

In the 1920s the White House was known as the Pennsylvania Avenue Zoo because of all of the wildlife people gave to President Calvin Coolidge. In his autobiography, Coolidge wrote:

"I have a beautiful black-haired bear that was brought all the way from Mexico in a truck, a pair of lion cubs now grown up, and a small species of hippopotamus from South Africa."

These and other animals were housed at the zoological quarters in Rock Park. But a mostly domesticated female raccoon that arrived from Mississippi in a wood soap box so pleased Calvin he decided to keep her as a house pet and had a home made for her in a tree on the White House grounds. Rebecca, as Coolidge named her, was kept on a chain when outdoors but allowed to run free inside the White House. In a 1930 article titled "My Life in the White House," First Lady Grace Coolidge wrote:

"She was a mischievous, inquisitive party and we had to keep watch of her when she was in the house. She enjoyed nothing better than being placed in a bathtub with a little water in it and given a cake of soap. With which to play. In this fashion, she would amuse herself for an hour or more."

Among other delicacies, the pampered raccoon was fed green shrimp, chicken, and persimmons. Cream and eggs was her favorite. The raccoon's collar was engraved *Rebecca, Raccoon of the White House*. She also wore a leash and muzzle when around the public. Rebecca still tore clothing and seemed to have a special talent for ripping expensive silk stockings. According to one report, the White House staff thought Rebecca a "regular Houdini" because of her ability to get free from harnesses and cages, and most of the staff disliked the raccoon.

After one of many failed escape attempts, White House usher John Mays was asked whether he was glad that Rebecca was back.

"The good Lord did not answer my prayers," he responded.

But Calvin obviously felt differently. He often played with Rebecca and



First Lady Grace Coolidge with Rebecca, the First Raccoon.

her exile. Yet the raccoon was back less than a week later.

Rebecca was featured during the 1927 White House Easter Egg Roll, and the *Evening Star* observed that the raccoon "plainly evidenced her dislike for the whole doings."

Later that year, Rebecca escaped for two hours before being captured and returned to her home on top of a stump in the rear of the temporary White House.

She escaped from the temporary grounds a few more times but was always recaptured.

In 1928, Rebecca joined the Coolidges for a three-month vacation in the Black Hills of South

Dakota. No president had ever gone so far from the White House for so long, and the Washington newspapers all covered the trip. According to one report, Rebecca rode in a wicker basket in the president's own rail car.

After reaching the lodge where they would stay, Rebecca immediately climbed a pine tree. She stayed in that tall perch for a full day before finally coming down on her own.

February 1929, a male raccoon was brought to the White House. Calvin named him Reuben, and in short order, Reuben made two escape attempts. First, he was captured on the White House grounds. The second time he was never seen again. It was the worst time of year to try to domesticate a male raccoon, what with mating season at its peak.

It was not recorded if the raccoons got along, but if anything, Rebecca's escape attempts seemed to increase after Reuben. She was found in a tall tree near the Metropolitan Club and also atop a telegraph pole. Both times, the fire department was called in for the rescue.

Fearing she would be run over in the street during one of her frequent forays, Calvin finally sent her to the Rock Creek Zoo for good.

It is now illegal to keep a raccoon as a pet anywhere in the District of Columbia. It is not clear if Rebecca's tumultuous time as the First Raccoon had anything to do with that. ■

The First Raccoon

By Scot Dahms

Rebecca, as Coolidge named her, was allowed to run free inside the White House.

walked about with the raccoon draped around his neck. She would crawl up on his lap in front of the fireplace.

Keeping a raccoon as a pet instead of eating it was actually strange for the time. But when the *Washington Evening Star* pointed out that raccoon meat was less fatty than possum and tasted like chicken, Calvin responded that he didn't have much of a taste for raccoon meat.

When the Coolidges moved to the Du Pont Circle mansion during renovations at the White House, at first Rebecca was left behind to roam the more-spacious White House grounds. But Calvin missed her and dispatched the presidential limousine to get her.

The next morning Calvin had a bandaged wrist, and Rebecca was at the national zoo in Rock Creek Park.

Although nothing was written about the raccoon biting Calvin, the press corps speculated that was the reason for