

Woodrow Wilson



by Kathleen Krull

Born in Staunton, Virginia, 1856

Died in Washington, D.C., 1924

Professor, president of Princeton University

Governor of New Jersey, and leader of the United States during World War I

- 1 Woodrow Wilson was nine before the alphabet started making sense to him. Possibly dyslexic, he grew up to become a political science scholar, the most popular member of his college's faculty, and our most highly educated president—his family budget always showed greater expenses for books than for clothes.
- 2 A devout Presbyterian, he prayed on his knees every morning and night, and believed that God had foreordained him president—a forceful, commanding presence to lead the United States through stormy times. Sometimes cold and dour in public, preferring talk of familiar things amid the company of family and old friends, he shied away from meeting new people. Believing that women should be subservient to men, he firmly opposed the right of women to vote (but later found it politically useful to mellow his stance and was president when women did start voting). Breaking his promises to black voters for reform, he used his power to make government more segregated, not less. He met with African American leaders only once, and it ended in bitterness.
- 3 Wilson often felt both grateful and guilty that his first wife, Ellen Axson, gave up a promising career as a painter to marry him. She managed their home so well that his only chore was to wind the tall clock each week. After a morning of proofreading his writing together, they would talk with punctuation marks at lunch: “The soup comma my dear comma is excellent period.” In the White House, they maintained separate bedrooms. Wilson's three daughters worshiped him, and in the evenings they all played pool, clowning around in games of charades, sang, and read aloud. Wilson would sit on the floor in front of the fire, rocking back and forth while he recited poetry.
- 4 When Ellen died at fifty-four of kidney disease, Wilson sobbed uncontrollably at her funeral. He confided to an aid that he hoped to be assassinated, because he didn't think he could go on. But a little more than a year later (causing a flood of gossip and rumors), he proposed to Edith Galt, a jewelry store owner who had two years of formal schooling and was the first woman in Washington to drive her own car. Considering thirteen his lucky number, Wilson had her select a diamond engagement

ring from thirteen choices. He soon regained his poise and was seen dancing on and off curbs and heard whistling vaudeville tunes.

5 He treated Edith as a coworker; she was at his side on every public occasion and worked closely with him in private. He listened carefully when she talked, and when they walked he took small, fast steps to match hers. They slept in Lincoln's bed, which they moved into Wilson's room. Setting an example for government rationing during World War I, they endured gasless Sundays, meatless Mondays, and wheatless Tuesdays. To save the energy of mowing, they kept a herd of sheep (including tobacco-chewing Old Ike) munching the lawn; Wilson would sometimes wander out to pat their woolly heads.

6 Never robust, but with a forcefully positive attitude about his poor health, Wilson suffered a major stroke while president. Ironically, "because she also vigorously opposed the right of women to vote", Edith took over significant presidential duties. In a controversial cover-up of Wilson's true condition (for at least a month he was totally disabled, watching movies in his sickroom, preferring old films of himself during tours abroad), she screened all visitors and decided what (if anything) was important enough to inform him about. Was she our first woman president and was he the "First Man"? How much business did she really do? Indignant when these questions were raised, Edith nevertheless refused to allow Wilson to resign.

7 After two more years, they retired to a brick-and-limestone home in Washington. There, Edith nursed Wilson until his death three years later at age sixty-seven. "The machinery is worn out—I am ready" were his last coherent words.

Name: _____ Date: _____

QUIZ
Woodrow Wilson

Directions: Circle the best answer.

1. Why did Wilson remarry little more than a year after Ellen died?
 - a. He needed someone to proofread his writing.
 - b. He wanted his children to have a mother.
 - c. He needed a companion.
 - d. He wanted someone to help him with his presidential duties.

2. The word subservient in paragraph 2 means
 - a. supportive.
 - b. independent.
 - c. submissive.
 - d. loving.

3. You can infer that helping African Americans was not a priority for Wilson because
 - a. he didn't allow African Americans to vote.
 - b. he didn't meet with African American leaders.
 - c. he didn't care if African Americans voted for him.
 - d. he broke his promises to black voters and made his government more segregated.

4. Why did the Wilsons keep a herd of sheep while at the White House?
 - a. to set a good example for conserving energy
 - b. to grow their own wool so they could make their own clothes
 - c. because Wilson thought sheep were good pets
 - d. so they would have wool to sell to save the taxpayers money

5. Why did Krull include details about Wilson and Ellen talking with punctuation marks and Wilson and his daughters playing charades and singing?
 - a. to show his human side
 - b. to demonstrate he wasn't fit to be president
 - c. to entertain the reader
 - d. to inform the reader of Wilson's favorite activities