

The Waltz Series

Our First Fifty Years

Compiled by Susan Converse Winslow

with the gracious assistance of

Mrs. William Binnian

Miss Thistle Brown

Mrs. William Cary

Mr. Jack Frazer

Miss Marie Frost

Miss Elizabeth Fuller

Mr. Frederic Fuller

Miss Hope Hendler

Miss Elizabeth Haynes

Mrs. N. Dudley Johnson

Mr. Tibor Kerekes

Mrs. Charles Whitman

and

Mrs. Suzanne Scanlan

Produced by Marian Henneman

The Waltz Series, Inc., New York

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THE ORIGINS of the Waltz Series seem to be lost in the mists of time. Some say the year was 1948, the date on which we base this fiftieth celebration. Others think we are older, perhaps dating from before World War II. All agree that the founders were a small, informal group who loved the Viennese waltz.

Among these earliest members were Theodate Johnson, surely a founder; Millard Bloomer, a lawyer who drew up our bylaws as a nonprofit corporation; and John Rovensky, a banker, who was the first treasurer and also took care of any deficits. June Hodges, a fine dancer and secretary to Mr. Bloomer, devotedly maintained our growing infrastructure. She set a pattern that her successors, Mrs. Suzanne Scanlan and Mrs. Dorothy Kimball, 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 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 to Webster Hall.

In the fall of 1951 we moved to Jaeger House, at Lexington and 85th Street, which became our home for the next twenty-three years (1951-1974). 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. No one minded the running track in the balcony, the dust on the chandeliers, or a one-time sign on the stage that said, "Please do not chew gum on the dance floor." Some gentlemen objected to climbing two flights of metal stairs in white tie,

while others found the steep, dark, beer-scented climb past the gym a striking counterpoint to 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 number was reduced to five and then four. At one time two extra dances were held a year to give inexperienced waltzers a chance to practice.

At the beginning there were no dinners, people saving their energies for dancing until two in the morning. Then members began giving dinners in their homes before the dancing. One memorable dinner was in a Fifth Avenue mansion, with cocktails in a small room whose paneling came from a house that had belonged to Lord Nelson. Another dinner, equally memorable, was held in a one-room apartment with twenty 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 jobs, dinners at home began to be alternated with dinners at Jaeger House, which was eager for our 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 cost \$3.00, then \$7.50, including wine.

Orchestras were a major concern, as they continue to be, because few can play the right rhythm and tempo for the Viennese waltz. At first Alexander Haas played for the whole season, but it was soon decided that varied orchestras made for more stimulating music. President Mrs. N. Dudley Johnson fended off Lester Lanin as being unskilled in the Viennese waltz. President Marie Frost invited Ben Cutler in his dashing red jacket to play for us. We also danced to the violins of Leo Pleshkov and especially of Dutch Wolff.

Dress 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 in later years who wore blue silk pajamas quickly got the point, appearing in a series of striking ball gowns thereafter.

Generally the presidents (listed below) received with a husband or male board member. Some made a point of visiting every table. There was much table hopping, and gentlemen danced with every lady at the table. Ladies could not ask gentlemen to dance. Dancing was vigorous. Thistle Brown remembers that an evening was not considered a success unless someone was knocked down.

A notable early president, Mrs. Johnson, managed our transition to dinners at Jaeger House and put us on a sound financial footing after the departure of the Rovenskys for Palm Beach. Her successor, Mrs. Lila Tyng, also a member of the board of governors for many years, was a charming and indefatigable hostess who invited many young people to her table. Some members recall her hospitality to waltzers at her fiftieth-birthday ball at the Plaza and at her home in New Jersey.

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 was 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.

Great store was set by 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. The winning woman

was usually Mrs. Clara Fargo Thomas, an inspiring dancer in a voluminous tartan skirt, but not always, when Mrs. William Cary won.

We had friendly relations with the Boston Waltz Evenings, founded in a drawing room in Louisburg Square in the 1930s. We made several expeditions to Boston to dance with them, including one when Marie Frost and Donald Gray judged their elimination dance. Boston visited us, and we 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 Fine Art, mostly separate from the Philadelphians.

A striking feature of the early Waltz Evenings was a demonstration, one or more depending on who is remembering, 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. Elizabeth Fuller and Marie Frost, who danced, remember them as enchanting; Hope Hendler, another dancer, 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 we 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.

In 1984 we settled happily at the Roosevelt, 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 German, Mrs. Charles Cotter, and Susan C. Winslow, with Mrs. Kimball, took up the long search.

Our present quarters continue the old problems of carpets (the Yale Club) and pillars (Manhattan Penthouse on Fifth), but they are offset respectively by a magnificent carved ceiling and a stupendous view. Under our last two presidents, Mrs. German and Mrs. John Miles, we have 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. On Waltz Evenings we dance happily to the music of Dutch Wolff and other orchestras, enjoying friends of many years and always eager to welcome new members who share our enthusiasm for gracious evenings of Viennese waltz.

Presidents of the Waltz Series

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
Mrs. John A. Miles