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## Readers Write

# An Equestrian Dinner

by Dan Demers

They were the days of uniquely opulent banquets by the very rich. Gatsby-like stories abounded in the nation's society columns about dinners that left the average working stiff shaking his head. One dinner in New York featured a tuxedo-clad monkey trained to eat with a fork and knife sitting at the head table. A Chicago "zoo" dinner featured ten guests with an animal seated with each guest—including a parrot, dog, cat, goat, rooster, dove, chameleon and a pig. The cat and dog got into a scrap. The nation's press dubbed it a "banquet of beauties and beasts."

*The New York Sun* reported that the industrialist C. K. G. Billings planned on throwing a dinner for thirty-three friends. Billings had just been elected president of The Equestrian Club. The club elected a new president every two months and the winner was obligated to throw a dinner for the members. It was the custom at the time for each new president "to provide a more novel affair than that given by his predecessor."

Billings originally wanted to hold the dinner at his new 25,000 square-foot trotting stables which he had built at a cost of \$200,000 (\$6.1 million in current values). Newspaper reporters caught wind that the dinner was to be on horseback and spoiled the surprise. The club members met instead at Sherry's Restaurant, which catered to New York's social elite. After the first course of soup, Billings sadly told the guests that he "had been forced to call off the affair." He asked them to follow him to the ballroom where they would finish their dinner and enjoy privacy.

The nation's press discovered, to their dismay, that Billings had outwitted them after all. One unknowing reporter misled his colleagues, writing that the dinner guests would meet at Manhattan's Hotel Netherland and would then "be conveyed by automobile to...the big driveway at his palatial stables." They would be treated to dinner on "thirty-six wooden hobby horses, gaily caparisoned, awaiting them." Instead, Billings had secretly relocated his opulent banquet to the Sherry's fourth-story ballroom. He provided a photograph to reporters which clearly showed that the men dined "on horseback" in the grand ballroom. The horses had been secretly loaded onto the restaurant's passenger elevator two at a time and "tethered in the ballroom... Each horse was equipped with a white quilted satin saddle and bridle, martingale and shoulder hangings in gold and white." Gold lettering for each guests name was embroidered on the saddle. The horses were arranged in a horseshoe shape around a mound of green turf "surmounted by a mass of flowers." The mound sloped off into a lawn which "spread to the horse's feet." Each horse had a three stair step-up to facilitate servers and riders.

The ballroom was replete with fountains, potted flowers and real grass. Added scenery made the room seem like "a bit of open country." Partially hidden behind the mound was a full orchestra.

A table was fastened to each saddle horn. To ensure the horses wouldn't "curvet (leap) or prance or shy" and possibly spill or toss the meal, "a liveried groom stood at each horse's head" holding the reins. While guests ate so did the horses, munching, "oats from individual satin covered mangers." Following the banquet's twelve courses, the tables were removed and the



*A banquet of beauties and beasts*

"guests lounged over their cigars in the padded saddles." One article reported champagne was served through rubber hoses attached to iced champagne in saddlebags. The guests were reported to still be in their saddles at midnight. Billings revealed he had spent \$50,000 on the soiree [\$1.5 million in current values].

Cornelius Kingsley Garrison Billings was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. He had grown up in Chicago. His father was one of the principal founders and owners of Peoples Gas Light and Coke Company which provided gas lighting to Chicago before electricity. After graduation from college he went to work for his father's company. When his father died, Billings inherited the bulk of his father's wealth and retired at the age of 40. He devoted the remainder of his life to stabling thoroughbred horses. In 1901 he moved his family and horses to New York City. He is considered one of the fathers of matinee racing (trotting).

Billings moved to Santa Barbara, California in 1917 where the weather there enabled him to "more fully indulge his love of fast horses." He died there in 1937 at the age of 76.

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