Lorena A. Hickok was a notable woman journalist of the early twentieth century whose career was greatly altered by her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt. After reporting for several newspapers across the country, Hickok became one of the first women hired by the Associated Press wire service (AP) in 1928. She was assigned to cover Eleanor Roosevelt during Franklin Roosevelt's first campaign for the presidency of the United States, at which time they became very good friends. Hickok later became the first reporter to conduct an on-the-record interview with a First Lady. However, when their friendship began to conflict with her loyalty to the AP, Hickok resigned from that organization in 1933. As an investigator for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Hickok's reports from her fact-finding tours contained information on unemployment and relief, but also captured the human side of the bitterness and heroism of Americans caught in economic disaster. In the 1950s Hickok and Mrs. Roosevelt coauthored a book on women in politics, and in 1962 Hickok wrote a biography of Mrs. Roosevelt. Before her death in 1968, Hickok lamented the loss of her notable newspaper career, saying it was the only thing she had done really well. (HTH)
LORENA A. HICKOK: WOMAN JOURNALIST

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Lorena A. Hickok: Woman Journalist

Lorena A. Hickok has come to attention recently following disclosure of her voluminous correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt now open to researchers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.¹ Since interest has focused on the intimate nature of the thousands of letters exchanged by the two women, the historical importance of the letters and accompanying papers has been obscured. These papers depict Lorena Hickok as a top journalist of the early 1930s who gave up her job with the Associated Press to work for the Roosevelt administration. As a confidential investigator of relief programs, Hickok traveled throughout the United States during the darkest days of the Depression. Her observations, contained both in her personal letters to Mrs. Roosevelt and in official government reports, constitute a gold mine of information on life during one of the most trying periods of American history.
This paper will examine Hickok as a notable woman journalist of the early 20th century and describe the extraordinary reporting task that she performed for the Roosevelt administration. Even if Hickok had not known Mrs. Roosevelt, her career would merit examination for she was one of the relatively few women to achieve success in the rough-and-tumble world of New York journalism in the early 1920s and 30s. Her closeness to Mrs. Roosevelt changed the course of her life. It gave her an opportunity to exercise her journalistic skills in a behind-the-scenes role that aided in carrying out national policy.

Lorena Hickok was the product of what she referred to as "the Golden Age of Individualism." In an introduction to an unfinished autobiography, she wrote, "Americans were still pioneers, frontiersmen, in their outlook when I was born over a creamery in rural Wisconsin on March 4, 1893. It was our national philosophy that each individual American could go as far as his ability and determination would take him."

In a sense her life lived out that dream. From that humble beginning in East Troy, Wisconsin, the daughter of a traveling buttermaker, she became the confidante of a President's wife, lived in the White House as Mrs. Roosevelt's
guest and earned recognition for her journalistic accomplishments. As a child she displayed unusual determination, in spite of frequent beatings from a tyrannical father, who horsewhipped her and threw her kitten against the barn and drove her mother to a house of weeping. She wrote years later, "Never once did he whip me - and the whippings grew progressively more severe as I grew older - when I didn't mutter, inaudibly behind my gritted teeth: 'You wouldn't dare do this to me if I were as big as you are.'"

After her mother died in the dingy village of Bowdle, South Dakota, where the father's trade had taken the family, Hickok was told to leave home. At fourteen, she began work as a "hired girl," staying with nine different families in the next two years. Finally a saloonkeeper's wife felt sorry for her and sent her to live with her mother's cousin, Ella Ellie, in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Under the cousin's guidance she finished high school and enrolled at Lawrence College, Appleton, Wisconsin. Unable to get along with sorority members, she clerked in a grocery store so she could pay for meals off-campus and avoid eating in the college dormitory. Flunking out at the end of her freshman year, she returned to Battle
Creek and started work as a $7-a-week cub reporter for the Battle Creek Evening News, meeting trains and collecting "personals." Following a second unsuccessful try at Lawrence, she landed a job on the Milwaukee Sentinel.

As a woman reporter she experienced the customary sex discrimination of her period, but she learned to surmount it. As she explained:

When I first went into the newspaper business I had to get a job as society editor - the only opening available to women in most offices. Then I'd build myself up solidly with the city editor by volunteering for night assignments, get into trouble with some dowager who would demand that I be fired, and finally land on the straight reportorial staff, which was where I had wanted to be from the beginning.

This was the path she followed at the Sentinel where she provoked the ire of the grande dames of the Schlitz brewery family.

In 1917 Hickok got a job on the Minneapolis Tribune, but she yearned for World War I adventure in Europe. Hoping to join the Women's Legion of Death, a group fighting in the tangled maze of the Russian Revolution, she headed to New York. There she was fired after a month as a reporter on the New York Tribune and resorted to police work - patrolling parks to rescue young women from amorous sailors. Unable to get to Russia, she returned to
Minneapolis.

Trying college once again, Hickok enrolled at the University of Minnesota while doing rewrite on the Tribune. But she ran afoul of a dean of women who tried unsuccessfully to make her live in a dormitory.\(^{15}\) Her college career ended as she rose to become Tribune Sunday editor and then chief by-lined reporter under managing editor Thomas J. Dillon.

Hickok called Dillon "The Old Man" and gave him credit for teaching her "the newspaper business, how to drink, and how to live."\(^{16}\) For six years under Dillon, Hickok recalled, she covered assignments rarely given to women in those days - politics, including the visit of "a rather frowsy Queen of Rumania," and sports, interviewing Knute Rockne, Red Grange and other greats.\(^{17}\) Her fame as a feature writer spread as she focused on personalities varying from Woodrow Wilson to circus performers. It prompted a male journalism student at the University of Minnesota to interview her on her own career. He described her as "good-natured, overweight, erratic, and the cleverest interviewer in this section of the country."\(^{18}\) "I have lots of experiences interviewing people," Hickok told him. "One time I slept with a murderess. There was only one
empty bed, so she and I slept together."19

Hickok also touched on the handicap of being a woman:
"The best job in a newspaper office is of course the manageing editorship and you seldom see a woman getting a job like that."20 Yet she painted a dismal portrait of women reporters including herself:

I always think of the woman journalist type as a sour individual, a kind of disillusioned being, with the 'Listen girlie' manner, and mannishly dressed. Something like myself, is the type, I guess, only I don't dress mannishly. Then there's another sort of woman journalist--the office flirt variety. That sort is rather messy, coming into the office and disrupting all the organization of the reporting staff. On the whole, I like them better than the first type. The first is just awful. Then there are exceptions that can't be classed in either of these groups - they're the best, I think.21

In 1926 Hickok was stricken with diabetes and left Minneapolis. She went to San Francisco for a year to regain her health and to try unsuccessfully to become a writer. When her money ran out, she decided to tackle the heights of jazz journalism.22

This time she was ready for New York City. First came a year on the Hearst tabloid, the Daily Mirror. Then in 1928 she became one of the first women to be hired by the Associated Press. At first she was restricted to features because women were regarded as unable to handle
"hard news" stories. As she complained bitterly in a letter to another newspaperwoman:

The newspaper business is alright for a woman who is contented to write nothing but features without any news in 'em or--better still--syndicated stuff, which pays a helluva lot better than newspaper work, straight, anyway...But if you're built as I am mentally, temperamentally, nervously, or however you want to put it, and you don't get any kick out of it except the thrill that comes out of working on news--real, honest-to-gawd stories--then it's just hell. 23

Soon she vanquished male competitors. She became "part of the horde of New York newspaper reporters and photographers that would sweep down on some defenseless little town unfortunate enough to be the scene of a good murder, trial, a page-one divorce story," as she described it. 24 "We were a wild, boisterous, cynical, unmannerly crew. Only the bootleggers loved us." 25

In 1936, Ishbel Ross, one of the first historians of woman journalists, credited Hickok with "achieving standing with the AP that no other woman has matched." 26 Her toughest assignment was the Lindbergh baby kidnapping story. During a blizzard she crawled on hands and knees around the Lindbergh house to peer in the windows and check out an unfounded rumor that the baby had been returned. 27 Afterwards she was sick for six weeks but kept working. Earlier hot on the trail of the kidnapper,
she and a photographer had come within 200 yards of the shallow grave where the baby's body eventually was discovered by a truck driver. "Things happened to me on that story that shouldn't happen to any reporter," she noted.

Hickok's life switched direction when she was assigned to cover Eleanor Roosevelt during her husband's first campaign for President in the fall of 1932. The two women had become acquainted in 1928 when Hickok was assigned to the Democratic National Committee headquarters in New York City and Mrs. Roosevelt was involved in her husband's campaign for governor. But it was not until the Presidential campaign that the friendship bloomed. As Hickok accompanied Mrs. Roosevelt on train trips, frequently her sole companion, Mrs. Roosevelt, initially shy and cool, turned to Hickok for a confidante.

After the election Hickok's by-lined AP stories introduced the new First Lady to the American public. They presented her as an independent-minded woman determined to remain "plain, ordinary Mrs. Roosevelt." Hickok's coverage of Mrs. Roosevelt ended on Inauguration Day, 1933, after she had made history as the first reporter to conduct an on-the-record interview with a First Lady in the White House.
The next day Hickok returned to her job in New York, but the two women remained in close contact, launching the now-controversial exchange of letters on a daily, and sometimes twice-daily, basis. They also talked frequently on the telephone. "Hick, my dearest," Mrs. Roosevelt wrote Hickok in her first letter, "I cannot go to bed tonight without a word to you. I felt a little as though a part of me was leaving tonight." 

Hickok's intimacy with Mrs. Roosevelt had strained her relationship with the AP. During the campaign Hickok had violated professional standards of objectivity and cleared all stories on Mrs. Roosevelt with either her or Louis Howe, a former newspaperman who was Roosevelt's chief adviser, before sending them over the wire. On one occasion her pay had been slashed when she withheld a story at Mrs. Roosevelt's request. In addition, she had become an unofficial press adviser to Mrs. Roosevelt, paving the way for her to hold women-only press conferences in the White House.

Finally Hickok felt she had to choose between her friendship with Mrs. Roosevelt and her loyalty to the AP. She resigned in June, 1933, after months of agonizing over the decision. One factor may have been Mrs. Roosevelt's
encouragement to try other endeavors. "Hick, darling," Mrs. Roosevelt wrote, "wouldn't the A.P. let you write for a magazine?" She urged Hickok to seek a higher-paying job: "I want you to be happy in your work, but I want you to be free from this worry over finances."

After resigning Hickok took a job as chief investigator for Harry L. Hopkins, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, traveling throughout the nation to observe relief programs. Before beginning work, she arranged a leave without pay to accompany Mrs. Roosevelt on a month-long, off-the-record vacation. Rejecting even a Secret Service escort, the two drove alone through New England and Eastern Canada. The next summer they drove together through the Western United States.

In her new job Hickok used her journalistic skills and contacts to prepare confidential reports on local relief efforts across the country. Her findings were dispatched to Hopkins in detailed reports that repeated information given Mrs. Roosevelt in her daily letters. Both Hopkins and Mrs. Roosevelt passed on her findings to President Roosevelt, who gave them close attention, according to contemporary sources. "Hick, darling: FDR finds your reports most interesting," Mrs. Roosevelt wrote.
Acquiring with Mrs. Roosevelt's aid a car nicknamed "Bluette," Hickok drove alone across the United States from 1933 to 1936, making fact-finding tours through 32 states. During the day she talked to politicians, reporters, civic leaders, relief recipients and welfare workers; at night she sat in uncomfortable hotel rooms, frequently exhausted, typing out the reports and writing the letters designed to bring human misery home to the White House. She visited the places that seemed god-forsaken: Fayette County, Pennsylvania, in the midst of a coal-miners' strike; Pineville, Kentucky, where relief had been cut off to starving people; Bottineau County, North Dakota, just before a blizzard; the Imperial Valley in California when her car thermometer registered 124 degrees.

Although her reports bristled with facts and figures on unemployment and relief, unlike most government documents they contained another dimension. Like the star reporter she had been, she looked for human interest stories, vignettes on victims of the Depression: The Negro woman in Philadelphia who walked eight miles a day in an unsuccessful hunt for cleaning work at 15 cents an hour; the eight-year-old Mexican girl in Colorado who already had worked two summers "in the beets"; the little boys in
Houston, Texas, too proud to go to school in trousers of the conspicuous black and white striped ticking furnished relief clients; the hungry farm woman in South Dakota who made soup out of thistles; the housewife in Bakersfield, California, who timidly suggested cash accompany grocery orders for purchase of "protection" against "having babies."

Hickok did not sympathize with relief recipients who failed to subscribe to middle-class values, but she pictured the vast majority of Depression-stricken Americans struggling heroically against adversity. Writing to Mrs. Roosevelt during a long trip through the Middle West, for example, she described conditions in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, formerly a center of activity for traveling salesmen:

Only the man selling the absolute necessities of life can get by, even. Take a commodity like paint...why, there obviously hasn't been a paintbrush on those farm buildings in years. And that's true of Iowa, too. What chance has a paint salesman had out here?...most of those traveling men and their families--good, solid, paying customers--have left Sioux Falls or have been forced on to the relief rolls, and their places have been taken by farmers and their families who lost their farms and moved to town, hoping they'd be able to get work there... And can't you imagine how they resent being called 'chislers'?  

In her travels Hickok tried to minimize her relationship with the White House. She avoided publicity, refused
interviews and tried to talk to "just average people" without telling them she was from Washington. Repeatedly she advised Hopkins of administrative failure due to politics or incompetency, exploding in one report, "Texas is a Godawful mess." Many reports appraised the strength of Communists and other "agitators," reflecting New Deal concern with potential revolution. On occasion her observations led to immediate action. After receiving her report of destitution in Minot, North Dakota, President Roosevelt personally telephoned the local relief head to speed up delivery of emergency supplies and livestock food. Her findings played a part in Mrs. Roosevelt's direct efforts to remedy conditions in the desolate mining towns of West Virginia. When she read Hickok's description of the misery near Morgantown, Mrs. Roosevelt drove there alone to meet Hickok and to tour the area with her. Soon Mrs. Roosevelt made arrangements for impoverished families to move into a new subsistence farming community called Arthurdale. Although the resettlement did not work out as expected, the effort helped establish Mrs. Roosevelt
as a leading humanitarian.

In March, 1934, Hickok accompanied Mrs. Roosevelt on another mission to inspect poverty. This time they were joined by four newspaperwomen, Bess Furman of the Associated Press, Ruby A. Black of the United Press, Emma Bugbee of the New York Herald Tribune and Dorothy Ducas of International News Service. The group toured Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands with Hickok reporting to Hopkins on chronic problems there. 55

President Roosevelt himself gave Hickok a second assignment in the spring of 1935 as a confidential investigator for the National Emergency Council. In actuality it was a political post—to determine the popularity of the New Deal in advance of the 1936 election. 56 Hickok's prognostications proved inept: She predicted Roosevelt would be in serious trouble (when he actually carried every state except Maine and Vermont). 57

By this time Hickok's health had begun to fail, due to diabetic tendencies, travel fatigue and fondness for rich food and drink. In their correspondence Mrs. Roosevelt chided her about the need to stay on a diet and to avoid "corn liquor:...if I have stopped the drinking of too much corn liquor I probably have increased your chances
for health in the next few years and hangovers can't have added much to the joy of life."\textsuperscript{58}

Hickok worried over being dependent on Mrs. Roosevelt. A frequent guest in the White House between trips, Hickok complained: I'm really on relief, myself," to which Mrs. Roosevelt replied, "You might say it's rather luxurious relief."\textsuperscript{59} A \textit{Time} magazine article infuriated Hickok, describing her as a "rotund lady with a husky voice" and "baggy clothes" and implying that she owed her position solely to Mrs. Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{60} Exploded Hickok: "I love Mrs. Roosevelt dearly--she is the best friend I have in the world--but sometimes I do wish, for my own sake, that she were Mrs. Joe Doaks of Oelwein, Iowa."\textsuperscript{61}

Hickok left Hopkins in 1936 and depended on Mrs. Roosevelt's help in locating other jobs. She was a publicist for the New York World's Fair from 1937 to 1940 and executive director of the women's division of the Democratic National Committee from 1940 to 1945, living at the White House during World War II. Her last employment was with New York Democratic State Committee from 1947 to 1952.

Partially blind, Hickok moved to Hyde Park, N. Y., in the 1950s to be near Mrs. Roosevelt. She and Mrs. Roosevelt co-authored a book, \textit{Ladies of Courage} (1954)
on women in politics, and Hickok wrote a biography of
Mrs. Roosevelt, _Reluctant First Lady_ (1962), and books for
young people. She barely had enough to live on and
Mrs. Roosevelt aided her repeatedly. Hickok died in
1968.

It is difficult to assess Hickok apart from her
relationship with Mrs. Roosevelt. As a reporter she
proved a prime example of what Ross called a "front-page
girl," a hard-boiled young woman determined to get any
story as well as, or better than, a male rival. First
her life was her job; later it became her association with
Mrs. Roosevelt. It was fitting that her most significant
reportorial achievement stemmed from her closeness to the
First Lady.

From 1933 to 1936 she interviewed thousands of
Americans on relief, perhaps more than any other one individ-
ual. Capturing both the bitterness and heroism of ordinary
Americans caught in economic catastrophe, her letters and
reports represent an unmined treasury for social historians.
Her experiences caused her to change her own views on
rugged individualism as she witnessed the need for people
"to look to their government for the common necessities
of life." Somehow her own initiative gave way as she
began to lean more and more on Mrs. Roosevelt.

Toward the end of her life she lamented the loss of American independence:

I am pretty certain that had I been turned loose at the age of fourteen, in the world as it is today here in America, to beat my way around earning a precarious living as an untrained domestic servant, the welfare agencies, the social workers, the psychiatrists, and the juvenile court would have nabbed me....The chances are I'd have been sent away somewhere to be trained to be a good servant.65

She also mourned the end of her newspaper career: "I was just about the top gal reporter in the country....God knows, I've had the conceit taken out of me plenty in the years since. Being a newspaper reporter was the only thing I ever was really good at."66
Footnotes

1 The letters, which number some 3,000, are contained in a 16,000-page collection of Lorena Hickok's papers opened to researchers in 1978 at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, N.Y.


3 Foreword, unfinished autobiography, Hickok papers, p. 1.

4 Ibid.


6 Ibid., p. 6.

7 Chapter 2, (untitled), unfinished autobiography, p. 2.

8 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

9 Outline, unfinished autobiography, p. 1. See also letter, Hickok from Ella Ellie, June 1, 1913, Hickok papers.


11 Foreword, unfinished autobiography, p. 2.

12 Ibid.

13 Outline, unfinished autobiography, p. 1.

14 Ibid., p. 2.

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 3.
20 Ibid., p. 4.
21 Ibid.
22 Outline, unfinished autobiography, p. 2.
25 Ibid., p. 4.
26 Ishbel Ross, Ladies of the Press (New York: Harper & Bros., 1936), p. 204. See also memo, JMK (unidentified AP editor) to Kent Cooper, AP general manager, Feb. 6, 1931, Hickok papers.
28 Ibid., pp. 1-3.
29 Ibid., p. 1.
31 Ibid., p. 49. For an assessment of the relationship between Mrs. Roosevelt and Hickok during the 1932 campaign, see Maurine Beasley, "Lorena A. Hickok: Journalistic Influence on Eleanor Roosevelt," Journalism Quarterly, 57: 281-286 (Summer 1980).
32 AP dispatch from New York, Nov. 9, 1932, Hickok papers.

34 Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to Hickok, March 5, 1933, Hickok papers.

35 Letter, Hickok to Malvina Thompson, Mrs. Roosevelt's secretary, July 23, 1949, Hickok papers.

36 This occurred when Mrs. Roosevelt asked Hickok to refrain from writing a story about her reaction to criticism of a remark she had made in a radio broadcast: "Nowadays a girl who goes out with a boy must know how to handle her gin." See Hickok letter to Thompson, July 23, 1949.


38 Letter, Hickok to Thompson, July 23, 1949, Hickok papers.

39 Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to Hickok, April 3, 1933, Hickok papers.

40 Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to Hickok, April 20, 1933, Hickok papers.

41 Hickok, chapter 14, "Incognito," Reluctant First Lady, pp. 119-131.

42 Ibid., pp. 158-161.

44 Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to Hickok, Nov. 12, 1933, Hickok papers.

45 Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to Hickok, Aug. 7, 1933, Hickok papers.

46 Foreword for proposed book of edited reports attached to letter, Hickok to Mrs. Godwin, Harry Hopkins' secretary, Nov. 21, 1936, Hickok papers.

47 Ibid.

48 Letter, Hickok to Eleanor Roosevelt, Nov. 26, 1933, Hickok papers.

49 Report, Hickok to Hopkins, July 18, 1936, Hopkins papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.


51 Report, Hickok to Hopkins, April 11, 1934, Hopkins papers.

52 Notation, report, Hickok to Hopkins, Nov. 1, 1933, Hopkins papers.

53 Hickok, Reluctant First Lady, pp. 136-141.


55 Report, Hickok to Hopkins, March 20, 1934, Hopkins papers.


58 Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to Hickok, Nov. 22, 1933, Hickok papers.


63 Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

64 Foreword, unfinished autobiography, p. 3.

65 Ibid., pp. 3-4.

66 Letter, Hickok to Thompson, July 23, 1949, Hickok papers.