



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
June 18, 2004

“To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”

-Franklin Roosevelt, June 30, 1941, at the dedication of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

When the news reported that Ronald Reagan was going to be buried at the Ronald Reagan Library, I started wondering what exactly that meant. I knew they couldn't literally mean in the library, so I read some more stories to find out where exactly his remains were going to end up. This, of course, led me to the subject of presidential libraries, a concept I was aware of but had never really completely understood. I decided this was my chance to look into it.

It turns out there are ten presidential libraries. They include: the George Bush, Jimmy Carter, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Gerald R. Ford, Herbert Hoover, Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman and Ronald Reagan libraries. They are administered by the Office of Presidential Libraries, which is part of NARA, the National Archives and Record Administration, located in Maryland. There is

also the Clinton Library, which is scheduled to open to the public in November 2004. The idea of presidential libraries formally began in 1939, when Roosevelt donated his papers to the Federal Government. In 1950 Harry Truman followed suit and this led to the passing of the Presidential Libraries Act, which established a system of federally maintained and privately built libraries. Until 1978, presidential papers were considered the property of the President and consequently a current or past President could decide whether or not to donate his papers.

But in 1978 the Presidential Records Act of 1978 was passed, establishing that the “Presidential records that document the constitutional, statutory and ceremonial duties of the President are the property of the United States Government” (from the NARA website). (I can't help pointing out that in writing this, I only needed to consider one

pronoun, the masculine one, since there have only been male presidents so far. I can't think of any other office – besides an officer in an all male organization – where this is true.)

Included in these collections are over 400 million pages of text, nearly 10 million photographs, more than 15 million feet of motion picture film, nearly 100,000 hours of disc, audiotape and videotapes recordings and about half a million museum objects. All of this is a combination of information generated by the presidency, as well as gifts, awards, campaign memorabilia and tape-recorded memoirs.

And you can research these materials, either online or at one of the libraries. There is a great step-by-step description on the NARA website of the difference between using a traditional library and archives, including what to expect and

how to begin your research. It is rare to see careful instructions like these and I appreciate the person who took the time to spell out how to get started in researching NARA's holdings.

The other website I found interesting in my Presidential Library journey was Mike's Top 15 Favorite Gravesites. His description and photographs of the Reagan site include Mike's Notes: "A monument that is neither insignificant nor overpowering, Reagan's grave strikes a good balance and is a fitting resting place for such a great president." High praise from someone who also includes Grand-Duchess Charlotte of Luxembourg and Napoleon Bonaparte on his list.