

The Era of Oscar of New Paltz by Vivian Yess Wadlin

Who's Who In America, 1936–1937 edition, gives us brief biographies of 31,434 individuals of influence representing hundreds of professions. The book has 2,878 pages of notables—artists, writers, politicians, attorneys, industrialists, physicians, inventors, teachers, preachers, philosophers, and more. Each page contains the vital information of about twelve of life's winners. Nineteen-thirty-six and 1937 were stellar years for many in a country gripped by the Great Depression.

You would recognize some of the 31,000 plus names, especially artists and writers whose works have endured in the public space. Although I did not read each biography, I believe if anyone did, they would find only one person listed among the august as a maître d' hôtel—as in—he ran the dining rooms. That would be the one and only Oscar Tschirky, aka, Oscar of The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, NYC, NY, whose blurb is on page 2,449. Oscar Tschirky was a man of the world. His featured Waldorf domains were the Palm Gardens, the Empire Room, Peacock Alley, The Sert Room (murals by Jose Maria Sert), the Grand Ballroom, and the private supper rooms, all part of the hotel's iconic dining scene.

The *Who's Who* lists Oscar's birth in Switzerland in 1866, his immigration to the United States in 1883, and that he obtained US citizenship in 1888. In 1887, he married Sophie Bertische of New York City.

The clue to his inclusion in the 1936-1937 edition is in the line, Tschirky is "...said to know more people from all over the world than any other person in America." It



turns out, he knew them by sight, by name, by reputation, by seating and food preferences, and other more personal information, always making them feel supremely special. Of course, they were special—not the hoi polloi, but princes and poten-

One visitor who received more attention than was granted to any "Eastern potentate, crowned head, politician, or actor, was the ...democratic idol— Buffalo Bill." From the book's description of the meeting between the admired old soldier and the maître d', and their subsequent interactions, it was clearly mutual admiration.

On registering as William Frederick Cody, Buffalo Bill was easily recognized by the bellboys who swamped the star. Oscar rescued Cody and then gave him a grand tour of the hotel. The only other problem presented to Oscar by Buffalo Bill's visit was the waiters' arguments as to who would serve the hero and wild west star.

Another amusing glimpse of history arose from a visit by Li Hung Chang, Viceroy of China (among six additional titles of power held by Chang, including Senior Guardian of the Emperor).

tates, stars, professors, politicians, priests, presidents, and production czars. These leaders hailed from every nation that had transport to an American border. And they all stayed at the Waldorf-Astoria when in New York.

Likewise, they all knew Oscar. As did anyone living or working in New York City. At the Waldorf's dining rooms, he held the reins of power over who could mingle with whom in a society more and more built on influence and income. And he perfected it over his fifty years at the Waldorf, beginning in 1893.

Karl Schrifgiesser's book, *Oscar of the Waldorf*, written with Oscar in 1943, and described by some as almost Tschirky's autobiography, tells of many a memorable guest. The small volume presents an amazing world history using Oscar's guests as focal points of world events.



The Viceroy brought his own entourage including cooks and servants. This presented a problem for the Waldorf for upon hearing of the coming royal visit, Waldorf manager George Boldt had gone to Chinatown and ordered the dining room be decorated and stocked with all things Chinese. *The New York Times* said Oscar's genius "...transformed the Waldorf into a Chinese inn that might well be called "at the Sign of the Dragon."

Chang, then in his eighties, was not all that taken with America, nor with the Waldorf. However, he took a liking to Tschirky's



Photo above left: The Tschirky family home, now the Culinarians' Home as it appears today. The Tschirky home also appears in the large postcard on page one between the pond on the right and the Wallkill River. Menu center: A menu from Oscar's collection of more than 1,000 items. Postcard right: The German Renaissance Revival-style Waldorf built in 1893 and the Astoria next to it on the right, added in 1897. A 900' corridor known as Peacock Alley connected the two buildings. The buildings were razed in 1929 to erect the Empire State Building. The Waldorf Astoria Hotel's successor was built at 301 Park Avenue, New York. All images are from the author's collection except those noted from the Culinarians' Home Foundation

two young sons and had an interpreted conversation with them that seemed to have made Chang approve somewhat of his surroundings. Newspapers noted the fact that during his entire visit, Li Hung Chang had smiled only at Oscar and his boys.

As to the fare for the potentate, Oscar said, "All the ingredients had traveled with the party, too. The cooks did not have to go to the market for their eggs. As a matter of fact, they used very special eggs for the Viceroy's omelette... eggs one hundred years old."

Tschirky was given one of the eggs. "I keep mine for remembrance rather than for nourishment," he explained.

Oscar noted that after a lavish dinner hosted by the American diplomatic and consular services of China, Chang went into the lobby and smoked a water pipe, "...which to the horror of everybody was mistaken for an opium pipe."

Speaking of eggs... when Oscar, world-renown maître d' at the huge Waldorf-Astoria hotel mentioned his dream of owning a farm, even friends laughed. After all, Oscar Tschirky was responsible for the care and feeding of the world's most pampered guests and their egos. The idea of owning rural land and running a farm in addition to his lofty and time-consuming perch at the Waldorf, seemed, well, outlandish.

Nevertheless, Oscar and Sophie purchased one thousand acres "at the foot of

the Catskills," with a magnificent view of the mountains and the Wallkill River. With that, Oscar officially became a second homeowner in New Paltz, NY. The nearer mountain range creating the true backdrop for the Tschirky home was the granite face of the Shawangunks.

Given Tschirky's early years in a remote Swiss canton, it was not surprising he longed for the simplicity and peace of the farm they would build in this fertile, quiet land. Accessible in the early years by train or boat, then by trolley, New Paltz was the perfect getaway.

Build they did. The Tschirkys did much of the early work of land clearing on weekends. Their work created a site for their lovely large home, replacing what Oscar himself described as "a shack."

Eventually, the family, including the two sons, August and Leopold, who had captivated the Viceroy, and a daughter named Clover,* spent considerable time at their New Paltz farm. The house is down a long tree-lined drive that crosses a manmade land bridge between two lovely ponds created by diverting water from the Wallkill River. The farm grew to include orchards, vineyards, chicken coops (FRESH eggs), a cow barn, a windmill-driven well, large gardens and fields of crops. Son August would become a successful farmer on other land near New Paltz.

In 1942, the Tschirky home was transferred to The Societe Culinaire Philanthro-

pique of New York, Inc., of which Oscar had been a member since 1908. The estate was established as "...a home for aged, disabled, and destitute of colleagues of the culinary profession," according to the *Kingston Daily Freeman* on Oscar's retirement in 1943. Today, it is home to twelve lucky retirees, none of whom cooked for a living. But then, neither did Oscar Tschirky.

However, he did produce a very popular cookbook. Often, the hotel's illustrious guests had asked for the magic formula of this or that dish. More than once was Oscar credited with being a famous chef because of that book.

Not all of those palate-pleasing recipes originated with the well-rewarded chefs employed by the Waldorf. A friend of Oscar's ran Sing Sing prison "up the river" from New York City. He asked Tschirky to review the prison's kitchen as inmates were not thrilled with its offerings.

On the day of Oscar's visit, the prison kitchen served clam chowder. The dish was so pleasing to Oscar he asked for the recipe to take back to the hotel's chefs. Sing Sing clam chowder had the hotel's clientele singing its praises, but of course, the name of the song had changed.

In return, the inmates enjoyed the Waldorf recipe for corned beef hash. Hash had been the one menu item the inmates described as inedible prior to the Waldorf version.

Right:
Edison
from C

Napanoch, NY, home to another large prison, was also the home of Yama Farms, owned by the successful ad-

vertising maven, Frank Seaman. Yama Farms was a Japanese-inspired get-a-way for many of the rich and famous. The Yarma farm had once been a trout hatchery. Frank Seaman is described in *Oscar of The Waldorf* as, "...a gourmet and sportsman by inclination." Any sportsman from Napanoch, NY, and its world-renown trout fishing would certainly want a trout stream *inside* his favorite New York City restaurant.

The Waldorf, ever accommodating, installed a trout stream. They hired a trout master to ensure the fish were well fed and feisty and left the rest to the men of that era of frivolity.

Describing the scene of "those early prototypes of playboys," the book relays, "In a happy frame of mind, they would invade the grill room, seize a pole amid shouts of laughter—and many a side bet—and fish for their dinner."

When successful, an attendant would unhook the fish, and the kitchen would prepare it for the mighty fisherman, who by then



Two postcards, circa 1910-1920 feature two of Waldorf-Astoria's many dining options. Left is the Grand Ball Room. Right is the Sert Room named for the famed Spanish muralist, Jose Maria Sert, whose work graced the walls.

was most fairly sloshed.

Another circumstance of the time that befell the Waldorf and its kitchen was the 1919 Volstead Act prohibiting alcoholic beverages. Not only was the hotel's bottom line impacted by its empty bar, but its French chefs were bereft at cooking sans wine.

Oscar was so esteemed that on the 50th anniversary of his marriage to Sophie, more than 1000 guests attended the Grand Ball Room of the Waldorf to celebrate. The Tschirky's may have made their reputations in New York City, but they left their deepest roots in New Paltz.

Some roots still sprout in the area. August Zimmerman, a French-trained chef, was recruited in London by Oscar to work at the Waldorf. Mr. Zimmerman was the grandfather of Marty and Judy Zimmerman (Sanford). Marty is a farmer still caring for the family orchards in nearby Clintondale. Judy (a math teacher for 30+ years) told me of this connection and believes it may have been August Zimmerman who first introduced Oscar to New Paltz.

But the deepest Tschirky roots are buried in the New Paltz Rural Cemetery. Oscar's parents, August C. Tschirky (1825-1890) and his wife, Antonette Fassbind (1832-1925); Oscar Tschirky (1866-1950) and Sophie, (1865-1949); son

August Tschirky (1889-1952) who ran a large dairy farm near New Paltz; daughter Clover (1897-1941) and husband, Ira Zimmerman (1894-1974) all rest there. Oscar's other son, Cornell graduate Leopold (1891-1960), was buried elsewhere. He donated Oscar's collection of more than 1,000 menus and his papers to the Cornell School of Hotel Administration.

Then there is the legacy of the beautiful Culinaricians' Home, a rich reminder of Oscar of New Paltz and his family.

Do an internet search for Oscar Tschirky's name. Press photos showing Oscar and any number of the rich and famous will open before you. Read the book *Oscar of the Waldorf* and a whole delicious slice of history will be yours. Especially moving are the stories about the First World War, its heroes (including the incredible conscientious objector, Sgt. Alvin York, hero of the Argonne), and the war's end-of-hostilities celebrations in New York.

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