

Kids, Mischief and the White House

By Dennis Knight

When we think of children in the White House, the image comes to mind of a little boy we knew as John-John playing under the desk at his father's feet in the oval office. He was sixteen days after President Kennedy's election in 1960, and only three when he lost his father to an assassin in Dallas. John and his big sister Caroline were playful children, and Mr. Kennedy usually spent the beginning of his day cavorting with them as the television blasted cartoons. Jack and the children loved to stretch and tumble and wrestle when Jack LaLanne's exercise show came on the tube.

When Theodore Roosevelt ascended to the presidency in 1901, along came six energetic children and a menagerie of pets, including dogs, birds and a pony. From the basement to the flagpole on the roof, every nook and cubbyhole was thoroughly investigated. The children would crawl in between ceilings and the floor above, skittering residential ferrets and rats. They skated, biked and stilt walked. They climbed high in the trees and swam in the fountains. The animals, even the pony, had free access to the children's' bedrooms, and giving the pony a ride on the elevator was a favorite stunt.

Tad Lincoln was eight and the youngest of three living sons when his family moved into the White House in 1861. The child was the most rambunctious of his brothers, but brother Willie was close. Together they sprayed dignitaries with the fire hose, broke mirrors, locked doors, interrupted Cabinet meetings, turned chairs into wagons and sleds, rang the call bells, and drilled the servants as if they were soldiers.

The twin daughters of President George W. Bush, Jenna and Barbara had been young children playing in the White House when their Grandfather occupied the presidency. They were nineteen when their dad was inaugurated, and within months they got into trouble trying to buy alcohol using someone else's identification. The girls enjoyed their official White House residency playfully but in a different way, making life difficult for the Secret Service by ditching them at every opportunity.

The Bush twins sent an open letter to their successors in the White House, Sasha and Malia Obama, advising them to "Slide down the banister of the solarium, go to T-ball games, have swimming parties, and play Sardines on the White House lawn." They told them what White House staffers to go to. "If you ever need a hug, go find Ramsey. If you want to talk football, look for Buddy. And, if you just need a smile, look for 'Smiley'."

Mrs. Obama often suggests the girls invite friends to spend the night, and sometimes they do, but they prefer to finagle invitations to sleepovers with their friends. Like centuries of White House parents before them, the Obamas seem bent on allowing their kids to make wonderful memories of their lives in the goldfish bowl, but so far they haven't gotten a pony.