

CHAPTER FIVE: THE FORTIES AND WORLD WAR II



*T*he 1941 Banquet: 1,000 Plus and Growing

The banquet held in 1941 set a new record for attendance that would keep growing throughout the 1940's: almost 1,000 members and guests attended the dinner that year. For the first time, Gus Niemeyer and his banquet committee had to use the first tier boxes in the new Waldorf's huge ballroom. A patriotic theme once again captured the Club, as it had in 1917 just prior to World War I. A huge flag appeared on stage behind the head table and the Club donated a substantial portion of its banquet receipts to purchase and present to the British War Relief Society a completely equipped mobile feeding kitchen and 25 hospital beds. Britain had endured the huge German air raids of 1940 and the jewelers were joining with President Roosevelt to help their beleaguered allies. The now perennial Meyer Davis orchestra entertained the jewelers, along with other headline performers. The subdued souvenir was a Deluxe Remington electric shaver packaged in a leather kit.

At the 1942 banquet, the Club celebrated its 40th anniversary. It gave souvenir pocket pieces diestruck with the Club's emblem to each member and guest. Gus Niemeyer was also honored for 15 years service as the banquet chairman. Niemeyer was also now serving as chairman of the Board of Directors of the Club, a consolidation of his power that would continue for many years. He received a 24k gold pocket piece similar to the base metal ones distributed to everyone else. The Club also contributed \$10,000 to the American Red Cross. Pearl Harbor had brought the U.S. into World War II the month before.

The Club voted to forgo a banquet in 1943, though it did hold its Beefsteak Dinner. In June, it voted to skip the Summer Outing, due to wartime problems with transportation and the lack of caddies for the now-favorite game of golf enjoyed by so many members. By 1944, the group was ready to have a dinner again, and this time it donated \$5,000 to the American Red Cross. The Waldorf placed

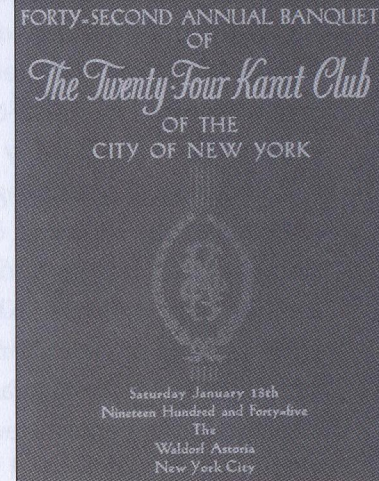
wartime limits on the number of banqueters it would serve, which prevented the number of members and guests from getting any larger, despite increased demand for tickets. The Club once again passed on a Summer Outing, though it did plan a dinner for 1945. The number of guests was allowed to grow for that year's banquet to 1,100, a new record. Once again, the Club donated money to the Red Cross in lieu of souvenirs.

The Late 40s: Post War Growth

The postwar boom started early for the Twenty-Four Karat Club, which filled the Waldorf ballroom with 1,150 people for its 1946 dinner. Souvenirs were back: an elegant sterling silver compact was the prize, once again joked about as an appeasement to wives, who were beginning to not only complain about the all-male dinner, but were starting to try and crash it.

In a 1996 interview with Norman M. Morris, who was a legendary banquet chairman in the 1950's, he recalled to Club members Joe Thompson and Hugh Glenn that the Club would have to hire special guards to politely ask the women to leave the ballroom. Eventually, the ladies began having their own dinner elsewhere in the hotel, where they were given the same menu their husbands received at the banquet.

Dues for the Club went up to \$25 and the banquet price rose to \$35 after the war, the Club's financial records show. Souvenirs continued to get more precious, with a 14k gold key chain as the souvenir in 1947. Banquet growth exploded in 1948, with almost 1,300 members and guests attending. The souvenir in 1948 was a Cyma traveling clock, with a seven-jewel, 48 hour movement. A 24k gold plaque was presented to Gus Niemeyer, in honor of his 20 years chairmanship of the banquet committee. He became honorary ban-



1945 Banquet program
Courtesy of: Denham Lunt

quiet chairman after that, though he continued to serve as chairman of the Board of Directors of the Club.

Norman M. Morris began his ascent to Club power that year, in chairing the reception committee for the Banquet. Morris was elected president of the Club in 1949 and presided over the dinner that year, at which once again the wives of members and guests were placated with a handsome overnight suitcase filled with cosmetics as the souvenir.

During these postwar years, the Club also started holding luncheons with its regular meetings, in an attempt to bring out more of the membership. They also decided to change the by-laws again to hold meetings in March, May and October, along with the annual meeting in December. Continuing complaints about how new members were chosen led the Board to open up the process a bit by announcing the names of candidates and allowing other members to voice their opinions on the nominees. About a quarter of the membership was now from outside of New York City, reflecting the growth and movement of the industry's manufacturers. Men from jewelry and diamond concerns now constituted a majority of the membership, as membership from the silver and watch companies began to take a back seat for the first time in the Club's history.

In 1949, the Board decided to articulate the essential requisites for membership, which it recorded in its March 22 minutes for that year. These included:

- that a nominee be a principal, partner or officer, rather than a salesman, of a well-regarded jewelry firm. (This rule acknowledged a major change, since many of the early members of the Club had been the New York representatives of their firms, rather than the principals.)
- that a nominee be a person who has contributed at least something worthwhile on behalf of the industry.
- that a nominee who is recognized as an industry-wide leader be allowed quick election to membership, even if another in his firm is already a member.
- that a nominee be of impeccable character, with no blemishes on his record.