

My Twelve Years with

John F. Kennedy

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the President

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southwest gate, around the fence that bounds the south lawn, by the east gate entrance, and along the north fence on Pennsylvania Avenue and into the northwest gate before coming back into the White House.

Because of the President's youth and his emphasis on "vigah," people were becoming conscious of the importance of physical fitness. The President himself did daily exercises, which were prescribed by Dr. Hans Kraus of New York City. It was due to Dr. Kraus's persistence that the trouble in the President's back almost vanished. One day when Dr. Kraus was in the office I overheard the President say to him, "I wish I could have known you years ago."

"I appreciate your saying that very much," Dr. Kraus replied. In one of his speeches, the President observed that he thought people should take hikes, and it wasn't long before the Attorney General went on a 50-mile hike, thereby starting a national epidemic of sore feet.

For several weeks there had been talk among the staff at the White House that Mrs. Kennedy was expecting a baby. I was not surprised to hear the President say one morning to a visitor in his office, "You know my wife will not be able to do a great deal this summer because we are expecting a baby in the fall."

Many times he said, "Mrs. Lincoln, soon you will have three coming over to get candy from your candy dish."

Mrs. Kennedy had had difficulty with child-bearing in the past, and he wanted to make sure that she did not exert herself, risking another miscarriage. On several occasions he substituted for her when she had previously made engagements to attend a public function, and he excluded her from his official travel for that spring and summer.

The first trip was to Costa Rica in March. The President stayed at the American Embassy residence there, which was on a lovely spot, high on a knoll. We were told that the residency had been built from blueprints of Tara, the home in *Gone with the Wind*. My office was on the first floor of this beautiful Embassy.

Whenever the President traveled abroad a large entourage went with him. A chef from the White House always went along to prepare the President's meals, and food and drinking water were transported with him. He insisted that his scales be carried everywhere he went because he kept a daily check on his weight. Sergeant Joe Giordano, who had served many Presidents with pride, checked all of the personal things that were to accompany the President, and it was due to his efficient handling of minute details that everything was always in order when we arrived. The President often remarked that Joe and his assistant, George "Boots" Miller, did a marvelous job.

One other item always accompanied the President: a stereophonic record player and a collection of his favorite records. The collection always included one particular record: a medley of Irish songs, including "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," and "The Wearing of the Green." After many a hectic day he relaxed by listening to these records.

Shortly after he joined the White House staff, René Verdon, a French chef who could make any food taste delightful, decided to become an American citizen. When the President learned of it, he said, "Mrs. Lincoln, I would like to congratulate him on the day he gets his papers."

When I told this to René, he said, "I don't want to bother the President. He's too busy." But President Kennedy insisted and so, on that all-important day, René appeared in my office wearing his apron and tall white hat. President Kennedy called the White House photographer in, and a proud René had his picture taken standing next to the President. This kind of thoughtful gesture was a basic part of the President's character.

On June 12, 1963, an NAACP field secretary for the state of Mississippi by the name of Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi. Not long after the funeral at Arlington Cemetery, the President asked Mrs. Evers and her three children to come by the White House so that he could meet them. Upon their arrival they were brought into the Cabinet room to wait for the time when they could go in to see the President.