

Val-Kill,

a home and retreat for
Eleanor Roosevelt.





Picnicking Plan

Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt loved picnics. One of their favorite places to go was two miles east of their family home Springwood. In the fall of 1924 Eleanor, Franklin, and their good friends Marion Dickerman and Nancy Cook had a picnic on the banks of Fall Kill in this favorite location.

FDR

Helps Out



The women were sad that this would be their last picnic of the year, it was late in the season and Franklin's mother would soon be closing Springwood for the winter. Franklin thought about the women's problem and suggested that they build a cottage on the property that could be used as a year round retreat. "But aren't you girls silly? This isn't Mother's land. I bought this acreage myself. And why shouldn't you three have a cottage here of your own, so you could come and go as you please?" he said.

Construction Plans



Franklin Roosevelt leased the land to the women for building the cottage. The three women shared the \$12,000 construction cost. FDR hired an architect named Henry Tombs to design the house, which was to look like a Dutch Colonial cottage with thick stone walls. FDR watched over the construction of what he called "the shack on a stream in the back woods".



Stone Cottage

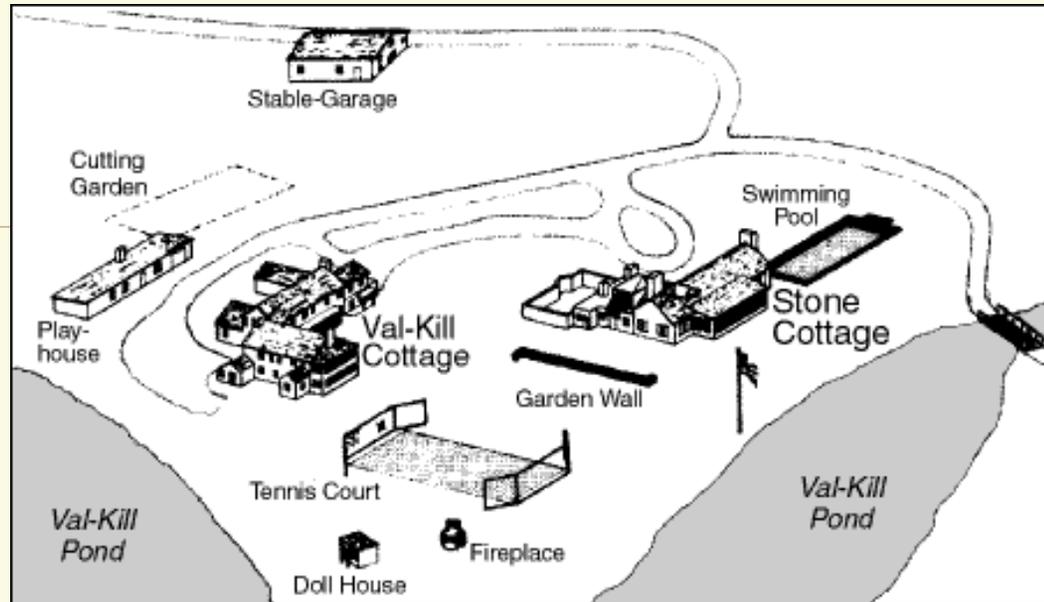
Stone Cottage was completed in 1925. The Roosevelt family had a big dinner party on New Year's Day in 1926 to celebrate the completion of their new home.

Staying at Val-Kill



If Franklin came to Hyde Park with Eleanor, she was expected to stay with him at Springwood, the family estate. When Franklin was not visiting Hyde Park, Eleanor stayed at the Val-Kill cottage with her friends Marion and Nan who lived at Val-Kill cottage year round.

Val-Kill's Additions



For the entire Roosevelt family, Val-Kill was a place to relax and entertain guests. Over time other additions were made to the property: a pond for boating, a pool, tennis court, stables, outdoor fireplace, and flower gardens. There were meadows and woods surrounding the cottage where they could walk and play.

Eleanor and Franklin's Idea



Eleanor was always interested in helping others and she wanted to help the community of Hyde Park. One afternoon ER told her friends that she and FDR had "often wondered if it would be possible to establish some small industries in the local areas that would provide income for men who could not make a living, or all of their living, from agriculture, and that would also provide interests for rural women."



Val-Kill Industries

Eleanor, Nancy, and Marion started Val-Kill Industries, to give jobs to young men in the Hyde Park area. It was very difficult to make a good living working on local farms and many boys were leaving the area to find work in the cities. ER wanted to try to make the lives of these young men better by giving them jobs close to home.

A Furniture Factory



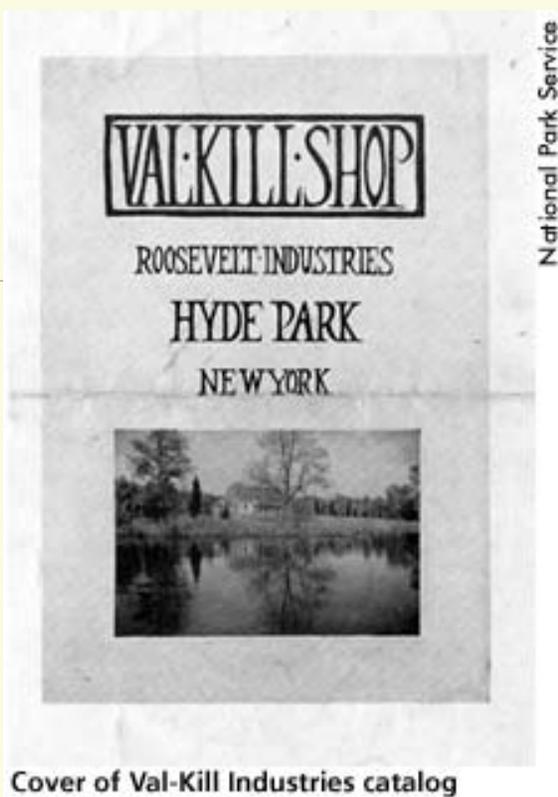
Cook suggested that they start a "small factory and copy early American furniture." Cook was a talented woodworker; she designed and built much of the furniture in Stone Cottage.

A New Building



In 1926, the women built a larger building near Stone Cottage that they called Val-Kill Cottage. The cottage was built to be the furniture factory. Eleanor, Nancy and Marion did a lot of research about furniture making.

Craftsmen



They hired master woodworkers to make the furniture. These men were also hired to teach the local men how to make furniture. Nancy Cook inspected all the furniture before it was sold. If the piece was not good enough, she sent it back to the worker. That person had to fix the problem on his own time.

New Products



In later years, Val-Kill Industries began to make new products. They made candlesticks, vases, and plates out of pewter. Pewter is a mixture of metals that is dull, silver/gray and fairly easy to shape. After adding pewter objects to production, Val-Kill Industries hired the women of Hyde Park to make weavings. All of these products are very valuable to collectors today.

The End of Val-Kill Industries

Val-Kill Industries was in business for nine years, from 1927 to 1936. The company only made a profit for the first two years. The factory closed in 1936 for two reasons:

1. It took a very long time for people to become master woodworkers, and the local men could not learn to make fine furniture in a short period of time.
2. The Great Depression came and people could not afford to buy the furniture.



A New Home for Eleanor



In 1936 the factory closed. ER turned the factory into a home for herself. She no longer had to share Stone Cottage with her friends. For the first time, she had a place of her own. Eleanor enjoyed selecting and arranging the furniture and books as she liked and wanted. She decorated her house with photographs of family and friends.

A Place of Her Own



ER considered Val-Kill to be her first real home. She had spent much of her childhood in her grandmother's homes and much of her adulthood in homes provided by, and ruled over, by Sara Delano Roosevelt, her mother-in-law. The cottage gave her a place of her own to which she could invite her friends.

Relax and Write



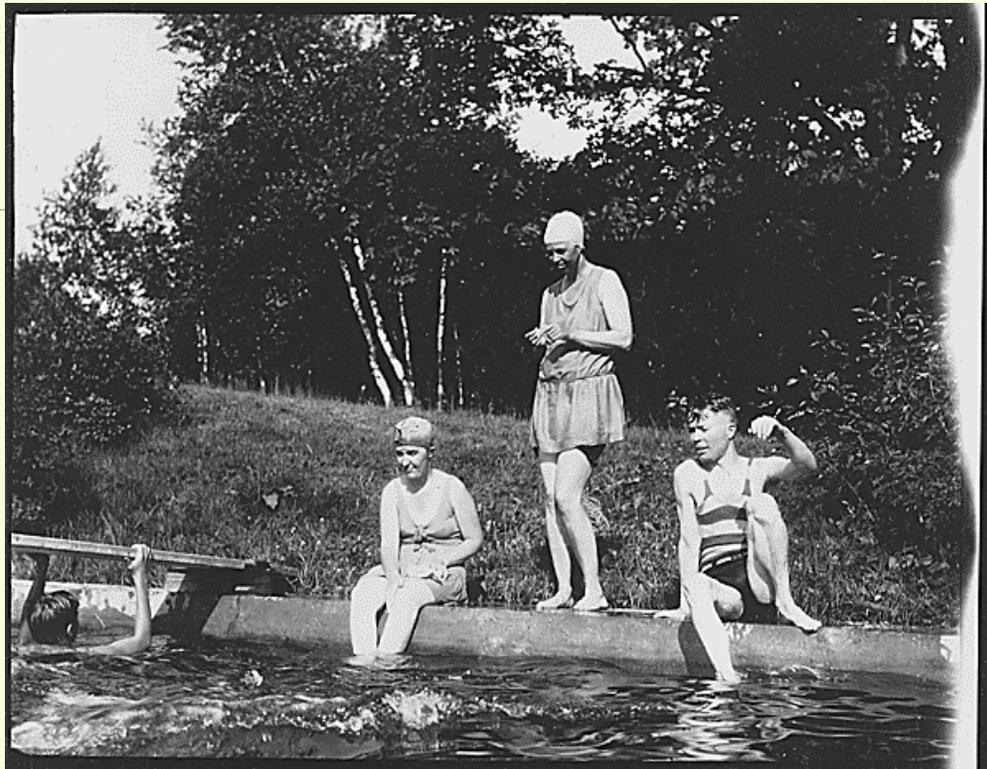
Val-Kill served as a peaceful place where ER could write and relax. She wrote many of her books and columns at Val-Kill. ER enjoyed sleeping on her second-floor porch overlooking the pond, she loved "the still nights . . . with only the stars to look at, just because it gives one a feeling of taking in."

Room for All



The house had about twenty rooms of different sizes. It had a place for herself and her secretary, Malvina ("Tommy") Thompson, and guestrooms for the many children, grandchildren, and guests who would visit her there during the years that followed.

A Gracious Hostess



Guests remembered ER's warm hospitality: the flowers she cut in her garden and placed in her guests' bedrooms, the fruit she knew you loved and put on your bed stand, and the book she placed in your room which she thought you might enjoy.



Guests at Val-Kill

Many different people visited ER at Val-Kill: her students from Todhunter School and Brandeis University, students from the Wiltwyck School (a school for troubled youth), civil rights and labor activists, members of foreign delegations to the United Nations, and dignitaries such as Nikita Krushchev and John F. Kennedy.

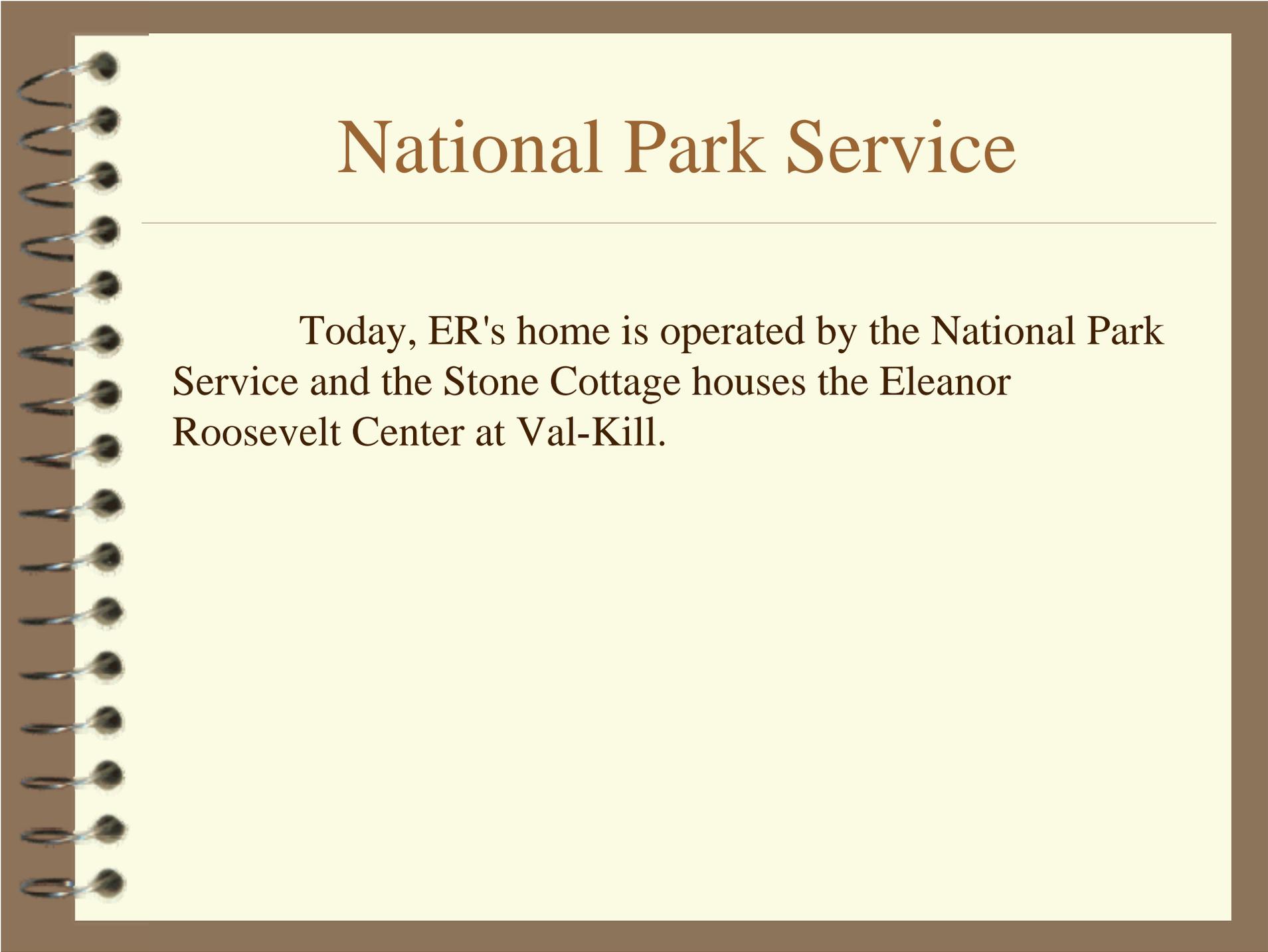
Moving On



After FDR's death on April 12, 1945, ER made Val-Kill her permanent home and when she was not traveling or staying at her apartment in New York City, lived there simply, often surrounded by family, friends, and other guests. ER spent as much time as possible at Val-Kill until September, 1962 when illness forced her to return to New York City.

Val-Kill After Eleanor

Her son John lived at Val-Kill until 1970. At that time John sold the property to two physicians who, in 1973, tried to rezone the property so that they could build health clinics, housing, and a nursing home on the grounds. Several local women opposed the destruction of ER's home and, working with Curtis Roosevelt and New York political leaders, in 1977, they led a successful effort to pass legislation creating The Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site.

A graphic of a spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a cream-colored page. The spiral binding is on the left side. The text is centered on the page.

National Park Service

Today, ER's home is operated by the National Park Service and the Stone Cottage houses the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill.

Credits

- The photographs from this site were collected from the FDR Presidential Library web site and the National Park Service web site.

www.nps.gov/elro/

www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu

- The text was adapted for elementary students from information in the National Park Service web site article “**Val-Kill: A Brief History**”.

<http://www.nps.gov/elro/what-is-vk/essays/vk-brief-history.htm>