

*Empty Without You:  
The Intimate Letters of  
Eleanor Roosevelt and  
Lorena Hickok*



[http://www.thecityedition.com/filmsprings/Eleanor\\_photos.html](http://www.thecityedition.com/filmsprings/Eleanor_photos.html)

Edited by Rodger Streitmatter

Joanna Newton

Braintree Public Schools

TAH: *A More Perfect Union*

Year III

September 14, 2011

Joanna Newton  
September 14, 2011

TAH: *A More Perfect Union* Year III

The United States was led through the troubled times of the Great Depression, the New Deal and World War II under the guidance of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Serving beside him as First Lady was his fifth cousin and niece of former President Theodore Roosevelt, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Roosevelt (Streitmatter xiii). As First Lady, Mrs. Roosevelt transformed the role that she occupied for an unprecedented twelve plus years. The aspect of her life that has received a great deal of attention in the past few decades is Mrs. Roosevelt's relationship with Lorena Hickok. Hickok was an Associated Press reporter who covered Franklin D. Roosevelt as Governor and eventually was assigned to cover Eleanor during the presidential campaign of 1939 (5-7). The two women became close friends and would remain so for their entire lives. When the friends were not together, Eleanor and Lorena kept in touch through personal letters, phone calls and telegrams. Hickok collected the letters and donated them to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. Hickok's will stipulated that the letters could not be opened until ten years after her death. In 1978, eighteen boxes of the friends' correspondence were opened. Inside the cardboard boxes were 3,500 letters written by the two women to each other (xiv). The contents created a storm of controversy about the true nature of the relationship between the two women. Missing from the boxes were the hundreds of letters that Hickok had burned to protect the legacy of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Streitmatter records: "In 1966, Lorena confided in Anna why she had done so: 'Your mother wasn't always so very discreet in her letters to me'" (xxii). However, the correspondence did contain enough evidence to plant the idea that the relationship between the two women had been more than best friends. In his book, *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok*, Rodger Streitmatter explores the possibility that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Associated Press reporter Lorena Hickok were involved in a lesbian love affair.

Editor Rodger Streitmatter read the letters and compiled 300 of them chronologically in his book. Although Streitmatter states that he is not completely convinced that the pair had a lesbian relationship, he does provide evidence to support this theory. For instance, in his introduction, Streitmatter acknowledges that “there is no question that they both spent enormous quantities of time with women who loved women” (xviii). Also, Eleanor appeared to be tolerant of less traditional sexual situations. Several of her best friends lived openly in female relationships and, Eleanor, according to Streitmatter, “was a professed believer in sexual freedom – including people acting on homosexual desires” (xix).

Contributing to the possibility of a lesbian relationship is the knowledge that Franklin and Eleanor no longer shared a marriage bed. In September of 1918, Eleanor discovered that her husband was having an affair with Eleanor’s personal secretary, Lucy Page Mercer. With the intervention of Franklin’s mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, the Roosevelts decided to remain married for the sake of the children and Franklin’s political career; however, they would no longer be intimate in the bedroom (1-2). This arrangement untied Eleanor from this facet of married life.

Lorena Hickok’s sexual preferences were apparent. In 1918, she became involved in a same-sex relationship that lasted for eight years with Ellie Morse, a co-worker at the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Streitmatter reports, “Lorena and Ellie shared a one-bedroom apartment in the Leamington Hotel and became a classic butch/femme couple...Lorena spent as little time as possible on personal grooming; Ellie had her hair curled and wore make-up even when she stayed in the apartment” (xix).

Joanna Newton  
September 14, 2011

TAH: *A More Perfect Union* Year III

Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok met in September of 1928. They did not begin to spend time together until the fall of 1932 when Hickok was given the responsibility of covering the presidential candidate's wife. The two quickly became friends and Hickok was frequently asked by Eleanor to spend time in private. After FDR won the election, Eleanor and Lorena spent even more time together. Streitmatter accounts that the couple: "attended plays, concerts, and operas before dining late either in one of Manhattan's out-of-the-way restaurants—one favorite was an Armenian café far downtown—or, more likely, in the privacy of Hick's one-room apartment in midtown" (9-10).

Mrs. Roosevelt and Miss Hickok spent as much time together as they could for the remainder of 1932 and the first few months of 1933 before Eleanor had to move to the White House. Hickok was unable to transfer to the Washington bureau of the Associated Press so the two knew their relationship would become a long distance one (10). On March 3, 1933, Lorena Hickok rode the train to Washington with the soon-to-be first family. As Streitmatter reports, "On the last night before the inauguration, the ascending first lady planned a quiet dinner and evening for herself and Hick in the privacy of the Presidential Suite at the Mayflower; they knew it was their last night together" (12). However, Eleanor already had a plan for when the new "First Friend" would visit the White House. Mrs. Roosevelt had chosen a suite in the southwest corner of the White House that had a sitting room, a bedroom and a bath (11). Private enough for her to have Lorena stay with her. The next phase of the couple's relationship would play out in personal correspondence for the next three decades.

Because Lorena had destroyed many of her letters from 1933, Streitmatter relied on the letters of Eleanor for the first chapter of his book. In this early correspondence he found the title

Joanna Newton  
September 14, 2011

TAH: *A More Perfect Union* Year III

for his book and an indication of Eleanor's feelings toward Lorena. In the first letter, dated March 5, the new First Lady tells her friend how much she missed her:

Hick, my dearest, I cannot go to bed without a word to you. I felt a little as though a part of me was leaving to-night, you have grown so much to be a part of my life that it is empty without you even though I'm busy every minute.

These are strange days & very odd to me but I'll remember the joys & try to plan pleasant things & count the days between our times together! (16)

Mrs. Roosevelt's letters usually followed the same pattern of a few words to Lorena, an account of the days' activities and then more thoughts directed to Lorena.

Streitmatter finds more evidence for the likelihood of a physical relationship between the two women. Eleanor often told her friend that she kissed Lorena's picture in the morning and in the evening. Lorena, who tended to be less descriptive in the saved letters, was a bit more forthcoming in her letter of December 5, 1933. The two had not seen each other in over two months and Lorena was lamenting that the memory of faces fades over time. In her letter to the First Lady, the "First Friend" had written: "Most clearly I remember your eyes, with a kind of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth against my lips" (52).

In February of 1934, Eleanor wrote a letter to Lorena that illustrated many of her feelings. She expressed a need to put her arms around Lorena and a jealousy about Lorena seeing Ellie Morse, her former partner. After Eleanor acknowledged that relationships take time and love can hurt, she ended her note with: "A world of love & I do put my arms around you in my dreams dear one" (79). Streitmatter feels that this sentence from Mrs. Roosevelt's letters is

Joanna Newton  
September 14, 2011

TAH: *A More Perfect Union* Year III

“one of the most memorable that Eleanor would ever write about her relationship with Lorena” (78).

Although Rodger Streitmatter finds evidence to support the theory that Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok had a love affair, his collection of letters falls does not achieve this goal. Many expressions of affection between them are recorded but it is not easy to draw the conclusion that the two were involved in a lesbian relationship. Much of the book centers on the lives the two women led rather than their relationship with each other although their friendship is a significant feature of both of their lives. Streitmatter’s commentary throughout the book does lead the reader to consider that it is possible that the First Lady of the United States had a female lover; however, just as Streitmatter concludes himself, it is still just a theory without definitive proof. Maybe the hundreds of destroyed letters would have provided enough evidence to have a more convincing argument.

### **Pedagogy**

*Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok*, edited by Rodger Streitmatter, provides an ample collection of primary documents that would be helpful to use in any history classroom. First, the letters often refer to major events that happened in the thirties and forties as well as numerous historical figures. History teachers could use these references to examine how people felt during this time period about what was happening. Some examples are responses to the New Deal, Eleanor Roosevelt’s feelings about being the First Lady and the events that shaped each presidential election. The ladies’ letters often refer to famous people of the time including Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and of course, FDR. Mrs. Roosevelt often refers to conversations she has with her husband regarding the current events of

Joanna Newton  
September 14, 2011

TAH: *A More Perfect Union* Year III

the day and visitors to the White House. In her letter of December 26, 1941, Eleanor recounts her day to Lorena:

The day went off well here from an official point of view. I've talked much with P.M. (Prime Minister Winston Churchill). He is a forceful personality but the stress on what the English speaking people can do in the future worries me a little. I don't trust nay of us with too much power & I want the other nations in too! (241).

A second educational purpose of this book would be to show how simple letter writing between friends can become an important part of documenting history. Eleanor Roosevelt's letters show the human side of the role of First Lady. Eleanor discusses how much time she must spend reading and writing correspondence, and Lorena Hickok puts a human face on the suffering of so many American during the Depression. Her book, *One Third of a Nation*, is a much more detailed account of her experiences as she traveled the country to investigate the work of the Federal Emergency Relief Organization, but her letters to Eleanor are more personal and highlight the anguish and the hopelessness she feels when she witnesses some of the poverty and strife Americans were experiencing during this time period. The letters would be beneficial in teaching this period and they would validate the rationale of using primary documents as a method of learning history.

Joanna Newton  
September 14, 2011

TAH: *A More Perfect Union* Year III

### Works Cited

Streitmatter, Rodger. *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena*

*Hickok*. New York: The Free Press, 1998. Print.