begin your life together. May you be happy, of course, but may you be more useful to the world – more perceptive of human need and more able to help it in double harness, than the sum total of your two *separate* lives. God bless you both and help you in your quest for truth and kindness. With love, Frances Perkins.” As a wedding present she gave us four of her grandmother’s Royal Worcester tea plates.

Each June she gave the graduating seniors copies of *Gracian’s Truthtelling Manual and the Art of Worldly Wisdom* to send them on their way. This was no sentimental gift, but a sparkling reminder to be one’s best ally in the world. One other tangible gift that we all received was an annual, fresh, Maine lobster dinner which Miss Perkins planned down to the bouquets on the table, both liquid and floral.

Her greatest contribution to us, of course, was to our understanding of American history. In the relaxed conversations that took place at any time of the day or night, she shared her eventful life with us. The scope of these conversations may be conveyed from my notes of one Sunday morning brunch in February 1963. We asked her how she knew so many prominent people so soon after graduation from Mount Holyoke in 1902. She met many in Mrs. Bush’s rooming house in Greenwich, Connecticut, where friendships with Muckrakers, women suffragettes, Bull Moose adherents, musicians, authors and social workers were easily made. Being one of the youngest, Miss Perkins slept in a back room without heat, although being over the kitchen she at least got the cooking odors.

One of the authors she came to know at Mrs. Bush’s was Sidney Porter, better known as O. Henry. Miss Perkins told how an editor friend received the first short story from O. Henry with a post office box return address. The editor returned the story with editing alterations and weeks passed before it came back. This process was repeated as new stories continued to come from O. Henry, but only after long periods of no communication with his editor. If someone could write like O. Henry, the editor thought, and wanted privacy he should be given privacy. Several years later Porter showed up – after serving his time in prison for forgery. Miss Perkins herself found him a sensitive, quiet person with marvelous facility for creating a story free from personal introspection – a facility she thought modern authors lack.

The Bull Moose Party inspired her progressive views, she explained in answer to a further question. She was not a member of the party, nor as a woman could she even vote, but the type of social concern of the Bull Moosers, like that of their New Deal successors, strongly attracted her. Mention of the New Deal recalled her efforts as Secretary of Labor to organize state conferences on labor to encourage state initiative in coping with problems of unemployment



and working conditions. She managed to convince Governor Gene Talmadge to host such a conference in Georgia. At the dinner held during the meeting of state and Labor Department officials, Talmadge turned to the Secretary and, referring to her as a New Yorker, declared that Georgia, the greatest state in the world, was free of New York's major problem. "We are all from strong Anglo Saxon stock," he boasted, "all good old English, Scotch and Irish." Miss Perkins fought the temptation to ask what "all those black things" were walking around. She resisted because she wanted the conference to succeed; the working conditions of Negroes must be brought up at the proper moment. When at last she raised the issue, ol' Gene assured her the "Negras" had no problems. "We treat them right and keep them happy," he insisted. When the conference held its working session in the Legislative Chamber, a group of Negroes selected by W. E. B. Du Bois were sitting in the balcony. Miss Perkins sent a note asking them to come down on the main floor. The message provoked a flurry of conversation in the balcony and a reply was sent down to her saying that it was illegal for Negroes to come on the main floor – even at the direction of the Federal Government. To make her sympathies known Miss Perkins addressed an overflow friendly crowd that night at a Negro Baptist Church. She remembered each Negro speaker prefacing his remarks by declaring that his father or grandfather had fought for the Grey.

The need for prayer to begin a public meeting in Georgia reminded her of a similar regulation in Missouri. During the 1928 Presidential Campaign she was speaking at an Al Smith rally in Independence. When she got to the hall with Senator Hawes there were only a few people inside, although an enormous crowd was milling around outside. Senator Hawes was nervous and became more concerned when he learned that because of Smith's Catholicism no Protestant preacher had agreed to open the meeting with the necessary prayer. Finally a young townsman named Harry Truman was deputized to find the local Mormon Elder, even though he was Republican and long-winded. Truman succeeded and the meeting began legally. Apparently Truman has referred to this as his first appointment. Miss Perkins began her speech with complimentary remarks about local Democratic Party officials. All of a sudden a tomato came whizzing through the air, making contact with her white blouse. Her grandmother's advice came to her: when something goes wrong, pretend that everything is all right and carry on. That she did, and despite a few more tomatoes and eggs she got through her speech. Outside she greeted the crowd, shook hands and joked about the incident. "That's politics," she told Senator Hawes.

Those are some of the anecdotes of one Sunday morning's brunch session. On other occasions she enjoyed talking about the people closest to her. Al Smith, next to Franklin Roosevelt, was perhaps her favorite politician and she continued to puzzle out loud about the rift between the two. In writing her final book, *The Al Smith I Knew*, this problem bothered her deeply. None of the obvious explanations adequately accounted for the bitter falling out of her two chiefs.

Beyond the realm of politics, of course, there was a wife, mother and grandmother. Miss Perkins retained a strong sense of privacy about her family life with her husband, Paul Wilson, and her daughter Susana. Their lives were their own business and this policy, forged to meet the glare of publicity when Miss Perkins came to Washington, remained even in the years after Mr. Wilson's death in 1952. But those who think primarily of Miss Perkins as the efficient career woman using her maiden name, however, did not know the proud grandmother of Tomlin Wilson Coggeshall. We heard a great deal about his wit, his schooling, his talents, his future. Indeed, as Miss Perkins looked ahead she seemed to think in terms of the world he would occupy, first as a college student, then as an adult.

Knowing from our conversations with her that Miss Perkins was extremely fond of Henry Wallace, we proposed in late 1962 that she invite him to Telluride House for a weekend of seminars on the New Deal. She liked



the idea but worried that Wallace, who had retreated from public view since the election debacle of 1948, would not be inclined to come. She began her letter to him with reference to their recent meeting at Eleanor Roosevelt's funeral. "I could not help remembering the day in April when you, Jim Farley, and I stood in the rose garden to witness the Christian burial of Franklin Roosevelt. That occasion seemed very fearful and tragic, while this occasion was the funeral of a good woman who had lived and acted according to her lights and who had finished her course. But it was comforting to be with you as it was in 1945." From there she moved into the proposal for a weekend at Cornell. She concluded by saying the boys would be terribly disappointed if he did not come and urged him not to say no.

Wallace flew into Ithaca on a Saturday morning in spring looking healthy, happy, and save for his snow white hair, not much older than in his pictures from the late 1940's. He quickly indicated that his primary interests were in strawberries and in developing a tropical corn for the Caribbean countries. The New Deal was the furthest thing from his mind. He suggested to his old friend that we talk about Latin America "which might at least be useful." We held him to the prearranged topic and the first session on New Deal agricultural policy displayed his forced concern until almost the end of the meeting when he and Madame Secretary began debating the conflicting merits of rural and urban America. He viewed with horror an America in two decades with less than 5% of the population living on the land. Were he a younger man, he would consider leaving a United States facing such a prospect. His evangelical fervor disintegrated as he caught the lack of concern on Miss Perkins's face and he humorously acknowledged that they never had agreed on the liabilities of growing up on the sidewalks of New York. Throughout their discussion Wallace expressed an almost passionate belief in the virtues of the soil that quite startled a young audience expecting to glimpse the left-wing Wallace of 1948 rather than the mid-western populist. Of course, Wallace was not one or the other. He was both and more. We saw the mid-western farmer and the eastern intellectual, the plant breeder and the academic economist, the politician and the prophet, the critic of the Cold War and the opponent of big government, a man at one time gregarious and at another reflective and removed. Miss Perkins had discouraged us from bringing up the election of 1948 which had plunged Wallace into a private world, stripped of many old friendships. But at a house beer party on Saturday night a young lady breathlessly informed Wallace of how proud she was to have worked for his election in 1948. "You're mighty courageous to mention that out loud," he replied with a twinkle in his eye, and went on to talk quite freely about the motley coalition he had tried to lead.

In the second seminar Miss Perkins painted a picture of the urban distress in 1933 to supplement Wallace's earlier description of the agricultural depression. She stated her conviction that no well-formulated New Deal program existed in March 1933. The New Deal evolved as men and women with a basic belief in the responsibility of government to protect people from economic forces and hardships beyond their control responded to the many problems of the depression on a day to day basis. "We had," Miss Perkins explained, "to teach people to take care of themselves, and the goal at first was to take the edge off human misery." She demonstrated the lack of a plan by describing the implementation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, one of Roosevelt's own ideas. His first thought was to get miserable men off the streets of cities into the countryside. When Miss Perkins first heard the idea she envisaged New York bums marching into the Adirondacks and getting lost. After the initial planning nightmares, Miss Perkins and her colleagues pieced together an expedient solution which involved select recruitment by the Department of Labor, uniforms and tents from the Army, and supervision by the Forestry Service. This give and take, trial and error, she insisted, was the way the New Deal developed, not from some ideologically inspired social blueprint.

At the Sunday morning session Wallace and Miss Perkins discussed their boss. Wallace recalled Roosevelt's technique of instigating disagreements among members of his cabinet. Although a somewhat messy technique for running the government, it seemed to work by encouraging originality in devising solutions to the multitude of



seemingly intractable problems. Roosevelt, they agreed, was unusually receptive to new ideas if they were explained in common sense terms. He usually made up his mind while talking, Miss Perkins recalled, and indicated in his thinking aloud that his father's judgment and that of a neighbor named Moses in Dutchess County, New York were yardsticks against which he measured the new ideas. Those advisors were most successful in selling their programs who could make Roosevelt relate their proposals to his own experience. Miss Perkins recalled the verbal hurdles she had to jump over to convince F.D.R. that coverage under the proposed Social Security program of the "half-old" – those workers included in the program who were already close to retirement – was not the same as a dole. The whole Social Security schema was jeopardized by the President's veto until Miss Perkins changed the language, though not the original features of the plan, so that F.D.R. did not think he was agreeing to the dole.

Wallace complained that Roosevelt did not listen to him in cabinet meetings, although the President read his memoranda carefully. "The Chief did not listen to you," Miss Perkins gently remarked, "because you talked too much." One had to fasten Roosevelt's mind on a subject or the President would think of a hundred other topics while nodding in agreement to whatever was said. This characteristic, Miss Perkins suggested, partly explained why Harold Ickes and others thought themselves betrayed by F.D.R. when he opposed projects he had seemed to agree to in just such a nodding way. Miss Perkins outlined her method for holding Roosevelt's attention. First she made her proposal in a brief written summary and took it to the President. After telling him what she was proposing and what action he must authorize, she listed the difficulties likely to follow the adoption of her recommendation. When he agreed to her proposal, she then repeated the action sanctioned. Finally she asked Roosevelt to repeat what he had agreed to. After such a session, Miss Perkins explained, he never forgot the proposals, nor the arguments behind them, even many years later. Such a technique, she added, also works well with eight-year old boys.

The obvious devotion of both old friends to Roosevelt overshadowed their occasional criticisms of him. His unflinching optimism in those dark days of the 1930's, Wallace asserted, was "providential for America." He may have entertained some faulty schemes (Miss Perkins recalled his enthusiasm for a new system of weights and measures employing "ergs"), but he was essentially receptive to any and all ideas that would help ease the suffering of men and women like those Miss Perkins had taken him to see in the sweater factory in Dutchess County. As we neared the end of the seminar Wallace recalled Roosevelt's death and wondered if his friend remembered when they stood together beside the grave at Hyde Park. She nodded slightly. "Do you remember what you said as you crossed yourself?" Wallace asked. Somewhat flustered, as if an area of privacy had unexpectedly been touched, Miss Perkins replied, quietly, "Why, yes. I said, 'Rest his soul.'" "Yes," Wallace concluded, "and you said it as if you thought it was a particularly restless soul."

The weekend had been a wonderful experience. Wallace even managed to pick up some new corn varieties from a fellow plant geneticist at Cornell after escaping from a reception we were holding in his honor. He later told James Farley how much he had enjoyed the stay at Telluride House, and Miss Perkins soon lined up Farley for the following spring. The Farley-Perkins seminar in April 1964 centered around questions of practical politics. While Miss Perkins tried to push the discussion towards more abstract issues involving the nature of the New Deal, Farley always brought it back to the lobby of the Blackstone Hotel, with one superb political anecdote after another. If Wallace had left his reception to pick up corn seeds, Farley left his to visit a local Tompkins County politician in the hospital, whose recovery was almost instantaneous after the soul-healing shock of seeing Farley stride into his room. The Telluride students and Miss Perkins in the spring of 1965 attempted to induce Henry Morgenthau to make the trip to Ithaca for such a seminar. Alas, it was not possible.



Watching her deft handling of old colleagues like Wallace and Farley taught us anew that we lived with a consummate politician. We were accustomed to her flawless reception manner in which a firm handshake and a “How very good to see you” set any visitor at ease. To see her with fellow professionals impressed us all the more. Her inviolable honesty and her penetrating intelligence enabled her to judge allies as well as enemies with a cool, unemotional shrewdness. Whatever her judgment of a man, she was able to mix and fight on his side if the cause required it. Without such flexibility a female Boston Brahmin might have suffered more difficulty than she experienced when dealing with Democratic politicians in Albany or in Washington, and with the nation’s labor leaders – men who held the key to her success in promoting social welfare legislation. She was basically generous in her assessment of human beings, with all their blemishes included (although I must admit that Alfred Sloan, Richard Nixon and Harold Ickes did not score terribly well in her book). Her knowledge of the highs and lows of life was combined with a rather uncomplicated but fervent Episcopalian faith to make her basically tolerant.

The consummate politician and the tolerant Christian lady were displayed in an encounter with Jimmy Hoffa during his visit to Cornell in early 1963. His relationships with the Kennedys and the Justice Department at this period were not particularly cozy. When she heard boys in the house speaking of Hoffa before his visit as the Hitler of the American labor movement, she offered some words of caution. John L. Lewis once looked as evil as Hoffa did in 1963, she reminded us. Given a chance to weather his current problems Hoffa might become in old age as benign and respectable as the old coal miner. On the other hand, she did not want to confront Hoffa publicly because of the press attention it might encourage, so she did not attend his lecture. However, at a Telluride reception following the lecture Hoffa asked to meet Miss Perkins. She conveyed her regrets through a student intermediary. Hoffa persisted in his request. By this time she was dressed for bed, with a 7:30 a.m. bus departure for Washington planned for the next morning. When the student returned to her door with Hoffa’s demand, she announced that the former Secretary of Labor would not be guilty of refusing to see one of the nation’s major union leaders. She dressed and came down into the living room at 11 p.m. where more than 150 people were tightly drawn around Hoffa who was handling himself skillfully. When she appeared, people fell back to form an unobstructed aisle between the two. Hoffa jumped up from the sofa and bounded towards her with an outstretched hand. “I always wanted to meet you Madame Perkins to tell you how good you done in ending unemployment.” (sic) From beneath her tri-corn hat she smilingly rejected his compliment. “Come now, Mr. Hoffa, you know as well as I do that the war and not the New Deal overcame unemployment.” That ended the interview and Hoffa retreated to the students. She turned to Hoffa’s lawyer, Sidney Zagreb, and almost demurely asked if the Teamsters still organized by hijacking non-union trucks in New Jersey. His somewhat flustered denials were not awfully convincing. Having rendered her respects to the Teamsters she went back to bed.

She was a curious partisan of the Democratic Party. On the one hand, she was reluctant to criticize any holder of high office, Republican or Democrat. Mr. Hoover and Mr. Eisenhower were both beneficiaries of this generosity. On the other hand, she was ready to fight openly for the official nominee of the Democratic Party with appropriate partisan zeal; but she was not usually ready to take sides among Democrats and waited until the official choice was made before giving her public support. When I first met her in early 1960 I asked her whom she-favored for the Democratic presidential nomination. Her favorite, she told me, was definitely Lyndon Johnson of Texas whom she described as a brilliant politician. During our last visit in April 1965 she revealed that she had been asked to endorse Johnson in 1960 but had reluctantly refused, not wanting to take partisan advantage of her former high office. Nonetheless, when Kennedy received the party’s nod, she campaigned for him with enthusiasm despite rather severe reservations about him personally.



As a Boston Brahmin, a Democrat, a friend of labor, she watched the Kennedy career with fascination. Her reservation about the President and his brother Robert, as she expressed it to me in private, was that they seemed intent on solving all the problems of mankind in four years. In her own area of competence, she found this zeal disquieting because it seemed to be leading towards compulsory arbitration as the rule rather than the exception in labor-management negotiations. The premium placed on speedy, efficient solutions to the nation's problems provoked in Miss Perkins a New England uneasiness; she remained concerned about the means, about the process by which public decisions are taken and enforced. Nonetheless she was encouraged by Kennedy's appointment of Willard Wirtz, whom Miss Perkins began to refer to as the most sympathetic, effective Secretary of Labor in history. She was impressed with the President's handling of foreign policy, with the quiet firmness, understatement and flexibility that he brought to world problems, although I remember she was worried after hearing Kennedy's Cuban-Embargo speech in May 1963, that the President was rattled because he seemed to lapse into his pre-Harvard Boston Irish accent. She was charmed by J.F.K. at their meetings in Washington and glowingly reported back to us about him when she returned to Ithaca. This sharing of her experiences was one of the most sublime features of our relationship with Miss Perkins. On one occasion we found a lovely bouquet of flowers on the front hall table. The card read: "To Frances Perkins, With warm regards, Jacqueline Kennedy."

Her response to President Kennedy's assassination recalls our common horror, but also the quality of her reactions to men and life. The following is her answer to my letter:

You can't think how much I appreciated your note or how much help it gave me to hear from another human creature also in pain and horror and shame over the assassination. I still can hardly believe it!! Telluride took it hard. They are so young and not inured to grief. Paul Wolfowitz [house president] did his part nobly. Several boys obviously grew up in those three days.

The University called a memorial meeting for Saturday a.m. It was extremely good. Clinton Rossiter [Cornell Professor of American Institutions] was the only speaker and he was brilliant. He satisfied the mind *and* the emotions also. They are printing it and I'll send you a copy.

It's been a hard fortnight. This boy into man, so young, with a life ahead of him, so intelligent, so dedicated. In some ways one feels as at the Roosevelt death, but there was no murder then to add horror, and confusion. I never doubted that the country and its institutions and ways of living would survive, but was startled and even annoyed that some people seemed to think America was over. I think that is why all the European rulers came – to bolster up our nerve. Thanks so much for writing. It helps a lot. Fondly, Frances Perkins. Dec. 10.

She herself was not inured to grief, but she faced the problems of sickness and death with a Christian confidence and a personal knowledge of tragedy that made her reflect calmly on the passing of old friends. But with the death of John Kennedy youth and promise were cut off before their full bloom. The illness of a godson in England and the occasional illnesses of her grandson afflicted her as her own pains and those of her older friends did not. Indeed she believed that death for the aged had a dignity that long suffering and the loss of faculties denied. When she saw a picture of Sir Winston Churchill at his window, being supported by his wife and an aide after suffering his broken thigh, Miss Perkins murmured that death would be kinder for a once great man.



She viewed her own advanced age with understandable ambivalence. Her schedule of teaching, traveling, lecturing and writing was full, not to mention the demands made on her by life at Telluride. Because she did not fly, her frequent trips to New York and Washington required complicated bus-train connections out of Ithaca and were inevitably fatiguing. Nonetheless she drew strength from her busy schedule and had impressive reserves of energy.

She came to Williams College at my request to give a public lecture on F.D.R. and to talk to history students studying the New Deal. To make the journey, she had to leave Ithaca at 7:30 a.m. to make connections in Syracuse for Albany where I met her. When we arrived in Williamstown she spent an hour resting and putting her talk in order, and then went with my wife and me to a small dinner party at the home of the chairman of the Lecture Committee, George Connolly, where Mary LaDame, an old friend and colleague from Labor Department days joined us. The lecture to over 200 people in Jesup Hall was a great success and after some witty and informative answers to questions the session ended. She went back stage and asked to sit down because she had had from the beginning of the lecture severe nerve pains up and down her back. After sitting about three minutes she was ready to go to an informal discussion with faculty members and wives. Her repartee was sharp, her command of complicated material professional. The economists laughed loudest at her reference to John Maynard Keynes as “an odd stick.” She got to bed about 11:30 and was up early the next morning to handle correspondence and phone calls. She had luncheon with the members of the History Department followed by a discussion class with forty history majors. My wife and I then drove her to Springfield to catch a train to Washington. In Springfield she wanted to visit a friend whom she had not notified in advance fearing that her friend, pre-warned, would spend all day preparing. We reached Springfield at 4:30 and checked her luggage at the railroad station. The train did not leave until 9 p.m. and Miss Perkins insisted that we leave her in downtown Springfield where she wanted to do some shopping. This insistence in being left alone seemed to reaffirm her independence of the infirmities of age, despite a bad ankle and vision that was dangerously impaired. As she walked into the rush hour crowd some seemed to recognize her, or at least to sense her unusual dignity and friendliness. One workman took off his hat as she strode past, and she gave him a short wave and smiled. The politician had complete command.

But if she could carry on this type of whirlwind schedule (she gave a speech the next day in Washington to the Democratic women) and be strengthened by it, there were real limitations imposed by her more than eighty years. Although her vanity was intact and she paid careful attention to clothes, her hair recaptured its auburn hues only after a trip to her hairdresser in New York. During the Labor Department’s fiftieth birthday celebrations in Washington in 1962 she appeared on the *Today Show*. “Imagine the shock of people just waking up in the morning and finding on their television screens that that damn old lady with the tri-corn hat was still alive,” she told us after her return to Ithaca. “They must have thought they were seeing a ghost.” When pictures from the Labor Department commemoration were presented to her later, she showed them to me and muttered, “What a mouse I am!.... Why, I’ve shrunk!” With her worsening eyesight she had to use a magnifying glass for reading. She memorized shapes of people and the color of their hair so that she could call them by name as they approached. In certain light the technique did not work and she always smoothed over her mistakes by making some reference to the odd lighting in the room. Stairs were a particular problem, but she refused to take anyone’s arm – the bannister was adequate and preserved her independence.

Frances Perkins expected, even required, privacy in the face of public curiosity. She told me of once demanding the film from a photographer who had snapped her picture in a railroad station without asking her permission. Even the census taker had trouble with Miss Perkins, who believed it was not the business of the U. S. Census whether she was a man or a woman. When a group of friends on the Cornell faculty urged her to write an autobiography, she half-



laughingly rejected their advice and told them that she had destroyed many personal papers “to keep them from people like you.” She abhorred the personal pettiness of old friends and colleagues which crept into their memoirs to live on forever. She complained about the Ickes Diaries on this account and thought Dorothy Thompson had been foolish to leave behind the materials which Vincent Sheehan used in his book on Miss Thompson and Sinclair Lewis. Miss Perkins’s own memoirs have apparently been arranged for publication at a date safely beyond the life expectancy of those most involved. This strong sense of privacy was not merely personal. She was troubled by the increasing invasion of the average American’s private life by all manner of modern devices. One of her major fears was that the Social Security system would be used as source of cross reference of almost every adult American by the F.B.I. and the Internal Revenue Service. Any such use of Social Security records she found a gross affront to the whole spirit of the Social Security system which she most prized as her major public achievement.

I think Frances Perkins felt most at home in a man’s world. She did not like to be referred to constantly as the first woman cabinet member. And yet she knew the advantage of her sex and believed her feminine intuition allowed her to understand Roosevelt as few of his male colleagues could. The test of this belief can be found in *The Roosevelt I Knew* which remains twenty years after publication one of the shrewdest assessments of that complicated man in the White House.

I suspect that Miss Perkins believed she understood sides of F.D.R. that Mrs. Roosevelt did not. Indeed, in Frances Perkins’s general assessment of Eleanor Roosevelt there was a curious underestimation of those qualities the public more and more revered. In a way, Miss Perkins had not totally erased the picture of the timid, somewhat harassed wife of the young Governor of New York who did not feel terribly comfortable around crowds of politicians. There is no question, however, of the deep affection Miss Perkins had for Mrs. Roosevelt. I do think that in her mind the Secretary of Labor never believed the First Lady had successfully entered that male world in which Miss Perkins felt so at home. The morning after Mrs. Roosevelt’s death, Miss Perkins somewhat impatiently anticipated the type of fuss the press would make. “In the next few days we are going to hear a great deal about how much Mrs. R. did for mankind,” she told me. “But the striking fact about Eleanor Roosevelt to those of us who knew her for many years was how much she did for herself in overcoming great difficulties.” This reaction at once treasured Mrs. Roosevelt, the personal friend, but slightly diminished the public figure – the First Lady of the World. Miss Perkins told me she was grateful the family had not responded to public curiosity by having a big funeral in New York City, and instead had chosen the dignity of a private service in Hyde Park.

But the funeral in Hyde Park brought Miss Perkins up to date. She was profoundly moved by the outpouring of people from all over the world, particularly by those who had known Mrs. Roosevelt only since 1945. The old faces from Albany and Washington were there, but Miss Perkins was more struck by the new and younger faces of many hues. She told a group of us at Telluride House on her return from Hyde Park that the funeral should have been held at St. John the Divine in New York so that more people could have been accommodated.

During our last conversations in April 1965 Miss Perkins talked with us of many things. She hoped to take a trip to Spain where she could see one of the Telluride boys who was in Barcelona. “Would you be going with someone,” I asked. “If anyone tries to join me,” she snapped, “I won’t go.” Just before we said good bye, I mentioned that her fortitude, even under difficult circumstances, had meant much to me. “When I’m tired and have much to do,” I told her, “I think of how I’ve seen you push on, with small regard to your own fatigue, and I push on.” “You’re wrong to do that,” she responded. “The young must rest for they must conserve their energy for the many things they have to do. The old have nothing to rest for. If they do not keep pushing they will give up.”



She kept pushing until the end – just three weeks later. Her deteriorating eyesight made her decide to go to a specialist at Johns Hopkins, and she slipped away from Ithaca with hardly a farewell. On her way back to New York she contracted a lung ailment. Before entering Midtown Hospital, however, she made a final trip to the ballet which, because of her eyesight, she must have had to enjoy somewhat vicariously. The doctors believed the lung condition could be controlled in a few days, but while in the hospital she suffered a stroke and died a short while later. For those of us who knew her, death had been kind, quick – and dignified.

Frances Perkins had been struck by the presence of youth at Mrs. Roosevelt's funeral. I heard words of surprise from some of Miss Perkins's old friends as they noted the young pall bearers at the high requiem mass held in the Church of the Resurrection in New York on May 17, 1965. To the strains of "Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past" Frances Perkins's casket was carried from the church by eight Telluride students. Few faces showed greater grief than theirs. None of them had been born before 1940 by which time Frances Perkins's great impact on the social revolution in America had been completed.