

Roosevelt, Franklin D.,
Material about 1945-52

HYDE PARK, New York—On the wooded rolling acres of the Roosevelt estate here, 270,000 Christmas trees are growing, the result of a hobby that occupied most of the late president's spare time.

This month between 2,000 and 3,000 of them will have reached a size suitable for use as Christmas trees and will, as in the past 10 years or so, be sold to grocers and florists within a 75-mile radius of here, for resale to families living in this Upstate New York section.

Although the tree growing was a hobby, the president insisted that it at least pay its own way, and yield a profit if possible. So, year by year, usable trees were cut and sold. Records still kept at the farm show that in the peak years of 1943 and 1944, 6,800 trees were sold for a gross of \$5,700.

Now in charge of the trees is R. W. Linaka, superintendent of the Roosevelt estate, and an ex-Navy man who used to skipper the president's 51-foot day cruiser.

The trees are growing helter-skelter on odd patches and parcels of land, surrounded by weeds, and look as if they had been abandoned. But Linaka explained that this was not the case. Weeds are necessary around the bases of the trees to hold moisture in the earth, but they must be short so that the trees will grow low and bushy.

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Mr. Roosevelt started his hobby in 1927 with a planting of 5,000 trees. He didn't add to this appreciably until 1936 when he swung into his hobby again by setting out 22,500 trees. Then, each year after, from 25,000 to 30,000 new trees were planted. The 1939 planting of 26,000 took the biggest blow of his Christmas tree career. The drouth of the year killed 20,000 of them, but at that, state nurserymen said that the president's grove came through with more trees still alive than any in the state.

Although Mr. Roosevelt took a personal and active interest in the tree growing, the actual work was performed by two of his farm associates, William Plog, (he says his name is pronounced "Plo," but everybody calls him "Plow") the former superintendent, and Frank Draiss, the former assistant. These men took care of the trees from the time they were bought as seedlings from the state nursery until they were ready for sale.

Plog and Draiss turned the trees over to Linaka at the time he became superintendent and are now working in the state-owned portion of the property which has been opened to the public as a Roosevelt shrine.

The Roosevelt specifications for a Christmas tree were that it should be from three to seven feet tall, cone-shaped and bushy, with enough resistance in its branches to support a good load of Yuletide ornaments. It takes about five years for a tree to reach his minimum saleable height, nine years for his maximum. Seedlings set out in 1936, for instance, grew up in time for Christmas, 1941.

The hobby, therefore, is a progressive undertaking; each Christmas finds groups of the trees arrived at cutting size, and each planting is earmarked for a Christmas five years or more in the future.

Although they tried a number of species, experience taught them that families in their selling radius had definite preferences as to the kind of Christmas tree they would buy. Now most of the trees are Norway spruce, white spruce, and Douglas fir, with a few balsams thrown in for old customers.

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Because of this hobby and other agricultural ventures, the president used to fill in "farmer" as his occupation when he signed the registry book at his voting place. Linaka recalled the great interest Farmer Roosevelt showed in his crops. He inspected his groves on each of his frequent visits to the estate, often accompanied by White House correspondents who soon made the trees among the most famous in the nation.

He used his 1940 Ford convertible to look over his trees, and very soon gained local fame as a driver who would take a car anywhere. That car, equipped so it could be completely controlled by hand, was a prototype of the cars the Ford Motor Company is now making for disabled veterans.

The correspondents, remembering many a bumpy ride with the president, would support Linaka's statement that he drove through the woods and over the fields almost as much as he drove on the estate's 13 miles of roads. If the woods were thick he would plow right ahead as if the convertible were a bulldozer, bashing over any vegetation up to three inches in diameter.

Linaka said he ~~felt sure the~~ president would have driven right into the estate lake if he'd had half a notion there were any Christmas trees there.

Some of the trees have been given permanent locations about the estate—such as the row of fine seven-footers which now separate Mrs. Roosevelt's cottage from the lake. This "cottage," incidentally, is the large two-story house which some years back contained Mrs. Roosevelt's Val-Kill furniture factory.

But the bulk of the 270,000 will keep right on growing up into Christmas trees. Linaka said they're going to keep the hobby going and in accordance with Mr. Roosevelt's wishes, make it pay off.