

From Presidential Home to Campus Center —And Now, a City Landmark

by May N. Stone

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took part in the month-long dedication festivities for the Hunter College building in October, 1940, he reminded students and faculty that he knew the college quite well, for he had been a long-time neighbor — living with his family at 47-49 E. 65th St. for many years.

Indeed, the Roosevelts maintained a warm, neighborly relationship with Hunter even throughout the tumultuous war years of Franklin's presidency. Eleanor Roosevelt was a frequent speaker on campus during the early 1940's, and it was on Nov. 22, 1943, that she came to formally seal and perpetuate the family's ties to Hunter by dedicating the former Roosevelt homes on 65th St. as a social and interfaith center for the use of students, faculty and alumni. It was named the Sara Delano Roosevelt Memorial House in honor of the president's mother, who had lived at No. 47 until her death in 1941.

Now, thirty years later, the "Roosevelt House" has been designated a New York City Landmark on the basis of its "special character" and "special historical and aesthetic interest." The City's Landmarks Preservation Commission made the official designation this fall.

Part of the special character of the building is its unusual architecture, for it is actually two identical houses with a single facade. Commissioned by Sara Delano Roosevelt as a double residence for herself and her son's family, the Georgian style townhouse was designed by Charles A. Platt and built in 1907-08. The houses shared a vestibule behind a single entrance, their two parlors and dining rooms could be joined, and there was a connecting door on the fourth floor.

The young Roosevelts moved into No. 49 in the fall of 1908, and it was their New York City home until 1942. As Franklin Roosevelt wrote, in a letter read by his wife at the dedication, the



house held many "memories of joy and sorrow." The family moved about a good deal—between Albany, Washington, Campobello, Hyde Park and New York—as FDR entered public life and became a New York State Senator, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and, in 1920, an unsuccessful vice-presidential candidate.

As the years passed, the house on 65th St. was visited by important people with increasing frequency. It became filled with the future president's books and papers, and with the prints and ship models of his nautical collection. After his defeat in the 1930 election, FDR returned to his New York law firm and became vice president of a large surety bonding company. Then, in August, 1921, while vacationing at Campobello, the vigorous young Roosevelt was suddenly stricken with

poliomyelitis, as a result of which his legs became permanently paralyzed.

On his release from the hospital in late October of that year, Roosevelt decided not to retire to the seclusion of Hyde Park, but to return instead to 65th St., where for more than a year he carried on the struggle to recover from the crippling illness and resume a full life. By spring, 1922, he was roughhousing with his sons on the floor of the library, and later that year he was using crutches and being driven to his office in downtown Manhattan several times a week.

After Roosevelt was elected governor of New York in 1928, he and his family never again lived together for any length of time at 49 E. 65th St., although the house continued to be their New York residence. It was here

that Roosevelt spent time as President-elect in 1932, with Secret Service men guarding the premises and scrutinizing all visitors.

Shortly after Sara Delano Roosevelt's death in 1941, a group of interested alumnae and friends of Hunter started a campaign to raise funds for the purchase of the house. In 1943, a Special Act of the New York State Legislature incorporated the Hunter College Student Social, Community and Religious Clubs Association, which took possession of the house for the use of Hunter students.

The Association has for the last 20 years undertaken the maintenance of the Roosevelt House and was responsible for furnishing it—again through the gifts of Hunter alumnae and friends. President Roosevelt himself donated a number of books to stock one of the libraries, and gave a few family mementos.

Student religious groups such as Hillel, the Newman Club and the Ecumenical Association were the first to make use of the house, and they continue to do so—fulfilling the purpose stated by FDR in his dedication letter that this was to be "the first college center established for the high purpose of mutual understanding among Protestants, Jewish and Catholic students."

Recent years have seen a broader range of activities at the house. It is now used as a meeting place for a wide variety of student clubs representing social, political, ethnic and national groups; by veterans and college counselor trainees; by members of scheduled honors classes; by alumni and the college faculty and staff who go to the large, comfortable house for study or relaxation.

The Sara Delano Roosevelt Memorial House has gained a new and special distinction in being named a City Landmark, and it continues to be a reminder of the special relationship between the Roosevelt family and Hunter College. In connection with this relationship, the Alumni Association plans to observe the 90th anniversary of Eleanor Roosevelt's birth (Oct. 11, 1884) in a commemorative event scheduled for Oct. 10 next year at the college. ■

Bess Myerson Returns To Hunter To Direct Consumer Study

Hunter alumna Bess Myerson, former Commissioner of Consumer Affairs for New York City, has begun work on an extensive consumer protection study that will be carried out under the auspices of Hunter with a grant from the Ford Foundation.

Miss Myerson has been appointed a visiting professor in the Political Science Department for the one year term of the study. She is now working with the department chairman, Prof. Robert S. Hirschfield, in selecting a group of students to become an investigative task force for the study.

While pioneering many consumer protection gains during her four years as Commissioner, Miss Myerson received hundreds of informal and official requests for guidance in setting up and developing consumer protection agencies and programs. "This grant will give us the opportunity to answer these and more questions now," Miss Myerson says, "and prepare a report that will serve as a guidebook to consumer protection—informative to both the individual consumer and the officials responsible for establishing consumer protection agencies in their communities.

The report will utilize the experiences of the Department of Consumer Affairs under Miss Myerson's leadership, a period of pioneer effort and achievement: the introduction of unit-pricing, open-dating, and the passage of the city's Consumer Protection Act, considered the most advanced and far-reaching consumer legislation in the country.

Basically, the study will analyze the factors in the organization and administration of consumer protection agencies, the ways and means of establishing supporting legislation, the relationship with other municipal agencies and other governmental levels, and the raising of consumer awareness in the community through information and action programs. ■



Bess Myerson

An important part of the report, directly involving the participation of the Hunter student task force, will be an unprecedented survey of consumer complaints, a demographic/psychographic evaluation of buyer dissatisfaction and the responsibility of the seller.

The students will collect raw data on where the needs of the consumer are not fully met—by products, by industries, by individual merchants, by government agencies, by media, by consumer inertia. Out of these statistics will come recommendations for changes in the consumer complaint process.

President Jacqueline Wexler has voiced her enthusiastic personal support for Miss Myerson and the purpose of the study. "We at Hunter are indeed happy to be associated with this important study of marketplace justice," the President said, adding: "Bess is a Hunter alumna, and that makes us even happier." ■