

Myths and Realities:

FDR's 1943 Vacation on Lake Huron, 1-7 August 1943

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This article began as a piece of local history. Jeff Wallace, now a Sudbury lawyer, spent his childhood summers near Little Current on the Manitoulin Island. There he heard rumours of a presidential visit, of the people who supposedly accompanied President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (including, according to some accounts, Lucy Mercer Rutherford and Winston Churchill) and of a plane which crashed and sank. Islanders reported that the Roosevelt visit was so secret that it attracted little or no attention in history books. Wallace organized a team of scuba divers which found the aircraft, now housed at the island museum on the east side of Highway 6 south of Little Current. Having found tangible evidence of the presidential visit, Wallace had a number of unresolved questions. What was the truth of the rumours? Why would Roosevelt take a vacation, if the trip to Northern Ontario really was a vacation, during the critical summer of 1943? What could the presidential party really have been doing?

Actually, it was not difficult to determine the basic facts. By 1999, when the research for this article took place, the Roosevelt Library/Archive at Hyde Park was willing to make the documents available for anyone who was interested. Ms. Rutherford and Winston Churchill had not been there. The trip lacked political significance, in connection with either World War II or Canadian-American relations. It was purely and simply a vacation, of little importance to professional historians (who subsequently quite understandably ignored it) but a big event in the folklore of Little Current, the closest town to Birch Island. This article summarizes what actually did happen, and in so doing, it dispels rumours. It also deals with challenges connected with presidential travel in time of war (even to a friendly country like Canada), wartime censorship in Canada, and, to a limited extent, Canadians' views of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

¹ Joyce Standish, who had heard about the visit, wrote a preliminary report, but without benefit of archival materials, which were available and which could have dealt with many of her questions and suggestions; Joyce Standish, unpublished manuscript "A Visit from FDR" (c. 1997).

From Sunday, August 1, until Saturday, 7 August 1943, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd president of the United States (1933-1945), vacationed in Northern Ontario. The Allies had begun to win the Second World War, regaining North Africa late in 1942 and on July 10, 1943, launching a successful invasion of Sicily. On 25 July 1943, King Victor Emmanuel III had dismissed Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator who had become Hitler's ally, and ordered his arrest and, by 27 August, the Allies had total control of Sicily.

While the Battle for Sicily raged, President Roosevelt went fishing. The world war was a series of crises: Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939; his successful offensive of April-June 1940, when he conquered Western Europe from Norway to France; the ensuing Battle of Britain; Hitler's invasion of the Balkans and of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941; the Japanese bombardment of Pearl Harbor 7 December 1941, and the swift and successful Japanese offensive throughout Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, even into the Aleutian Islands; the notorious Dieppe Raid of 19 August 1942; campaigns in Africa, Europe, and the Pacific.

The tide of battle turned with British and American victories in North Africa during the second half of 1942 and their total triumph on that continent by 12 May 1943. American, British, Canadian, and other Allied soldiers began their successful invasion of Sicily less than two months later, on July 10. Yet, it would take two more years for the allies to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Churchill and Roosevelt were planning their fourth strategy session, Quadrant, in Quebec City, beginning 17 August. There they would discuss what to do next in Italy, prepare for the D-Day invasion of Normandy in the spring of 1944, and plan strategy against Japan. Millions of human lives were at stake, and ongoing warfare until 1947 remained a possibility.

There were also problems at home. Civilians who thought that they were not receiving their share of the national wealth went on strike in 1943: coal, rubber, plastic, railroad, and other industries went on strike that year, and although Roosevelt needed support from organized labour, he repeatedly forced the strikers back to work.² In 1944, there would be a presidential election which Roosevelt or another Democrat might or might not win.

Under the circumstances, there was no perfect time for a vacation. Paralysed from the waist down since stricken with polio in August 1921, Roosevelt loved cruises. As late as the summer of 1939, he had cruised the fjords of Labrador aboard a US warship. In the summer of 1943, the oceans were too dangerous for vacationers. Axis submarines were all too active. The Great Lakes would provide an alternative.

A letter in the files of the Secret Service explains why the presidential party chose McGregor Bay as the place for Roosevelt's vacation. The president wanted to fish, and Eugene McDonald, President of Zenith Radio, with almost thirty years of experience on the Great Lakes, suggested the place:

² James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom, 1940-1945*, (New York, 1970), 335.

There is no outstanding fishing in the open waters of the Great Lakes except in Lake Superior in September when the lake trout are biting, but Lake Superior has some very bad stretches of weather and the President might encounter many days of continuous blow or fog.

On the other hand, the greatest fresh water fishing I have ever experienced is to be had in McGregor Bay, which is one of the Bays off Georgian Bay on Lake Huron in southern [sic] Ontario....

The fishing for small mouth black bass and walleye [pickerel] in this Bay is unsurpassed in any other section of the Great Lakes....In trolling for these game fish, you catch many, many Great Northern Pike weighing from five to twenty pounds, but we throw these back as there are too many good edible game fish to be bothered saving this type and they take up too much room on the boat.³

McDonald explained other advantages of McGregor Bay. Many animals - deer, moose, partridge - inhabited its islands and the surrounding woods, and it was relatively secure. Unauthorized people could not easily go there, an important consideration for those charged with the safety of the president during a world war. There was only one deep-water entrance to the Bay, and it was inaccessible to cars. Few people lived in the area. The days would be "comfortably warm," the nights cool enough for blankets, and the Northern Lights would be visible. From early July onward, the insect life would not be a problem.

Most biographies and commentaries on Roosevelt's presidency say nothing about the trip. After all, McGregor Bay was only the site of a vacation, not a major international conference like Casablanca, Teheran, or Yalta. So much happened during the 12 years of Roosevelt's presidency that a week-long fishing trip was hardly worthy of mention. However, for those few Canadians who were involved, even in a most indirect manner, the visit was an experience of a lifetime. Unable to go to the conference sites, unfamiliar with presidential visits, they felt thrilled to see a world leader in the flesh.

The presidential train left Washington at 10:30 p.m. Friday, 30 July. Four RCMP officers joined the presidential party as an honour guard when the train crossed the border. Shortly before daybreak 1 August the train passed Toronto, and reached Sudbury at 1 p.m. Three hours later it arrived opposite Birch Island. As the train travelled from Sudbury to Birch Island, aircraft flew above the CPR tracks. Aboard the train were 31 Secret Service agents, and nine officers of the US Army Signal Corps, and some of the President's most significant wartime advisers: Admiral William D. Leahy, chief of staff; Admiral Wilson Brown, Vice Admiral Ross McIntire, the President's doctor; Major General Edwin Watson,

E.F. McDonald, Jr., President, Zenith Radio Corporation, Chicago, to Thomas H. Beck of the Crowell-Collier Publishing Company in New York 25 April 1942, Container 21, File 6-1: Trips of the President, 1939-1945, Sub-File: Birch Island, Canada, August 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt Archives, Hyde Park, New York. Cited hereafter as Secret Service Records.

military adviser; James Byrnes, economic adviser; Grace Tully, the president's secretary.' (The woman whom Wallace's informants had seen was the presidential secretary, not the presidential mistress!) Special Assistant Harry Hopkins arrived on Wednesday, 4 August.⁵ Because the vacation was taking place in Canada, seventeen RCMP officers assisted the Secret Service, taking rotating shifts on guard duty.⁶

During the war Roosevelt's travel plans outside the United States were always supposed to be secret. At the end of the Roosevelt-Churchill meeting at Casablanca in January 1943, the two men held a press conference. Churchill wrote, "The fact that the President and I were at Casablanca had been a well-kept secret. When the press reporters saw us both they could scarcely believe their eyes, and, when they were told that we had been there for nearly a fortnight, their ears." Secrecy in Canada was potentially more difficult than in Morocco. Roosevelt and Churchill would have gone directly to Casablanca, a coastal city, unobserved by people on the land. There would also have been fewer journalists on location to leak information. Churchill reports that when his ship docked at Halifax 9 August 1943 and he transferred to the train which would take him to Quebec City, there were huge crowds to greet him.⁸

The number of strangers arriving in the area around McGregor Bay would have alerted all but the dullest to the fact that something unusual was happening. Secret Service agents began to arrive at Little Current 28 July, 17 Mounted Police officers (Canadians) shortly thereafter. Upon arrival, the Secret Service contacted local merchants, outfitters and guides, officials of the Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railways and Telegraph companies, and Bell Telephone.' H.H. Campbell, Chief Electrician with the International Nickel Company, and his assistant, L. Spry, inspected the train daily.¹⁰ A secret shared by so many people could not remain totally secret.

David Cork, now a Toronto lawyer, remembers that even before a special train stopped and stayed, there were so many huge aircraft overhead and ships in the lake, presumably securing the site, that it was not difficult to guess that a VIP was coming. The USS *Wilmette* sat offshore throughout the visit, and 28 of her sailors took the fishermen wherever the fish were supposed to be biting." The *Wilmette*, a converted yacht stationed at the Coast Guard's Great Lakes Naval Training Station in North Chicago, was 300 feet (almost one hundred metres) in length. In addition there were motor-whaleboats and motor

Secret Service Records.

US Army telegram, 3 August 1943, Secret Service Records.

⁶The roster, dated at Little Current 2 August 1943, appears in the Secret Service Records.

Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*, (Toronto, 1950), 693.

⁸Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Closing the Ring*, (Toronto, 1951), 80.

⁹Michael Reilly, chief Secret Service Officer on Birch Island, to his superior, Frank Wilson, Washington, 3 August 1943, Secret Service Records.

¹⁰Reilly to Agents in Charge, 2 August 1943, Secret Service Records.

¹¹Michael F. Reilly, US Secret Service, to Admiral Ernest J. King, US Navy, 6 September 1943, Secret Service Records.

speedboats. ¹²

After Roosevelt's trip return to Washington, the *Sudbury Star* would report:

For a week previous to the arrival of the presidential party, there was activity at Birch Island. Cars of timber and lumber arrived on the scene. Every carpenter in the district was corralled. Floating docks and ramps began to take shape. But nobody guessed it right. Then on Saturday, July 31, news spread that the presidential train had passed through Sudbury. Next day word began to circulate that President Roosevelt was at Birch Island.¹³

One evening, Cork's mother took the family dog for a walk near the train. One of the visitors, presumably a Secret Service Agent, yelled: "Grab that dog!" The official had mistaken the Corks' dog for Fala, Roosevelt's dog. Confusion over the dog convinced Mrs. Cork that the celebrity had to be Roosevelt, whose dog Fala was famous.¹⁴

Sudbury lawyer E.D. Wilkins was fishing when a launch approached and Roosevelt himself asked, "What luck are you having?" Wilkins had heard rumours of the presidential presence, and he recognized Roosevelt at once. Wilkins held up two bass which he had landed, and Roosevelt, waving back, shouted, "We're going after some like that right away. We had good luck yesterday." After that, said Wilkins, the presidential party moved beyond talking distance. ¹⁵

Eugene McDonald, who had recommended McGregor Bay as the site for a presidential vacation, approached Ernie St. Pierre, who delivered ice, dry goods and vegetables from his supply boat. "A celebrity is coming," said McDonald, "and I'd like you to guide for him." St. Pierre then found himself in the awkward position of telling his customers that he would not be able to receive or deliver their orders for a period of time without being able to explain the reason. According to St. Pierre:

All outgoing communications were shut down--letters, telegraphs, telephones, everything.... We were all sworn to secrecy and told not to contact anybody or to take pictures....

With all the boats following behind [the presidential vessel], it was like a mother hen and all her chicks behind....And above us the airplanes--just circling all the time, and contacting us through walkie-talkies, asking

¹² Michael Reilly, Birch Island, to Frank J. Wilson, Washington, D.C., 3 August 1943, Secret Service Records.

¹³ *The Sudbury Star*, 9 August 1943.

Telephone conversation with David Cork, 24 June 1999. *The Sudbury Star* of 9 August 1943, confirmed that Fala was part of the expedition.

¹⁵ *The Sudbury Star*, 9 August 1943.

what kind of fish we caught and how big it was.'

According to St. Pierre, the Secret Service and the RCMP had speedboats which chased other boats away. One who had suffered that experience told St. Pierre that the machine guns gave him the worst scare of his life. St. Pierre himself found Roosevelt totally congenial." St. Pierre later wrote that when Roosevelt when fishing, surrounded by his advisors, he did not discuss the war. He concentrated on his fishing, although on one occasion, he did make a facetious remark about rich people who could own expensive vessels 200 feet (about 66 metres) in length: "When I get through taxing those rich bitches in the U.S., they won't be able to afford those great big yachts.' However, taxing the rich was not an idea that came to him in McGregor Bay. Roosevelt had been doing that since his inauguration in 1933. Nor did the rich lose only their boats. The Vanderbilts of Hyde Park, New York, who lived within walking distance of the Roosevelt Estate, had to sell their summer home, a veritable palace. Roosevelt intervened to save it from a developer's sledgehammer and preserve it as a museum with the National Parks Service.

The temperature fell during the presidential visit, and although the train itself was prepared for such a contingency, two cottages which the party had rented were not. The Secret Service records indicate that Mrs. W. J. Fairlie and Mr. J.C. Nichols had given the visitors the use of their cottages for the week, and *The Sudbury Star* said that dry goods merchant Grant H. Turner "was cleaned out of all woollen blankets on the premises.' One of Sudbury's leading hardware stores, Cochrane-Dunlop, had heard rumours about the enormous fish which President Roosevelt had caught. As early as 10 August, it notified the White House about a fishing competition which it sponsored on an annual basis. This time, it said, it had "taken the liberty of entering the results of the President's piscatorial proclivities in their 1943 fishing contest." The White House thanked Cochrane-Dunlop for its interest but denied that any of the fish were as enormous as reported, said that the presidential party was unaware of any contest and had not maintained records, and, thought, therefore, that Roosevelt and his entourage were ineligible for any prize.'

Basil Scully, son of CPR employee P.J. Scully, conductor of the presidential train between Sudbury and Birch Island, says that he did not discuss the visit with his father until 1945, two years after it had happened. When he finally did discuss the event, P.J. Scully, the conductor, told his son that another CPR engine preceded the presidential train by a distance of roughly half a mile (just short of one kilometre). The Secret Service, responsible for

¹⁶ Ernest J. St. Pierre, *Memoirs of McGregor Bay* (typed and photocopied manuscript, 1995), pp. 265-266.

¹⁷ St. Pierre, pp. 261-266.

¹⁸ St. Pierre, p. 266.

¹⁹ White House memo signed by Mike Reilly of the Secret Service during the Quebec

City conference, 19 August 1943, Secret Service records. See also *The Sudbury Star* 9 August 1943.

²⁰ A summary of the letter from Cochrane-Dunlop to the White House, dated 10 August 1943, and the White House reply of 7 September 1943, appears in Office File, OF 200-2Z to OF 200-3N, Box 64, File: Canada-Fishing Trip, 30 July - 9 August 1943, FDR Archives, Hyde Park.

protecting the President, was taking no chances. If Axis agents had placed explosives on or close to the tracks, the decoy engine, not the presidential train, would take the hit.²¹

Michael Reilly, head of the 31-man Secret Service contingent with the presidential party, described security arrangements to his superior in Washington, Frank Wilson. As on previous and subsequent presidential visits, the Secret Service and the RCMP shared responsibility for security. Without the Secret Service, the president would not travel. However, Canadian governments have not wanted to give the impression that a foreign agency had absolute authority over a section of Canadian land, air or water and have insisted upon the involvement of the RCMP. The 1943 visit was no exception. Reilly said:

The President's train is parked on the regular main line at the Birch Island Station area while the two trains a day through the area use the siding for their passage. Switches at both ends of the siding above and below the special train are spiked. In addition to the regular shift of Agents always in the immediate vicinity of the President, we have four uniformed and two plainclothes RCMP men stationed three at each end of the train. Furthermore three armed Naval personnel patrol the woods east of the parked train twenty-four hours a day and other Naval boats patrol the waters near the Presidential train when the President is not fishing. When the President goes fishing his boat is accompanied by three fully equipped escort boats with eight Agents and three Royal Canadian Mounted Police and thus remain in the immediate vicinity of the President's boat at all times. An air patrol is made of the contemplated fishing area whenever the weather permits.²²

As it was, the Secret Service received word from Washington August 3 that a German prisoner-of-war, Peter Krug, had escaped from confinement in Gravenhurst. Nobody knew whether he had drowned or gone to Birch Island. In any event, Reilly instructed Wilson: "You will be more on the alert than usually with respect to the above matter."²³ Apparently Krug excelled at escapes; on a previous romp he had gone as far as Texas before being apprehended. On this occasion, clad in nothing more than a bathing suit at the time of his unauthorized departure, he went to North Bay, between Gravenhurst and Birch Island. There a policeman recognized and handcuffed him as he stood waiting on the platform outside the CPR station,²⁴ where he could have made connections to Sudbury, Espanola, and Little Current. There is no evidence, however, that he knew of the presidential visit or had any such plans.

The Secret Service had code names for people with the presidential party. The

²¹ Interview with Basil Scully, 25 June 1999. P.J. Scully's name appears in the Secret Service Records.

²² Reilly to Wilson, 3 August 1943, Secret Service Records.

Ibid

²⁴ *The Sudbury Star*, 9 August 1943.

President himself, whose family home sat above the banks of the Hudson River at Hyde Park, New York, was "Hudson". Admiral William D. Leahy, the former US ambassador to France, was "Seine", and Admiral Ross McIntire, the president's doctor, was "Columbia" as in the District of..., currently home to himself as well as to Roosevelt.'

Such an entourage had many needs. The President would live aboard his train, which would sit on the main CPR line between Espanola and Little Current, some fifty yards (less than fifty metres) from Lake Huron.²⁶ Normal traffic would use a siding. The main line was closer to the water than was the siding, and the intention was to make it as easy as possible for the paralysis victim to reach the lake.²⁷ So many fishermen needed bait, and they bought 2,000 worms from Turner's store in Little Current, which, more than half a century later remains in business. Grant Turner, the proprietor, purchased half of them locally, from a Mrs. Kemsley in Little Current. These he sold to the presidential party for \$10.00. He also bought 1,000 from the Skinner Bait Company in Toronto, and these cost \$13.75, presumably because of the additional transportation costs.' Briefly the CPR Telegraph Office at Little Current became one of the world's principal communications centres at one of the world's most critical moments. Between 29 July and 11 August, the presidential entourage sent two dozen telegrams for a grand total of \$15.71 plus \$2.08 in taxes. These went to such destinations as Washington, Detroit, Chicago, and Sudbury.²⁹

At McGregor Bay, Roosevelt could not ignore the war. Too much was at stake. Roosevelt heard about military engagements from the Aleutian Islands to Romania while he vacationed in Ontario. The White House sent news summaries, and the State Department asked the President who should attend the forthcoming inauguration of the new President of Paraguay.' Roosevelt and Churchill remained in touch with each other several times a day. They discussed events in Italy, the forthcoming Quebec conference, and co-operation with General Charles de Gaulle and French forces opposed to Hitler.'

When it was time to return to Washington, the train left McGregor Bay at 10 p.m. Saturday, August 7, reached Espanola at 11:24, stopped briefly in Sudbury between 1 a.m. and 1:15 August 8, passed West Toronto, at 10 a.m., and crossed the border from Fort Erie to Buffalo early in the afternoon. It reached Washington morning at 7:40 a.m."

²⁵ The list of codes appears in the Secret Service Records.

²⁶ Memorandum for Secret Service Agent Mike Reilly, Secret Service Records.

²⁷ Interview with the Rev. John Caswell, 25 June 1999.

²⁸ Turner's bill, 31 August 1943, Secret Service Records.

Canadian Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Bill, Secret Service Records.

Sumner Welles, Department of State, Washington, to FDR, Birch Island, 4 August 1943, Map Room, Box 16, File: Canadian Fishing Trip to Quadrant Conference, 31 July-29 August 1943, FDR Archives, Hyde Park.

³¹ The Roosevelt-Churchill correspondence of this period appears in the Map Room collection, Box 4 and 16, of the FDR Archives in Hyde Park, New York. The quotation comes from a letter which Roosevelt sent to Churchill, still in London, 3 August 1943, Box 4.

³² The schedule, labelled "Confidential", appears in the Secret Service Records.

Obviously, that the President had visited fished in McGregor Bay did not remain a secret for long. On Monday, 9 August, in the very first issue after the departure of the presidential party, *The Sudbury Star* featured Roosevelt's picture on its front page, underneath which was the headline: "President back in Washington after 7-day holiday spent in McGregor Bay district." The story identified several members of the presidential entourage and accurately reported, "The president saw no Canadian officials on his trip...." *The Sudbury Star* devoted its entire fifth page of 9 August to pictures of the environment where Roosevelt vacationed and comments from those islanders who met him. In the words of that newspaper:

Strict censorship necessarily prevented the use of a word about the unprecedented trip--about his plans for departure from Washington...; his passage from Niagara Falls to Sudbury (with every railroad crossing guarded and every switch spiked to guard against accident or design on his life); his arrival at Birch Island on August 1, and his return to American soil last week-end.

Now it may be told--the excitement brought to this part of Canada and the Manitoulin district in particular--by the advent of such a visitor and his retinue; the plans and preparations for his comfort and safety, and the special accommodations necessary to create a "Little Washington" in the Canadian wilderness for even the limited "vacation" period.

What difference did Roosevelt's week at McGregor Bay make to the outcome of the Second World War and subsequent world history? Perhaps Roosevelt's medical records would provide some definitive answer. Undoubtedly, the change of pace in the cool Northern Ontario environment provided some respite for a president who faced one critical situation after another. In all probability, the vacation improved his physical condition prior to the Quadrant meeting with Churchill later in the month. Yet, there were other places where Roosevelt could have gone for a vacation if escape from the heat of Washington and the pressure of the White House had been the only considerations. Roosevelt loved the family homestead on the banks of the Hudson River at Hyde Park, New York. A president who took an interest in Canada, Roosevelt had spent many vacations at Campobello Island in New Brunswick. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to demonstrate that the Northern Ontario site led to outcomes appreciably different from what would have materialized if he had gone elsewhere.

What is certain is that the thirty-second president of the United States could not have gone to many other countries outside the United States without meeting the host country's political leaders. The relationship between Canada and the United States in 1943 was so friendly that the president could slip across the border and go to a destination on the periphery without having to maintain correspondence with the host country's head of government or any other prominent politician. None of his successors even attempted such a feat. In doing this,

sculptor Gutzon Borglum; Arctic explorer Donald MacMillan; Count Felix von Luckner, a German naval hero from World War I; Illinois Governor Henry Horner (1933-1940)--all guests of Zenith's president, E.H. McDonald.³³ These men, who had the resources to roam the world, appreciated the opportunities for rest and recreation which Northern Ontario could offer. Their appreciation, in turn, prompted McDonald, to suggest McGregor Bay as a vacation site fit for a president. At the time it remained possible for a president to accept such advice.

E.F. McDonald, Chicago, to Reilly, Washington, July 23, 1943, Secret Service Records.