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What Were You Doing When . . . ?

This story involves two things that fascinate me: both have to do with memory - remembering small events connected with big events (what were you doing when . . . you heard about Pearl Harbor, FDR died, JFK was killed, etc. etc.) and remembering names – especially remembering names, a big bug-a-boo today, but a problem even when I was twenty-three.

Historic events have a way of engraving themselves in a person's memory by making vivid and permanent not only the event itself, but also otherwise trivial events of the day. Thinking of April 12, 1945, the date of the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, causes me to remember what I was doing when I heard about his death, as well as the events following.

We lived in Takoma Park, Maryland. I was hostess for the day at a wives' luncheon and bridge afternoon in a Washington hotel, a "job" I'd had several times, but this one was different. Because I've always had a struggle with names, I was not happy about the news that there were five new wives who would be present at the luncheon. As each new woman came in, I learned her name and ceremoniously introduced her to each "old" member of the group. The circle of chairs grew to about thirty some odd people, all of whose names I had been through successfully at least several times. Then, luncheon was announced and we seated ourselves at a large table, where the order in which we had been seated was changed. The last newcomer came in and, miraculously, I was able to call her name as well as the names of all the people already seated around the table. We had a pleasant luncheon, followed by an exodus across the room to eight or nine bridge tables, where we seated ourselves at will. Then the last guest arrived, one whose name I knew well. But taking her around to all the tables and identifying each new person by name proved to be my undoing. Two shuffles in position had obliterated all the new names from my mind, as well as a good many of the familiar ones. For some reason, that memory comforts me, perhaps because it's good to know that my difficulty with names is not age-related. Finally, everyone was acquainted and we settled down to our usual afternoon of bridge. I was the last one to leave.

I emerged from the hotel to hear news carriers calling out "Extras" heralding the news of the death of Roosevelt. I'm sure I remember the details of the bridge luncheon mainly because it was fixed in my mind by the news of the death. That was the primary difference in that luncheon and others of its kind.

F.D.R. was dead -- shocking, unexpected news. After all, he had begun serving his unprecedented fourth term as President. No one seemed to know anything about Vice President Harry S Truman, but as the nation grieved in various ways the death of the President, we learned something about the new President.

The days following Roosevelt's death remain strongly in my mind, from the progress of the funeral train from Warm Springs, Georgia, to the lying in state in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, and finally the solemn funeral procession down Pennsylvania Avenue to the church where the funeral was conducted. And, finally, the final journey of the funeral train to Hyde Park for the interment. How can it be that all those details are etched in my memory in such detail, when all the details were carried by radio, not television? But the radio details were vivid, down to the catch in the

voice of Arthur Godfrey, the announcer --I can still hear, no, actually SEE, the weeping crowd witnessing the procession of the horse-drawn caisson down Pennsylvania Avenue. When I actually saw the television coverage of John F. Kennedy's funeral procession, it was familiar because I had SEEN Franklin D. Roosevelt's procession on radio. My memories must have been reinforced by seeing newsreels and newspaper pictures of the funeral train and the funeral procession. But the intimate details came from the radio, sound which was as real as sight. And anything about that day also produces unavoidable images in my mind of that bridge luncheon.

