AWESOME stories

Rare Video of FDR in His Wheelchair

FDR became ill while visiting his family's retreat on Campobello Island (in New Brunswick, Canada) during the summer of 1921. We learn more from Amy Berish at the FDR Presidential Library and Museum:

> *During the summer of 1921, FDR was enjoying a day of sailing on his yacht when he suddenly fell overboard into the icy waters of the Bay of Fundy, which ironically felt paralyzing to his body. The following day, FDR complained of lower back pain and went for a swim in hopes to ease the soreness. As the day progressed, he could feel his legs becoming weaker and by the third day, he could no longer hold his own weight. His skin quickly became very sensitive and eventually even a slight breeze across his body caused great distress.*

No one has ever been sure how FDR was exposed to the virus which caused his illness. Many people think that he may have contracted the disease when he visited a Boy Scout Camp in New York, before joining his family in Canada.

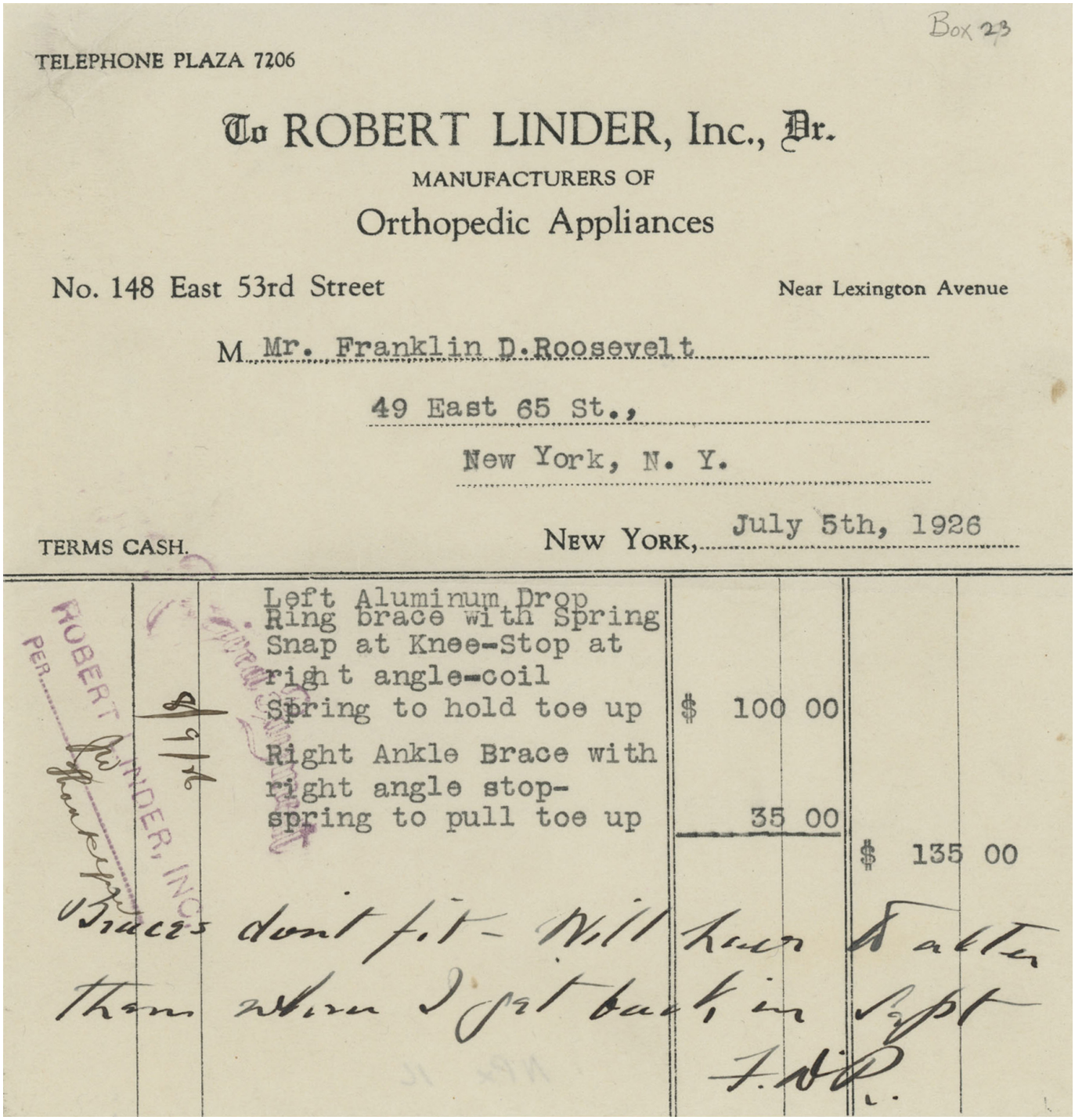
Polio has no known cure, although an effective vaccine was developed (and made available without a patent) in the early 1950s (long after FDR became ill). The future President initially doubted the polio diagnosis since most people who developed polio were very young children. Berish tells us how it was that FDR came to accept polio as the correct diagnosis:

> *[Dr.] Lovett explained that in order for a person to combat poliomyelitis, they must be in good emotional and physical health and have a healthy immune system. This made FDR rethink the actuality of having the disease since he could recall frequently becoming ill as a young boy, but for the past few years he had been leading a stressful life in politics that may have weakened his immunity. At the young age of thirty-nine, FDR became a victim of infantile paralysis.*

Although Roosevelt was able to recover from the excruciating pain he was experiencing, his legs remained paralyzed. He learned how to stand-with-assistance, even though his legs no-longer supported his weight, and was able to walk with crutches. Leg braces, which weighed around ten pounds, helped him to maneuver his lower extremities. A few pictures reveal those braces (which extended to his feet), such as this 1930 photo with FDR and former New York governor Al Smith.



Those braces didn’t always fit properly, as FDR’s handwritten notes indicate on this invoice (which is maintained at the FDR Library and Museum).



Box 23

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1	Left Aluminum Drop Ring brace with Spring Snap at Knee-Stop at right angle-coil Spring to hold toe up	$ 100 00	
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Braces don't fit - Will have to alter them when I get back in Sept

F. D. R.

As FDR continued to recover from the immediate impact of his illness, he began to think about returning to public life. He was concerned, however, that his disability might be viewed as an impediment. He did several things to mitigate such a result. One of the first things was to design his own wheelchair. Berish tells us what he did:

> *In private, FDR used a special wheelchair he designed himself. He refused to use a "regular" wheelchair because the chairs of the time were one-size-fits-all, bulky and a nuisance to get around in. Most buildings during his era were not wheelchair accessible; therefore Roosevelt needed something small, appealing, efficient, and discreet. To accomplish this, he used a dining chair and replaced the legs with bicycle-like wheels. The chair was small and could move around tight corners and narrow hallways with ease. His wheelchair did not call a lot of attention since it was made out of something people were used to seeing in their own homes.*

Masking his disability in private was one thing, but if FDR returned to public life, he couldn't entirely "hide" his personal situation. Then—when he decided to run for president—he didn't want any of America's enemies to view him as "weak," because of his limitations. So ... he developed a way of walking, which worked for him:

> *FDR devised a method of "walking" in which he used a cane and the arm of his son or advisor for balance. He would maneuver his hips and swing his legs forward in a swaying motion to make it appear as if he was walking. Stairs were also a challenge for FDR, he learned to support his weight with just his arms, holding himself up as if he were on parallel bars, and swing his way down toward the next step.* (Berish.)

The President didn't want members of "the press" to take pictures of him if those images depicted his

disability. Berish tells us how that was handled:

> *FDR requested that the press avoid photographing him walking, maneuvering, or being transferred from his car. The stipulation was accepted by most reporters and photographers but periodically someone would not comply. The Secret Service was assigned to purposely interfere with anyone who tried to snap a photo of FDR in a "disabled or weak" state* (Gallagher 94).

As a result of the President's wishes, it is difficult to find any videos of FDR moving in his wheelchair. However, the National Archives has a clip of the President visiting Pearl Harbor in July of 1944 (the month after D-Day) where (beginning at 7:36 in the video) we can see him—for a few seconds—rolling along during his visit to the USS *Baltimore*. That archival video appears at the top of this page (where the actual scenes, beginning at 7:36, are near the end of the clip).

Laura Diachenko, a spokeswoman for the National Archives, tells us that such a video is rare:

> *With respect to whether or not this is the earliest or only existing footage of FDR in a wheelchair, we cannot state that this is definitively the case, although such footage is certainly rare.*

FDR died the following year (on April 12, 1945). He was a man unafraid to face the worst things in life, believing that such events would make him stronger. During his first inaugural address, he knew firsthand that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." That is why the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, could also say:

> *You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'...You must do the thing you think you cannot do.* (Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living*, at pages 29-30).

Those words, and President Roosevelt's example, still hold true for everyone, everywhere.

Credits:

Embedded video from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. In-text photos from the FDR Presidential Library and Museum.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Rare-Video-of-FDR-in-His-Wheelchair

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
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Media Stream



FDR in His Wheelchair

Photo online, courtesy FDR Library. The picture was taken by President Roosevelt's friend, Margaret "Daisy" Suckley.

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