

A Putnam Roosevelt

(by Mike Bogdanski)

As the social media director for the Aspinock Historical Society of Putnam, I receive many fascinating inquiries through our Facebook and Instagram pages. Recently, Putnam resident Hans Lowell shared a vintage newsreel titled "Wheels Across India" that revealed a captivating piece of history about Putnam residents Armand Denis and Leila Roosevelt. Their story is a blend of global adventure, filmmaking, and a distant connection to one of America's most famous families. With Presidents' Day approaching, diving into this remarkable tale seems fitting.

Leila Roosevelt: A Distant Cousin of FDR

Leila Roosevelt's lineage traces back to the illustrious Roosevelt family, although from a different branch than President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). While FDR hailed from the Hyde Park Roosevelts, Leila belonged to the Oyster Bay branch. Both branches share a common ancestor, Claes Martenszen van Rosenvelt, who emigrated to New Amsterdam (modern-day New York City) in the 17th century. This connection made Leila and FDR very distant cousins. It has been rumored FDR had visited his cousin in Putnam. Although several American presidents have visited Putnam, there is no hard record of FDR making the trip.

Born in New York City, Leila's journey took her far from her ancestral roots. She became a filmmaker, explorer, and partner to Armand Denis, with whom she created groundbreaking wildlife documentaries. However, the couple's connection to Putnam adds a unique local angle to their story.

The Denis-Roosevelt Asiatic Expedition

In 1940, Armand Denis and Leila Roosevelt embarked on an ambitious expedition, capturing the imagination of audiences worldwide. Traveling 16,000 miles across Asia in Dodge trucks, they documented the landscapes, cultures, and wildlife they encountered. This expedition was part of their broader work as modern explorers, including a 42,000-mile journey across the Sahara, Africa, and Asia. Their films, such as "Safari" (1956) and the TV series "On Safari" (1957–1965), became iconic for showcasing the wonders of the natural world.

Leila's charm and poise brought a unique touch to their work. Not only did she narrate and present their adventures, but she also played a significant role in popularizing wildlife conservation, a cause that was just beginning to gain traction in the mid-20th century.

A Putnam Connection: The Denis Family in Our Town

The Denis-Roosevelt story has a unique link to Putnam. The house they lived in is located on Fox Road. Their son, David Roosevelt Denis, was born here on March 7, 1927. This connection

brings a global tale of adventure back to our small town, making it a cherished piece of local history.

In the newsreel "Wheels Across India," a charming moment features the Denis children playing with two hunting leopards, described as their "kittens." Originally from Tanganyika (modern-day Tanzania) and India, these leopards were tamed and featured in the film "Wheels Across Africa." Anecdotes from local families suggest that these exotic animals were sometimes seen on leashes—secured with chains—during the Denis family's time living in Putnam. Such vivid memories offer a glimpse into the extraordinary lives of this family.

Preserving Their Legacy

The Denis-Roosevelt legacy is a reminder of the adventurous spirit that once captured the hearts of audiences worldwide. Their films entertained, educated, and inspired, paving the way for modern wildlife documentaries. Today, the Aspinock Historical Society continues to uncover and share stories like theirs, celebrating Putnam's unique contributions to history.

For those interested, the video newsreel "Wheels Across India" is available on our YouTube channel, offering a window into the Denis family's adventures. If you've heard stories about their time in Putnam or have family anecdotes to share, we'd love to hear from you on our Facebook page.

This Presidents' Day, as we honor leaders like FDR, let's celebrate the Roosevelts who forged their paths and brought the world closer through exploration and storytelling.