

SPOT

NOV., 1941

Opening the President's Mail



THE PRESIDENT PROBABLY EVOKES—AND WELCOMES—THE
OPINIONS OF MORE PEOPLE THAN ANY OTHER MAN IN HISTORY

Into the White House An Alert People Pour Their Hopes, Fears, Praise and Blame In Many Thousands of Letters a Day

BY DONALD MacGREGOR

U**NDER** a dictatorship a citizen would be out of his mind to write a letter to his Fuehrer saying anything other than "Heil!" or "Hooray!" But in a great democracy like the United States the people still are free to back up their free votes with the freest of written expression—and they do. More mail is addressed today directly to Franklin D. Roosevelt than to any other office or agency of government.

The avalanche of mail that floods the White House every day affords a significant sampling of living democracy at work. People with constructive ideas, people with denunciations and criticisms, people who are worried about things—these, plus a goodly sprinkling of just plain crackpots, all contribute. To give SPOT readers an insight into this cross-section of the nation's opinions, I went down to Washington to talk to Stephen Early, the President's tall, rangy secretary.

"So you want to know about the President's mail? Well, I'll tell you—it's a whale of a story." Early pressed a buzzer on his letter-strewn desk and asked his secretary for the daily mail reports for the last five or six weeks. When they came, he adjusted his spectacles and started to read.

"Yesterday," he began, "the President received 3,617 letters and telegrams and 1,051 postcards. Day before that, 4,402 letters and telegrams and 825 postcards. That's about average. If some hot



COMMUNICATIONS TO PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT NOW AVERAGE BETWEEN 3,000 AND 5,000 A DAY. BEFORE HIS ADMINISTRATION SET UP WHITE HOUSEKEEPING THE MAXIMUM WAS 500 A DAY

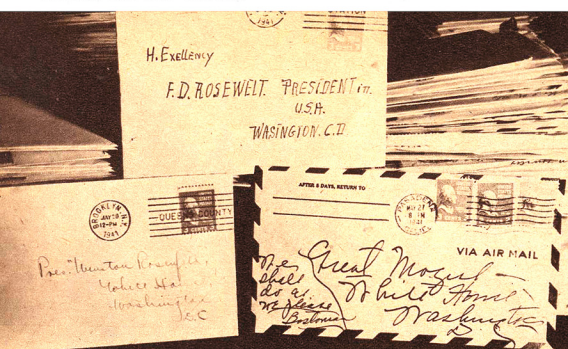
issue is up the figure goes higher. Frequently it's enormous. Reaction to fireside chats; messages to Congress; greetings on his birthday; Christmas; New Year's; Easter, etc. In a lull, of course, the figure drops off."

This amazed me. I've been acquainted at the White House for twenty-five years, first as a newspaper, then a magazine writer. Only a few years ago you could carry a day's White House mail in your pocket. One man handled it all and had enough time left on his hands to make up what Joe Tumulty called the "yellow journal"—newspaper clippings of interest pasted on yellow sheets, a Presidential timesaver.

"Even during World War I, under Wilson," I said, "I'm sure the White House mail never ran anything near that."

Early said, "Five hundred letters was tops. And then only in the thick of the war, when mothers wrote in about sons and that sort of thing. Times have changed. We hear from people all over the country and in all walks of life. And we're happy about it. It's a good, healthy sign."

Twenty-five years ago Mrs. John Doe of Oskosh would have considered it highly impertinent even to dream of writing the President about her trouble over the mortgage or how she disliked those who were out to destroy the American system. She regarded the President as a man who wore a silk hat and wielded a trowel at cornerstone layings but couldn't be bothered with trifles except just before election. Now she believes it her duty to write the White House what's on her mind.



Crackpots address the President as "F. D. Rosewelt," "Winston Rosenfeld" and "Great Mogul." The Secret Service checks on the writers.



Ira Smith, major-domo of the White House mail, has been there 44 years. He knows at a glance which letters are personal and should be sent without delay to the President's break-fast tray or desk.

Mr. Roosevelt has encouraged this business of writing, through his let's-sit-down-and-get-together attitude as revealed in fireside chats and the now nearly forgotten "Forgotten Man" slogan. The crises developing one on the heels of another since he entered the White House, prompting the Government to take a greater hand in the citizens' private affairs, have demolished the once stony reluctance of the public.

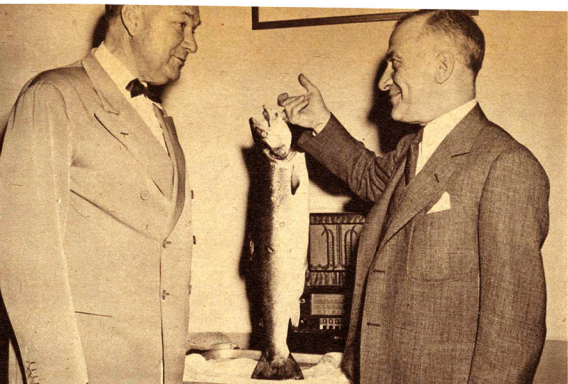
Forty percent of the White House mail actually pertains to the White House. It contains facts for the President, expressions of opinion, endorsement of applicants for high office, requests for interviews, invitations to visit some particular part of the country, suggestions that such and so be discussed in a forthcoming speech.

The rest—sixty percent—concerns business with some one of the hundred or more Government departments and agencies. It goes to the White House either because the writers aren't familiar with the Federal setup or because they feel they'll get front-office attention if the Big Boss knows what they're after. Possibly it does make a difference, although the department or agency would tell you it didn't.

Mr. Roosevelt doesn't even see this sixty percent of the mail, let alone read it. Obviously he hasn't the time. On arrival in the White House mail room, it is read by some one of the staff and sent to where it belongs, and frequently the delay isn't longer than a couple of hours.

Actually, the President doesn't see much of the mail that remains in the White House. It's read and digested for him. When important issues are up, the staff tabulates the purport of the telegrams, letters and cards—so many for, so many against—and Mr. Roosevelt gets the report. It's highly revealing. It serves as a guide on public reaction which he feels he has never quite been able to get from other sources, especially in times of great friction of opinion.

Mr. Roosevelt often lets his press conference know what the mail bags reveal. He did this right along in his battle with Senator Wheeler, in which he felt confident he had the popular side, since the mail returns ran three to one in his



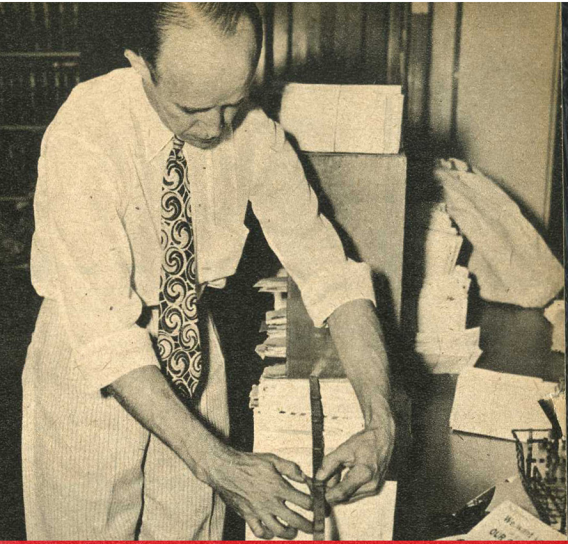
Major General E. M. Watson accepts a salmon for FDR. Once such a fish was sent in and decapitated in the kitchen.

It had to be wired together for presentation photos.

The President's Mail

favor. He did it when the Lend-Lease proposal was up, in an unconcealed effort to swing votes in Congress. His private polls of the nation, unsolicited but covering a wide cross section, have worked to his advantage numerous times.

Aside from these letters from the general public, the President has thousands of personal and official friends over the country whose letters go to his desk, and it's the job of the mail



The mail is measured, not counted. It's been found that there are 1,000 letters to a yard.



The Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, N. Y., contains hundreds of gifts sent by admirers.



Steve Early, Presidential Secretary No. 1, says the President's mail makes "a whale of a story."

the President's Mail

room to know what to send.

"Would you like to visit the mail room?" Early asked.

"Yes, I would," I informed him.

He got Ira Smith on the phone. Smith has been in charge of the mail room for forty-four years, and a White House employe longer than anyone else except Rudolph Forster. Forster is Executive Clerk in charge of the Executive Offices, and they say he went there with Abraham Lincoln, which of course isn't so.

I remembered Ira Smith from the old days. He is a capable man of medium height, with sandy hair and a soft voice. Smith is in charge of eleven highly skilled readers and an equal number of workers who handle the daily avalanche of bags, bundles and boxes.

The ordinary flow of telegrams goes through an upstairs office, but these days it frequently is necessary to employ outside facilities. When an important issue is up, and public feeling at fever, Western Union and Postal Telegraph transcribe messages in downtown offices and boys on bicycles deliver them in packets of fifty apiece.

The mail staff reports at 8 a. m., an hour ahead of the others who work at the White House. It's on hand for the 8 o'clock mail, heaviest of the day as well as the first. As soon as the bags, bundles and boxes are out of the truck, which lists the White House as "Run 1, Stop 28," the staff gives everything a quick once-over to see what's important and what can just as well wait.

The reading staff knows fairly well, and Ira Smith accurately, what unopened letters should go to the President in his bedroom along with his breakfast. These are from members of the family and personages close to the President.

For years Smith has made it his business to know the names of those from whom a Chief Executive wishes to hear, and—all important, since an outsider might employ a big name to put something over—the characteristics of their sealed envelopes. At this his score is one hundred percent.

The business of reading mine-run letters begins. The readers, at desks, batches of letters before them, peruse each from "Dear Sir:" to "Yours truly," then pile them for disposal according to subject. Many are laboriously penciled on two sides of scrap paper, others professionally typewritten on the finest of bond. Those in a foreign language go to the State Department for translation, and at times the foreign mail is exceedingly heavy. From Europe shortly before the war, chiefly from persons asking admission, came thousands of letters that gave Mr. Roosevelt advance information of the international crisis ahead.

The Secret Service gets the crank letters. Its list contains the names of two hundred cranks, some of whom write to the President two or three times a day. Most of the cranks are harmless, but the Secret Service doesn't take chances. It investigates, and if it seems warranted, puts the offending writer under surveillance. Gifts for the President also receive rigid Secret Service attention.

Almost anything you can think of has arrived as a gift at some time or another—dogs, sheep, eagles, baby chicks, toads, alligators. Mr. Roosevelt has never received any lions, but Calvin Coolidge got two, from Johannesburg. They're now at the Washington zoo.

Much comes in for the President's table—pies, cakes, plum puddings, preserves. A fish arrived from Maine, and, cleared by the Secret Service, the kitchen cut off its head just before a telephone call from the Capitol said the Maine delegation wanted its picture taken beside it. The kitchen recovered the head and wired it in place. The same thing occurred with an Ar-

the President's Mail

kansas turkey, and a ringer turkey had to be used. But before anything goes to the table it must have a clean bill of health. Here, again, the Secret Service doesn't take chances. Nothing can get through the line of skilled operatives that would do the President harm.

The gifts are of interest, of course, but what's really important are the wires, letters and cards. The gifts are tokens of friendship; the wires, letters and cards evidence of the nation's desire to participate in its Government. It's democracy really at work, and as Steve Early said at his desk, highly significant in these troublous times.

