

CHAPTER THREE: THE ROARING TWENTIES



Eighteenth Annual Banquet of 1920; Prohibition Begins

Just two days before Prohibition commenced on January 17, 1920, the Twenty-Four Karat Club held its last dinner "in the era of eat, drink and be merry," mourned one participant. The dinner was no doubt held on a Thursday evening to beat the deadline so that the jewelers could enjoy one more dinner with spirits before the official dryout of the country's liquor supplies, which would last until 1933.

The lavish decoration that year was a harbinger of the excesses of the Twenties to come: a bar pin that stretched 32 feet wide behind the speakers' head table, containing 3,200 jewels that had been part of a collection recently shown in the Tower of Jewels at the Pan American Exhibition in San Francisco. Tables that year were named for precious gems, from the "diamond" head table to prominent tables named ruby, emerald, sapphire and pearl, through all the other tables named after "semi-precious" gems.

Three speakers entertained the jewelers that evening, including a well-known playwright, John Drinkwater, who was ribbed regularly for his Prohibition-correct name. Drinkwater had a play on Broadway at the time about Abraham Lincoln and the Club's choice of him signaled a new recognition of the value of drama and musical



1920 banquet. Note the 32-ft. wide "bar pin" stretched out behind the head table. It contained 3,200 jewels.
Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

events over political dissertations. Radio broadcasts began in 1920 and before long, coverage of political news, speeches and events became a daily occurrence. This change would affect the Club's choice of "entertainments" at its annual events.

The Summer Outing of 1920

The euphoria over the end of the war and the beginning of the Jazz Age seemed to loosen up the Summer Outing to an even greater degree than usual, reported T. Edgar Willson. The usually very formal Willson pronounced one game a "scream," in which members of the Club sat upon kiddie car horses and dragged themselves through the sand in front of the seashore hotel for a race to the finish. The 24 Karat Game was still around, now called the President's Cup contest. As in the past, only members could play. This year, the game involved rolling 24 peanuts down a board with pockets into which the peanuts would fall. Each peanut and each pocket was numbered and through some complicated multiplication, a winner was named.

At the outing, many members remarked at how much they missed Charlie Brinck. The founding president was a beloved senior member, but had been ailing and retired for the past few years. This was the first outing he had foregone, since engineering the first one in 1902. In August, he succumbed to his illness and the trade mourned his passing. Brinck had worked as a salesman for several different watch case companies through his career and had the warmth and personality of the best of his profession, according to all who knew him. More than anything else, he seemed to enjoy having a laugh and a good time. His work in founding and nurturing the 24 Karat Club was noted as the highest achievement of his professional career.

Nineteenth Annual Banquet of 1921

Perhaps to replace the liquor everyone was missing, the nineteenth banquet of the Club featured a full-scale production of the Ziegfeld Follies, then the most popular and exciting entertainment in

New York City. The troupe was on a very tight schedule in presenting its Midnight Frolic for the jewelers, as it had to repeat the performance back at its regular venue later in the evening.

Thus, the jewelers assembled for dinner early at 6:30. Before the Follies could begin, the old timers were insistent on having at least a few speakers. One could almost read between the lines of printed accounts the growing tension between the old guard, who liked speeches, and the younger element, who just wanted to have fun at the banquets. In 1921, both contingents got their way. The chafing elements of change were also apparent in another transformation: the traditional tuxedo coats of old-fashioned times were quickly being replaced by "swallow tailed" coats, observed a slightly grumpy Willson, who was in a bad mood because someone had swiped the souvenir "smokers' cabinets" from the press table. Handsome wooden canes, with silver details, were given as souvenirs that year.

The key speaker at the dinner was French Legion of Honor winner James M. Beck, a well-known lawyer

who had distinguished himself during the war. Beck was a great choice as one of the Club's last speakers, as his words touched prophetically on so many themes that the Roaring Twenties would introduce. Referring to the Follies coming after him, he talked about the fact that the real celebrities had become movie actors and Broadway stars, rather than political and military leaders, noting that Hollywood actor Douglas Fairbanks had received a greater reception

than Marshall Foch when he visited Paris.

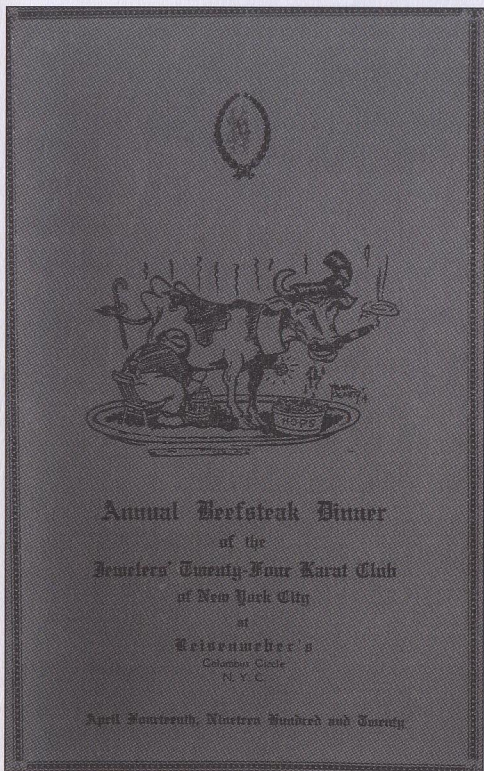
Beck also talked about the profound changes that had occurred in America and would continue to do so in the years ahead. "The world war has changed the course of affairs in many ways and has transferred their center from the Thames to the Hudson and the dominating city of the world...The United States today owns one-third of the wealth of the world, is carrying that much of the debt of the world and occupies the dominant position in world affairs because of its wealth and power."

New York City had truly become the center of the world, mostly owing to the fact that the U.S. became a creditor nation for the first time in its history, taking over the role historically played by a devastated London. New York's chief financial powers worked just minutes from Maiden Lane on Wall St., a point not lost on the jewelers, who knew America's growing wealth would elevate their businesses, too.

Beck ended sentimentally, as many prior speakers had done, with these words signaling the hopefulness all in the room felt about the go-go years ahead: "The nature of your work is in itself a symbol of optimism and has been since the earliest dawn of history, because your craft has been for a long time fashioning gold and silver into articles of beauty and adornment. The craft dates back to the time of the cavemen, and evidences are often found even today of their love of the beautiful and artistic...Jewelry is the natural protest of man against the ugliness of the little things of life."

The speeches were soon over and then the Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic began, an extravaganza that included songs such as the immortal "Love is Like a Mushroom" and "Ten Fingers of Syncopation." A special feature prepared for the jewelers was a bevy of beautiful Ziegfeld girls, dressed as various gemstones in spectacular gowns, lit by colored lights. The Midnight Frolic girls were famous for wearing extremely revealing outfits, which when lit showed off their bodies beneath their diaphanous costumes!

The Club lost its second president, Col. John L. Shepherd, just a month after the banquet, when he died of bronchitis. The colonel,



The Beefsteak Dinner invitation for 1920. It was the first "dry" Beefsteak Dinner after Prohibition began. Note the drawing: the cow is smoking a cigar and eating hops, the "milk" is labeled "brew." Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

who won his title in the Civil War, had been a founding member and was in charge of the McKinley Roosevelt Victory Dinner that got the Club started in the first place. He also had been the founder of *The Keystone* magazine in 1882 in Philadelphia. A long-time sales representative for watch case companies, as well as a prolific writer, the multi-talented Shepherd was particularly noted for his poetry.

Twentieth Annual Banquet of 1922

By 1922, the younger element had won and the banquet committee voted to do away with speakers altogether at its annual affair and just entertain the crowd with a repeat performance by the Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic. Though T. Edgar Willson would never badmouth his beloved Club in print, he did have this to say about the change: "That the innovation was a success was the opinion of a large number of people who enjoyed the affair, but there were many who thought otherwise and who regretted this change in the belief that there was some loss of dignity of the organization in having an affair that was purely a feast for the body and the eye without consideration of the intellect or the interest of the jewelers in public affairs." Intellect and public affairs were taking a back seat to entertainment, however, thus the jewelers were once again treated to scantily clad Ziegfeld girls from whom they had trouble tearing their eyes, reported Willson. The souvenirs that year were umbrellas with silver trim and the cigar boxes were elegant and made of cedar.

Things didn't get much more intellectual by the Summer Outing of 1922, when there was a contest to identify the noses of past presidents, such as Gus Niemeyer and Harry Larter, from photos prepared of the prominent proboscises. Even the honored deceased presidents' noses were included, so members got to gaze again at the noses of Charlie Brinck and Col. Shepherd, for example. Another stimulating game involved the members putting bags over their heads and crawling around on a life-sized checkerboard. Movies were taken of the Summer Outing for the first time, to the excitement of all, and the printed program featured cast and characters for the

day, as well as a synopsis.

Just two days after the summer outing, Augustus Sloan, one of the earliest honorary members of the Club, died at the age of 84. He had started working in the jewelry trade in 1854 at 2 Maiden Lane and thus qualified as probably the industry's oldest continuously working member. He had served as president of the Jewelers' Security Alliance for 25 years, from 1892-95, then again from 1900-22. He also was president of the Maiden Lane Historical Society, a group that kept souvenirs of the trade's life on The Lane. Readers of this history will also recall his leadership role in the Jewelers' Republican Club that helped defeat William Jennings Bryan in 1900 and in subsequent elections.

Twenty-First Annual Banquet of 1923: Will Rogers

Will Rogers was a surprise speaker at the Banquet in 1923. The famous humorist and storyteller was on his way to huge stardom on stage, the movies and the radio, before his untimely death in a plane crash in 1935. Rogers' particular brand of humor was making jokes about people in his audience. The jewelers were not spared. "This industry, the jewelry trade, is the most non-essential in the world. When a retailer sells a piece of jewelry it is a misdemeanor, but when one has to address men who sell at wholesale, that is a crime!" Rogers went on to skewer the many bankers in the audience, invited there by their prominent jewelry clients. "There is nothing harder [than a jeweler] except the bankers who are with you tonight. No one ever heard of a banker being shot in the heart and killed; for two reasons - first, it is too difficult to find his heart, and in the second place, it is too tough to shoot through." Rogers even joked about the souvenirs. Addressing the retailers there as guests of manufacturers, he said, "When you who are guests pay your bills, you can gamble that you will pay for the souvenirs!" In closing, Rogers thanked the Club, by saying "I have been very glad to address your Club, which has a limited membership of 200. This is an improvement on Ali Baba's Club, as he only has 40 in his!"

Jewelers were then treated to movies of the 1922 Summer Outing, where they saw themselves as moving picture stars. Then, an astonishing parade of Broadway's hottest three revues entertained the jewelers. First, there were numbers from Irving Berlin's popular Music Box Revue, then came highlights from the equally sensational Greenwich Village Follies, known for its innovative lighting, costumes and scenery. These two were followed by the Ziegfeld Follies and its high kicking dancing girls. Revues were in their heyday in the 1920's and these three were the equivalent of seeing scenes from the top three shows on Broadway today.

Times were good for the jewelers and not just on the entertainment scene. They received three souvenirs that year, starting with an elegant leather day pad that held the menu for the dinner and the guest list. Both could be removed so that jewelers had a place for all their engagements in 1923. Next, a handsomely bound book was found at each place, in which the jewelers discovered a surprise opening containing a complete smoking outfit of Egyptian and regular cigarettes, two imported cigars and matches. Finally, another leather case bearing the Club's insignia contained a gold Waterman's fountain pen and gold-mounted pencil!

Medals for the Club's members were mentioned for the first time at this dinner and a careful observer can see them on the stiff white shirts of members sprinkled throughout the annual photo. Apparently there were so many crashers at these popular dinners that the members were also forced to give all guests special buttons to wear, so that if they left the hall during the socializing times, they'd be allowed back in afterwards!

Beefsteak Dinner of 1923

In keeping with the high spirits of the time, the Beefsteak Dinner for that year was a well-played out spoof involving a nervous head waiter, who all through the meal keeps admonishing the boisterous jewelers to quiet down so that he doesn't get in trouble with the law (remember, this was during Prohibition). At times, the waiter



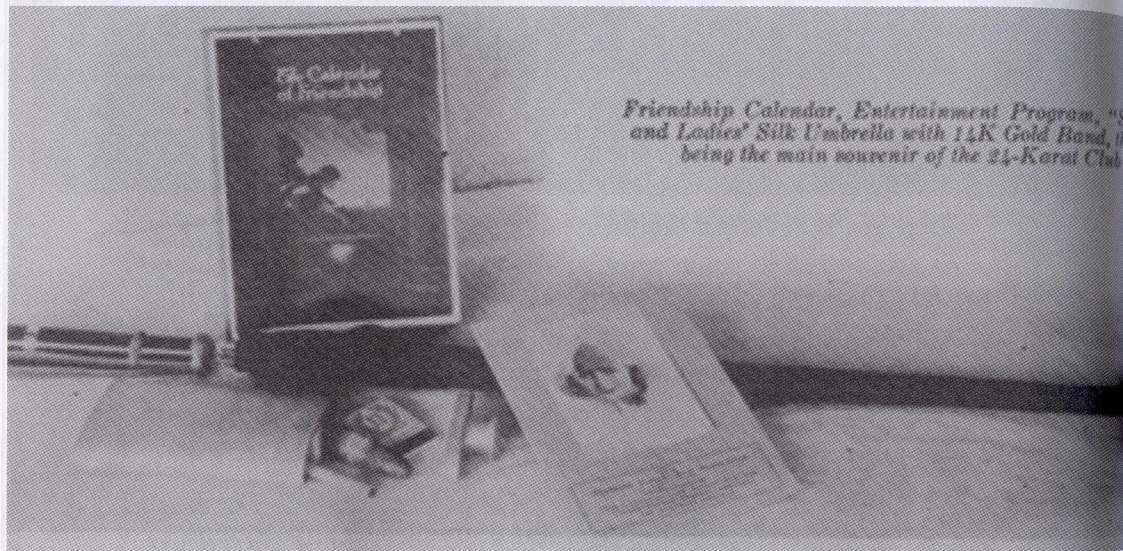
1923 Beefsteak Dinner. Note the "waiters" at the back left of photo. They were really actors who later performed for the gathering.
Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

becomes so exasperated he walks out, and several concerned jewelers follow him to apologize. But each time he returns, the noise level rises again and other jewelers begin to taunt him until he's almost ready to explode. At that point, the entertainment for the evening begins and when the singer has finished, the waiter is asked by the crowd how he liked her. Grunting his disapproval, he agrees to the jewelers' demand that he outdo the entertainment. His subsequent comic monologue reveals to the jewelers that he was part of an act all along. His act was followed by a whole list of parody songs about certain leading members, written by other members of the Club and performed by entertainers. It may not have been Ziegfeld or Irving Berlin, but it sounded like more fun than many of today's staid dinners!

Twenty-Second Annual Banquet of 1924

The 1924 banquet again featured lavish gifts, including a silk umbrella with a gold band on its handle. The members had begun to clamor for gifts more suited to their wives, as disapproval of the late

evening and all the festivities apparently ran high among the spouses. *The Keystone* magazine called the gift an effective “hush, dear” that ensured many of the guests would be “allowed back” the following year! But the gentlemen did not go away empty-handed. A cigar case in the form of a pocket whiskey flask was theirs to keep, as was a beautiful calendar featuring the dreamy art of famed colorist Maxfield Parrish, one the country’s leading commercial artists. This gift probably resulted from his relationship with Oneida Silver Co. - he created advertisements for the firm.



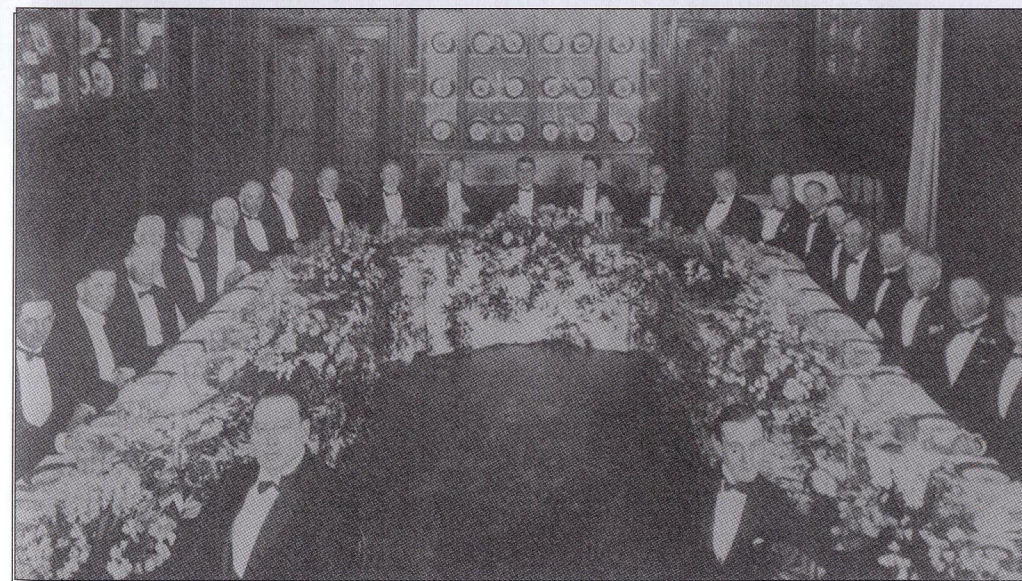
1924 banquet souvenirs were lavish. They included a silk umbrella for the men to take home to their wives as a “hush, dear” gift. Also pictured here is the calendar featuring the art of Maxfield Parrish and a “flask” cigar case, another sign of the Prohibition era times. Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

The new president of the Club, Herbert Reichman, was another of those beloved members, who, like Charlie Brinck, Harry Larter and Gus Niemeyer, worked tirelessly on every committee and kept the Club going. His brother Lee was also a former president of the Club and would go on to become its long-time treasurer during the

dark years of the Depression. The Reichman brothers, who also included another sibling, Arthur, were diamond dealers who had worked for 30 years to achieve the distinction of offices up on 47th St., where the diamond trade had relocated. Many jewelry firms were following the diamantaires uptown, as well.

In February, Reichman sponsored the now much-anticipated President’s Dinner in the State Apartments of the old Waldorf. T. Edgar Willson, an attendee, declared the dinner to be the best ever held. The meal was served on the Waldorf’s gold service, usually reserved for Presidents of the United States and visiting royalty, noted Willson in his account. In another sign of the prosperous times, the generous Reichman presented the bevy of Ziegfeld girls and other performers at the dinner each with a strand of pearls! He also gave every attendee a gold fountain pen.

The Reichmans were fondly honored at a luncheon in June at the Waldorf, for their contributions, not only to the Club, but to any jeweler in the industry who called on them in a time of need. “Whenever there has been any project on foot for the betterment of our industry, whether it required advice, work or financial assistance,



1924 President’s Dinner, hosted by Herbert Reichman
Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

it has been given by them in the most liberal spirit possible," said Harry Larter, before presenting to the brothers a Waltham chime clock to help decorate their new offices on 47th St., from the ex-presidents, officers and directors of the Club.

Beefsteak Dinner of 1924: "Jewelry Box Revue"

It stands to reason that after being entertained by so many revues during its annual dinners, the Club would try its own hand at the format. During the 1924 Beefsteak Dinner, a group of younger members put on an entire revue, consisting of political sketches about the birth of industry, "Frenzied Finance" and finally, "The Teapot Dome," which was a parody of the recent scandal involving President Harding's cabinet members and their corrupt alliances with oil companies out west. The final act involved the young jewelers dressing up like women and parodying Ziegfeld girls!



1924 Beefsteak Dinner, featuring the "Jewelry Box Review." Those are Club members dressed in drag! The "ladies" depicted various precious materials, such as gold, platinum, silver, jade, onyx and opal.

Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

Twenty-third Annual Banquet of 1925: Fannie Brice

The 1925 banquet marked the first year that Gus Niemeyer was chairman of the banquet committee. The indefatigable Niemeyer had earned the right to be chair, after working for years on the banquet

committees of legends such as Harry Larter. The entertainment headliner for that year was Miss Fannie Brice, the legendary comic and singer who Barbra Streisand would portray forty years later in "Funny Girl." The whole evening had to be worked around her, for she was to go on to perform again later that evening in the Ziegfeld Follies.

Souvenirs for that year's dinner included a sterling silver clothes brush and a silver calendar including that year's menu and guest list.

Twenty-fourth Annual Banquet of 1926: The Marx Brothers

Entertainment continued to be the central attraction of the banquets during the Twenties, with this year's main attraction the performers from the hit show "No, No Nanette" as well as performers from the Marx Brothers hit "Cocoanuts," then charming audiences on Broadway, before making its way into film in Hollywood. The souvenir was a sterling silver hair brush, made to match the clothes brush given out in 1925. A leather memorandum wallet was also given to each member along with the menu and guest list.

Twenty-fifth Annual Banquet of 1927: Silver Anniversary

The Club went all out for its Silver Anniversary, decorating the hallowed banquet halls of the old Waldorf in solid silver, from the 27-by-32-foot jeweled box that made up the curtain on the stage, to the billows of silver material that gathered below and between each box, as well as hung from the ceiling and other walls. For this year's event Herb Reichman had been chosen chairman and he engineered the souvenirs as well. These included a square sterling silver folding desk case decorated with a straight lined engine-turned pattern and an oblong shield for a monogram. Inside was fitted a Waltham 24-hour movement with a silver dial and radium numerals, which made it a handsome desk or boudoir clock. The gift was made by both the Elgin and Waltham companies. Eight of the original founding members were on hand for the commemorative meal.

A leather pocket case also accented in silver was presented to each guest enclosing the menu and guest list. Among the many notable guests at the Silver Anniversary was a newcomer to the dinner: The tall figure of Robert M. Shipley, future founder of the

Gemological Institute of America and the American Gem Society was noted by journalists, who said he enjoyed the meal.

For entertainment, Helen Morgan was a featured singer at the sterling event. The torch singer would go on to wow audiences later that year singing "Can't Help Loving That Man," in the groundbreaking new production "Show Boat," featuring the music of Jerome Kern and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II and P.G. Wodehouse. Also featured was a risqué "living picture" tableau of an enormous

necklace, from which was suspended a

nude woman posing as an ivory figure!

The only other notable event of 1927 was the renewal of the Club's lease of its headquarters at 15 Maiden Lane, in the Silversmiths' Building. Though many jewelry concerns were moving uptown, the Club decided to maintain its traditional location for at least another three years. By the early 1930s, however, the whole world had changed and the Club would make other arrangements.

Twenty-sixth Annual Banquet of 1928

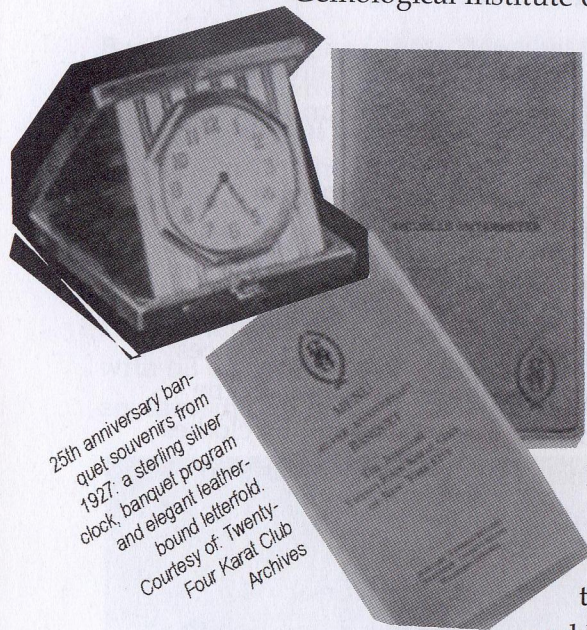
The 1928 banquet had a shadow cast upon it, for just two weeks before it took place, its beloved chairman, Herb Reichman, died suddenly. Gus Niemeyer stepped into the breach, guiding the banquet to its completion, but the sad event seemed to take the wind out of the

sails of the festive occasion. The spectacular souvenirs, Reed & Barton silver jewel cases lined with plush material, cheered up some jewelers, but even 17-year-old dancer Eleanor Powell, who would go on to partner with Fred Astaire in Hollywood, could not completely lift spirits during the entertainment. Leading jewelers Harry Winston and Oscar Heyman were at the 1928 event, as was Richard C. Murphy, then counsel and secretary of the Jewelers National Crime Committee, who would later serve many years as executive secretary of the Jewelers' Security Alliance, a post he took on in 1941. That year, T. Edgar Willson was Club president, marking the first and only time a journalist served as leader of the Club.

At a meeting just before the banquet, the Club passed an eloquent resolution honoring Herb Reichman, while at the same time voting his brother Arthur into membership to take his place.

Twenty-seventh Annual Banquet of 1929

The 1929 banquet again had an air of melancholy, but this time it was mourning the imminent death of its hall. The old Waldorf Astoria was destined for the wrecking ball that year to make way for "some office building," as T. Edgar Willson put it. By the next year, the group would know of the Empire State Building, but for now, it simply regretted the passing of its old location and decided to honor the maitre d'hôte,



25th anniversary banquet souvenirs from 1927: a sterling silver clock, banquet program and elegant leather-bound letterfold. Courtesy of Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives



Top to bottom: Gus Niemeyer, 1928; Herbert Reichman; T. Edgar Willson, 1928. Courtesy of: Twenty-Four Karat Club Archives

Oscar Tschirky, who had personally overseen the dinners over the years. Oscar sat at the head table and was given a beautiful hall clock from the Club. The humble man promised the jewelers that he would return, hopefully in a new Waldorf Astoria at an as-yet unnamed new location (Club members who stay at the present Waldorf will note that the downstairs dining room of the hotel is still called "Oscar's").

The entertainment program was presented in the form of a popular radio show and featured a variety of performers made famous by radio's ever-growing reach. The souvenirs for this last year of prosperity were handsome sealskin wallets made to contain both the older, larger money as well as the new, smaller Treasury bills soon to be issued. The wallets were finished with gold corners and a gold panel made for the initial of each recipient.