

CHAPTER SIX: THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES



*T*he 50th Anniversary Banquet

The Twenty-Four Karat Club celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 1952 with a gala banquet that honored all the still-living past presidents, going back to William I. Rosenfeld from 1917. Also attending that dinner was Frank C. Beckwith. With Rosenfeld, he was the only other surviving member of the original group of 24 men who started the Club in 1902. A 17-jewel, 14k gold women's Hamilton watch was presented as the souvenir in a special case embossed with the Club's logo. Xavier Cugat and his Waldorf Astoria orchestra entertained the jewelers that year and tickets were \$50. The board also voted to raise the annual dues to \$50.

The Club continued to grapple with demand for membership and seats at the banquet, which had grown to almost 1,500 attendees by the early 1950's. It voted in 1950 that any member who had left the jewelry industry lose his membership after three years, or if a member moved out of the U.S., he would lose membership after one year. The group also decided it had to reduce the number of tickets sold at the banquet by 15%, as so many members and guests were uncomfortable now at the bulging affair.



*The 1952 banquet celebrated the Club's 50th anniversary.
Photo courtesy of: Cyril Gsell.*

Old timers even suggested that the dinners be cut back drastically to 700 people to make everyone comfortable again! The Board also quarreled over a motion to change the provision allowing only two persons per firm to become members. Some wanted to allow as many as four persons; others saw this as a dangerous change. In the end, the motion was defeated.

In 1953, Norman M. Morris began his long reign as chairman of the banquet committee, becoming a legend in his maiden year by negotiating with General Motors to get them to move their car show out of the Waldorf's ballroom early to make way for the Twenty-Four Karat Club banquet. The Waldorf had mistakenly double booked the room and Morris refused to back down. He recalled in a 1996 interview with Club members Joe Thompson and Hugh Glenn shortly before he died that General Motors even offered him a Cadillac to reconsider.

That kind of hanky-panky during the Fabulous Fifties wasn't the only transgression Morris remembered. He also recalled hard-driving craps games in the hallways outside the ballroom during banquets, where professional gamblers would lure members. "Of course, we used to have special officers who would stop them," Morris said. "But you know, gambling is in the bones of some people..."

Morris also recalled that cigar smoking was still a big deal in the Fifties before the anti-smoking movement got started. "I would buy Cuban cigars for the banquets, which you were able to get in those days. I had no problem. Most men liked the cigar after dinner, even if they were not regular cigar smokers." Cigarette smoking was in its heyday, too, and the 1954 dinner guests received a sterling silver cigarette set, complete with a large box and four ashtrays.

The Beefsteak Dinners moved in the mid-Fifties back to the New York Athletic Club, the site of the Club's first dinner back in 1902! Members had been grumbling for years that the traditional site for the dinner, the Hotel Warwick, had gone downhill in food and service. In 1955, the Club itself also finally gave up its rooms at 608 Fifth Ave., which it had moved into during the depths of the Depression.

Members were prosperous enough now to hold all meetings at restaurants and the Board reasoned that such a move would increase attendance at Club meetings. The furniture from the Club rooms was given to the Jewelers Vigilance Committee.



1961 President's Dinner, Barnett Robinson, president and host
 Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

By the early 1960's, press accounts for the banquets had become smaller and less emphasis was placed on them in print. This probably was due to the excessive demand for seats and the anger among those who couldn't gain access to the banquets, which had leveled out at about 1,600 attendees who now filled two tiers of boxes as well as the main floor. One journalist joked: "One basic rule limits the guest list at the annual dinner of the Twenty-Four Karat Club of the City of New York: There must be enough room between tables so that the waiters don't spill the turtle soup."

Performers at the banquets ranged from Broadway acts to night-

club performers from such popular Fifties and early Sixties hangouts as the Latin Quarter, the Copacabana and the Starlight Roof. Complaints continued about the selection process for members, as well, but for all the discussion that took place, very little change occurred in the rules of selection. The Club did approve a change allowing the election of a third member from the same firm if one or more of the other Club members was over 65 and a long-time member or semi-retired.

Throughout the Sixties, Norman M. Morris remained in firm control of the banquet committee, receiving high marks for entertainment. Television comics such as Nipsy Russell, Victor Borge and Frank Gorshin sometimes replaced the New York acts traditionally seen at the banquets, but there were also singers such as Diahann Carroll and musical acts such as Guy Lombardo.

Gus Niemeyer continued to serve as chairman of the Board of Directors of the Club until his death at the age of 84 in 1967, which marked his 57th year in the Club. His friends in the industry formed a trust fund to honor his many years of service to the Twenty-Four Karat Club, the Jewelers Vigilance Committee, the Jewelry Industry Council and other groups. It was called the Gustav H. Niemeyer

Memorial Educational Fund and it provided aid to colleges and schools that had courses pertaining to the jewelry industry. It also provided scholarships and awards for design contests in the silver trade, to honor his long employment at Handy and Harman, where he spent his entire professional career.

Left: Gustav Niemeyer Fund Flyer
 Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

Next pages: 1967 Banquet head table photo, from *National Jeweler*
 Courtesy of: Paul W. Nordt, Jr.



Niemeyer Fund Awards

Gustav H. Niemeyer, who died in 1967 at the age of 84, was regarded as the foremost spokesman for the jewelry industry and the recognized dean of the industry. He was also a man who did much for the silver profession in America.

In 1968, a group of his friends in the jewelry industry formed a trust fund to honor his many years of excellent service to the jewelry industry and to every worthwhile cause. Income from the fund will be used for aid to colleges and schools which have courses pertaining to the jewelry industry or for scholarships.

Five prizes awarded by the Trustees of The Gustav H. Niemeyer Memorial Educational Fund are matching awards to the outstanding departments of schools whose students win prizes in the 1968-70 Working Silver Design Competition. The school awards will match those presently given to winning students by the Working Silverware Guild of America: First Prize—\$500; Second Prize—\$400; Third Prize—\$300; Fourth Prize—\$200; Fifth Prize—\$100.

The Niemeyer Memorial Fund Awards are to be used for the purchase of equipment, tools, teaching materials, or materials such as silver to be used in teaching nonworking classes. Most schools having non-working departments teach silver in jewelry as well as other design.



Special guests (l. to r.): Robert M. Kremetz, president, Manufacturing Jewelers & Silversmiths of America; William A. Kaufman, Jr., president, Chicago Jewelers Assn.; Morris Levine, president, National Wholesale Jewelers Assn.; Thomas M. Palmer, president, Canadian Jewelers Assn.; Gustav H. Niemeyer, chairman, Jewelers Vigilance Committee, past president, Twenty-Four Karat Club; Leo L. Kaplan, president, Twenty-Four Karat Club.



Special guests (l. to r.): Rabbi Irving J. Block; James M. Rudder, chairman, Jewelry Industry Council; Mort S. Abelson, president, Retail Jewelers of America; Howard T. Brenner, president, Sterling Silversmiths Guild of America; Richard S. Shreve, president, Boston Jewelers Club; J. Warren Thomas, president, Jewelers Board of Trade.



Past presidents (l. to r.): Robert G. Packer, Henry Peterson, Louis F. Kruskal, John H. Ballard, Alexander E. Arnstein.



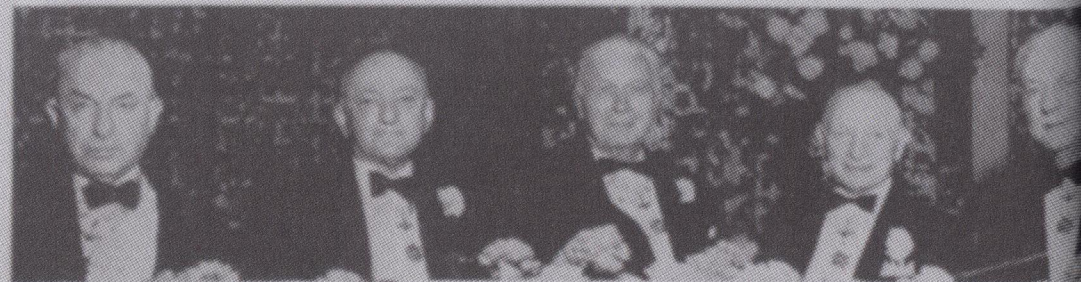
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