The "New" Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (1931)
Part Two

By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

The new Waldorf-Astoria was commissioned by Boomer-DuPont Properties as a replacement for the original Waldorf-Astoria which was torn down in 1929 to make room for the Empire State Building on Fifth Avenue between 33rd and 34th Streets. Lucius Boomer shrewdly retained exclusive rights to use the name Waldorf-Astoria. Boomer was enjoying his retirement in Florida in late 1929 when he received a call from L.J. Horowitz, chairman of the Thompson-Starrett Company asking if he would head up a new Waldorf-Astoria. When Boomer learned the size and scope of the new hotel, he agreed with his wife that this was the project of a lifetime. The new Waldorf was to be built on an entire block leased from the New York Central Railroad between Park and Lexington Avenues between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets. It was designed by the famous architectural firm of Schultze & Weaver (Sherry Netherland, Pierre, Lexington Park Lane).

The new Waldorf-Astoria was a vast undertaking by many men and nearly as many corporations. Construction funds totaling forty million dollars were provided by a consortium of banks and railroads, including Hayden, Stone & Company, Hallgarten & Company, Kisser, Kinnicutt & Company, and the New York Central and New York, New Haven and Hartford railroads. The construction firm of Thompson and Starrett was hired to build the structure. On April 1, 1929, preparations were made to transfer a New York Central power station from the proposed site to a new location beneath the Commodore Hotel (now the Grand Hyatt Hotel). On November 4 demolition of buildings already on the site began. Excavation commenced on January 6, 1930, and the first rivet in the steel frame of the new building was driven on March 24. Schultze & Weaver had to pay special attention to the equipment in the back-of-the-house. They had little choice since the hotel had only a small basement area, situated as it was over the New York Central railroad tracks. On October 1, 1931, the new Waldorf-Astoria was opened to the public.

Describing the hotel was a little like attempting to portray the wonders of Hoover Dam or the Golden Gate Bridge—an exercise in ooh-and-ah statistics: The hotel extended 200 feet along

Park and Lexington Avenues, 405 feet along Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets. Three thousand cubic feet of granite were consumed in its construction, as were 27,100 tons of steel, 76,700 barrels of cement, 1,000,000 square feet of metal lathing and furring, 2,695,000 square feet of terra cotta and gypsum blocks, 11,000,000 bricks, and 300 imported mantels of marble. The tracks of the Penn Central Railroad ran beneath the hotel, which was cushioned from vibrations by a elaborate steel carriage, from its sidewalk entrances to the top of its twin towers, the hotel soared 625 feet into the air. With just under two thousand rooms, it was the largest hotel in the United States, if not in the world.

On September 30, the night before the official opening, thousands of New Yorkers gathered in the great ballroom as Lucius Boomer raised his hands in a gesture of silence and a voice from far away Washington squeaked through a radio loud-speaker. It was Herbert Hoover, the first President of the United States to speak at the opening of a hotel. "Our hotels have become community institutions," said Hoover. "They are the central points of civic hospitality… The erection of this great structure," he continued, mindful of the awful Depression that had settled over the nation, "has been a contribution to the maintenance of employment, and an exhibition of courage and confidence to the whole nation."

Oscar of the Waldorf was on hand for the opening, his smile as broad as ever, his palm still discreetly but unmistakably upturned. Those who remembered the old Waldorf were as pleased to see him as anyone, or anything, else in the new hotel—with the possible exception of a broad hallway which paralleled Park Avenue and was entered from the main foyer. Its walls were paneled with French burl walnut inlaid with ebony, its pilasters faced with French rouge marble and topped with capitals and cornices of nickel bronze. Along the walls, at intervals rested maple vitrines fronted with glass in which leading New York merchants displayed their wares. It was a handsome corridor which captured the spirit, though it did not duplicate the appearance, of the fabled promenade in the old Waldorf. But it bore the same name, Peacock Alley, and that fact was enough to warm the hearts of nostalgics.

Despite Herbert Hoover's brave hopes, the Waldorf did little to help the sluggish economy of New York in the 1930s. The hotel employed 1,600 people, and hundred of thousands of guests regularly rested their heads on its pillows, but costs of operation were unexpectedly high, equaling and sometimes exceeding revenues. The beginning of World War II marked a return to prosperity for the city and the hotel.

Even during the bleak years of the Depression, the Waldorf was widely acclaimed as the world's greatest hotel. Top-name entertainers appeared regularly in its Empire Room. Important balls and banquets were held in its ballroom. One of the remarkable features of the hotel was a private railroad siding beneath the building where guests in private cars could come directly to the hotel via the New York Central tracks.

In a Waldorf-Astoria advertisement in 1946 which is reproduced in Lucius Boomer's authoritative book *Hotel Management*, Harper & Brothers, Publishers, New York, 1938, the following words appear under a Waldorf-Astoria photograph:

> The Waldorf-Astoria is definitely something more than a hotel. For more than forty years, the great figures of the earth have chosen the Waldorf-Astoria as the one hotel compatible with their political dignity, their economic importance, or their artistic fame.

The Waldorf Towers with it own private entrance and elevator lobby on Fiftieth Street is exclusively for long-term tenants. Hundreds of notables, ranging from European kings to Indian maharajas, bedded down in its luxurious tower suites. President Hoover, after his departure from the White House, made his home in the Waldorf, as did General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, publishers Henry Luce and William Randolph Hearst, Jr., song writer Cole Porter, Elizabeth Taylor, Bob Hope, the Sultan of Brunei, etc. The Towers have 115 suites and 90 rooms on the 28th to 42nd floors.

A plaque in the Presidential Suite reads:

> The Waldorf- Astoria Presidential Suite.
> A few of the famous occupants
> Every President of the United States since 1931

Queen Elizabeth II, England
King Hussein, Jordan
King Saud, Saudi Arabia
General Charles de Gaulle, France
Chairman Nikita Krushchev, Soviet Union
Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, Israel
Prime Minister Menachen Begin, Israel
Premier Giulio Andreotel, Italy
President Valery Giscard D’estang, France
Emporer and Empress Hirohito, Japan
King Juan Carlos I, Spain
President Nicolai Ceausescu, Romania
King Olav V, Norway
King Faisal, Saudi Arabia

The Towers provides housekeeping, room service and concierge service with the goal of encouraging every guest to feel like a king. Still, Towers guests often bring their own chefs, butlers, and housekeepers.

Lucius Boomer introduced such U.S. hotel business “firsts” as the six-day work week, a floor reserved exclusively for women guests, a floor with Spanish-speaking clerks and maids to cater to guests from Latin America (which might not seem a novelty in New York today, but was unheard of in the 1929’s) and the employment of women as front desk receptionists and clerks.

Boomer laid great stress on modern management techniques softening the harsh carrot-and-stick methods of Henry Ford and the father of scientific management, Frederick Taylor. New institutions guided this shift to a kinder, gentler form of scientific management.

On June 26, 1947, Lucius Boomer was killed in an air crash while vacationing in Homar, Norway. He was sixty seven years old.

In the summer of 1949 a writer named Thomas Ewing Dabney readied for publication a book-length biography of hotelier Conrad Hilton. The book traced the story of Hilton's rise from obscurity in New Mexico, his entry into the hotel business in Cisco, Texas, and his celebrated purchases of Chicago's Palmer House and New York's Plaza Hotel. The book, titled *The Man Who Bought the Plaza*, was finished and in the hands of printers when the publishers suddenly ordered work to halt. Title pages were destroyed, dust jackets discarded, and the author called in to revise the text. Conrad Hilton was a good subject for a biography but, as Dabney had learned, a very poor sitter for a portrait. Hastily updated, the book was released to book stores in 1950 under a new title—*The Man Who Bought the Waldorf*.

Why had Hilton, who had already won hotel fame and earned enough money to live on comfortably for several lifetimes, decide to buy the Waldorf? It was a famous property with a lustrous history, a vast "city within a city" with nearly unlimited revenue-producing possibilities. It was a handsome structure that could profitably be operated in conjunction with Hilton's growing chain of large hotels in other cities. All these reasons, and more, were summed up in a single phrase scrawled by the ambitious hotelier across a photograph of the Waldorf-Astoria: "The greatest of them all." Because it was the greatest, Hilton was determined to own it. On October 12, 1949, the Waldorf became a Hilton hotel. More than 58 years later, it continues to carry that designation.

Visiting kings and queens made it a regular stop on visits to New York, as did presidents of the United States. The United States Ambassador to the United Nations maintained a suite in the hotel, as did ambassadors from more than thirty other nations. One day in the early 1960s ex-President Eisenhower was in the Grand Ballroom for a banquet while then-President John F. Kennedy was attending a fund-raising dinner in the Empire Room. Past President Herbert Hoover received an award that day in the hotel. Six astronauts were checking in. Francis Cardinal Spellman attended a lunch honoring General Mark Clark, while future Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon wandered about in the halls. With five American presidents and a former King of England in the building, it was not a typical day for the Waldorf, but it was not so far out the ordinary as to cause any great consternation for the hotel's staff.

The Waldorf is the "unofficial Palace" of New York, a citadel of luxury, a center of power and wealth, and a living museum of Manhattan history. There are notes here and there that recall the old Waldorf on Fifth Avenue—portraits of hotel luminaries, including handsome canvas of Oscar Tschirky (Oscar of the Waldorf), at whose death in 1950 all Waldorf flags were lowered to half-staff; the reconstructed Peacock Alley; a magnificent clock saved from the old hotel that has nine feet of bronze adorned with a miniature replica of the Statue of Liberty, four spread-winged eagles, a series of sports scenes, and the likenesses of Queen Victoria, George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Benjamin Harrison.

But the grand tradition that lives in the building recalls the past even better than these relics—memories of the Astors, echoes of "Diamond Jim" Brady. "Bet-a-Million" Gates, and the Bradley Martin Ball; recollections of Coleman Du Pont, Herbert Hoover, and the Douglas MacArthur. When night descends on New York and an air of respectful silence creeps through the great lobbies and corridors, the palace inn breathes deeply—but the ghosts of Peacock Alley do not sleep, maybe because the current management has added an equal sign: Waldorf = Astoria.

This article is excerpted from my book-in-progress "Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry" which will be published at the end of 2007 by McFarland & Company, Publishers, Jefferson, N.C. Email me to reserve a signed copy.

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