

The Waltz Series

Our First Sixty-Five Years

First and Second editions written by
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www.thewaltzseries.org

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The First Fifty

THE ORIGINS of the Waltz Series have been lost in the mists of time. Some say the first year was 1948, the date on which the Waltz Series' 1998 fiftieth anniversary celebration was based. Others think the club is older, perhaps dating from before World War II. All agree that the founders were a small, informal group who loved to dance the Viennese waltz.

Among these earliest members were Theodate Johnson, surely a founder; Millard Bloomer, a lawyer who drew up our bylaws, making the Waltz Series, Inc., a nonprofit corporation; and John Rovensky, a banker who was the first treasurer and who also took care of any deficits. Miss June Hodges, a fine dancer and secretary to Mr. Bloomer, devotedly managed our growing infrastructure. She established a schedule of responsibilities and set an example that her first successors, Mrs. Suzanne Scanlan and Mrs. Dorothy Kimball, and now Mrs. Rolly Woodyatt, have ably continued with extraordinary tact and flexibility.

In those early days we danced at Webster Hall, an antiseptic, low-ceilinged community center at 119 East 11th Street, noteworthy for a revolving green and red ball and a good wooden floor. We soon moved uptown to the Central Opera House at 205 East 67th Street. This was more convenient to most members and more elegant, with an iron birdcage elevator and a splendid chandelier, but it had four large pillars in the middle of the floor. When it was turned into a television studio, we briefly retreated back to Webster Hall.

In the fall of 1951 we moved to Jaeger House at Lexington Avenue and 85th Street, which became our home for the next 23 years. Jaeger House, a former haunt of the German American Bund, sheltered a German restaurant, a gymnasium where a turnverein met, and a basketball court on the third story. That room, which had a marvelous sprung-wood floor, was transformed into a ballroom with the aid of a mirrored wall and crystal chandeliers rescued from the demolition of the Ritz Carlton Hotel. No one minded the running track in the balcony, the dust on the chandeliers or the one-time sign on the stage that said, "Please do not chew gum on the dance floor." Some gentlemen did object to climbing two flights of metal stairs in white tie, however; while others appreciated the striking counterpoint between the steep, dark, beer-scented climb past the gym and the sparkling scene at the top.

In the early days, we had six dances a year; but as competition increased from the Assembly, the Cotillion, and other groups that held formal balls, that number was reduced to five and then to four. At one time, two extra dances were held each year to give inexperienced waltzers a chance to practice.

At first, meals were not served at the waltz evenings; people saved all their energies for dancing until two in the morning. Then members began giving dinner parties in their homes before the dances. One memorable dinner was in a Fifth Avenue mansion, with cocktails in a small room with paneling that came from a house that had belonged to Lord Nelson. Another dinner, equally memorable, was held in a one-room apartment with 20 or more guests in white tie and ball gowns spread on cushions on the floor. Dancers who were not involved in dinner parties could conveniently dine at the Jaeger House restaurant, although one lady is said to have lost a fur coat in the process.

As it became harder to find household help and more women had full-time paying jobs, dinners at home began to be alternated with dinners at Jaeger House, which was eager to have the patronage. We queued up for goulash and salad set out on red-checked tablecloths in the bar and then found places at tables around the dance floor. A dinner originally cost \$3, then \$7.50, including wine.

Orchestras were a major concern, as they continue to be, because few can play the appropriate rhythm and tempo for the Viennese waltz. At first Alexander Haas played for the whole season, but it was soon decided that a variety of orchestras increased the probability of having more stimulating music and dance experiences. When president, Mrs. N. Dudley Johnson fended off Lester Lanin as being unskilled in the Viennese waltz. Miss Marie Frost invited Ben Cutler in his dashing red jacket to play for us during her presidency. We also danced to the violins of Leo Pleshkov and especially loved dancing to the violins of Dutch Wolff, whose orchestra was still the Waltz Series' primary source of music in 2013.

The dress code for male members progressed from black tie, to black or white tie, to white tie. Ladies wore long ball gowns, some made for the occasion, and long white gloves. One newcomer wore blue silk pajamas to her first waltz but quickly got the point and appeared in a series of progressively more striking ball gowns at every dance thereafter.

In the early years, the presidents (all ladies until Kent Straat in 2009), with a spouse or male board member at their side, greeted all dancers as they arrived at the party. Some presidents made sure they also visited every table during the evening. There was much table hopping, and gentlemen always danced with every lady at their table. Ladies could not ask gentlemen to dance, however. Dancing was vigorous. Miss Thistle

Brown once recalled that an evening was not considered a success unless someone was knocked down by a swirling couple.

Donald Gray, an exceptionally fine waltzer and the epitome of urbanity, was also a hard-working vice president. Denton Carman, whose snowy locks, white kid gloves, and polished manner suggested the court of Franz Josef, was an outstanding membership chair. He also directed the Paul Jones mixer, which has been a feature of the evening from the beginning. On one occasion he danced so beautifully with a silver-haired lady in black lace that the rest of the dancers fell back to the sidelines to watch in admiration.

Originally, more emphasis was set on the quality of the dancing. At one time there were elimination dances in which dancers would gradually be tapped off the floor by two judges (members or guests from the Boston Waltz Evenings) until the best couple was left dancing. The winning woman was usually Mrs. Clara Fargo Thomas, an inspiring dancer who wore a voluminous tartan skirt, but not always; sometimes Mrs. William Cary won.

The Waltz Series had friendly relations with the Boston Waltz Evenings, founded in a drawing room in Louisburg Square in the 1930s. Our group made several expeditions to Boston to dance with them, including the time Miss Marie Frost and Donald Gray judged their elimination dance. Boston dancers also

visited us, and we even gained several Bostonians as members—the Perry Rathbones, Wade White, and Tibor Kerekes. Our one visit to the Philadelphia Waltz Evening was less successful inasmuch as the guests from New York and Boston were confined to one room in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, mostly separate from the Philadelphians.

A striking feature of the early waltz evenings was a demonstration by members in which eight or ten couples, after long practice with an instructor, performed an elaborate waltz quadrille. The ladies wore bouffant white gowns loaned by Carl Loman, an enthusiastic member. Miss Elizabeth Fuller and Miss Marie Frost, who performed, remember them as enchanting; Miss Hope Hendler, another performer, thought they left much to be desired.

There was always an international flavor to the waltz evenings. Members have hailed from Poland, South Africa, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and especially Hungary. The Hungarians were proficient at the polka and introduced the czardas, which braver members tried to emulate. Otherwise, the Waltz Series has kept a watchful guard against the “other rhythms” that encroached on the original Boston waltzers and the Washington group.

Sadly, Jaeger House was sold in 1974. After a last dance in its new guise as the Spaghetti Factory, we began our search for a new home. We discovered that

hotels and clubs, while more glamorous, were also more expensive and usually too small. One after another we tried the Seventh Regiment Armory, the University Club, the Baroque Room at the Plaza, the Union Club, the Colony Club, and the Biltmore Hotel.

In 1984 we settled happily at the Roosevelt Hotel, sometimes in the Terrace Room, sometimes in the ballroom. Always we were fighting carpets, which hotels and clubs like to lay over nice wooden floors. In 1995 the Roosevelt closed for renovations, and our officers—Mrs. James L. German III, Mrs. Charles Cotter, and Miss Susan C. Winslow—with Mrs. Kimball, once again took up the long search.

Our old problems continued in our next quarters—carpets (Yale Club) and pillars (Manhattan Penthouse), but they were offset respectively by a magnificent carved ceiling and a stupendous view. Under the presidencies of Mrs. James L. German III and Ms. Sarah G. Miles we instituted “waltz parties with instruction” as a means of enabling both new and experienced waltzers to brush up on the basics or learn fine points of technique in a less formal setting.

The Next Fifteen and Beyond

Since 1998 we have continued to dance primarily at Manhattan Penthouse on Fifth Avenue but have been holding our December dances at the Cosmopolitan Club on 66th Street since 2008. We have continued to

enjoy the music of Dutch Wolff and Zoltan Zorandy but are also trying other orchestras, including Paul Errico's. The Paul Jones mixer remains a popular feature of every waltz evening. Dancers still swirl about the floor in white tie and long ball gowns.

Several adjustments were made in the fifteen years following our golden anniversary, however. Long white gloves for ladies are now rarely seen, the tango has replaced the czardas, and one slow waltz has been added to the evening's dance fare, although no other dance incursions have been admitted as of 2013. To accommodate changing eating preferences, vegetarian dinners have been added as a menu option. Mrs. Rolly Woodyatt became our ever-efficient executive administrator.

Perhaps most notable, is the establishment of our Waltz Series website, www.thewaltzseries.org, by Carlo M. Lamagna and David Moyer. It is illustrated with photographs of our evenings and provides basic information about the Viennese waltz and our organization, while still clarifying that the Waltz Series is a private membership club.

What never has changed—or will—is the fact that on waltz evenings, members and guests dance happily to the music of beautiful orchestras, enjoying the company of old and new friends who share their enthusiasm for gracious evenings of Viennese waltz.

Presidents of the Waltz Series 1948-2013

Mrs. Roswell Gilpatrick
Mrs. John T. Harrison
Mrs. N. Dudley Johnson
Mrs. Lila Tyng
Miss Marie Frost
Miss Constance McKenna
Mrs. James Sargent
Mrs. George Boomer
Mrs. Benjamin Fowler
Mrs. Charles Cotter
Mrs. James L. German III
Ms. Sarah G. Miles
Miss Lucille McCulley
Mr. Kent L. Straat
Ms. Denise Marcil