

THE CUFF LINKS CLUB

By Les Dropkin

In his 1920 bid for the Vice-Presidency as the Democratic Party's candidate, FDR had the support and advice of many people. With some, like FDR's political mentor Louis Howe, the relationship went back to the early days of FDR's political career in New York after he won the race in 1910 for State Senator for Dutchess County – normally a stronghold of the Republican Party. For others, becoming part of FDR's team was of much more recent origin.

In December of 1920, just a few months after the Democratic Party's electoral loss, FDR wanted to express his gratitude to nine people in particular who had worked so long and hard on his campaign. He chose to do this by giving to each of them a set of golden cuff links from Tiffany's. One of the cuff links bore the initials FDR; the other, the initials of the recipient. The cuff links shown here were those given to Renah F. Camalier, one of FDR's stenographers in the campaign.

The cuff links were much more than souvenirs of a hard fought campaign. It soon became the custom for members of the Club to get together for dinner every year on or about January 30th, FDR's birthday. These men of extraordinary abilities were thus brought together regularly; the ties of loyalty to FDR and the preservation of the relationships among them would make the Club a potent force in later years and later campaigns.

The dinners were very private affairs. They afforded Club members a chance to reminisce and indulge in skits and high jinks. Well oiled by the end of dinner, they would enjoy a poker game afterwards. The Club would also be a source of strong support to both Eleanor and Franklin in the very difficult years after he contracted polio in 1921.

As the years passed the group began to be referred to as the Cuff Links Gang. More individuals became members. Wives, Eleanor and Eleanor's friends began to be invited; they graciously retired after dinner so the poker night could begin. Louis Howe often took the lead in preparing the "program" for the evening. A good sense of his preparation for the night is afforded using 1924 as an example. The idea was to pretend they were still in the middle of the 1920 campaign; that they were in the ward-room of a battleship at the Brooklyn Navy Yard where there was going to be a dinner in FDR's honor and that the "Gang" would be impersonating Navy Yard workers.



Part of Howe's Letter Planning the 1924 Dinner

We might start out with an amusing dialogue between Admiral (William V.) Pratt and the Master Mechanic in which Pratt insists that all the boys come aboard whether they have washed their hands or not. . . get Marvin McIntire to get sailor suits from the Department for our four sweetest singers. They can dress in my room before dinner, and appear as the Colorado Star Quartette. Also, some other goat must represent the Marines. Apropos of Haiti, he should present Franklin with a couple of skulls of Haytians which he dug up from the local graveyard for amusement. You will probly remember the unfortunate incident.

The more I think of it the more possibility this seems to give, and I am getting quite keen for it as I write.

Get the gang together and let me know the date for the big drunk.



The Cuff Links Club, White House, 1934

If photos of the Club dinners were taken they remain in private hands, with one exception. In 1973 photos of the January 30, 1934 get together of the Club were donated to the Tacoma Public Library. The dinner that night, the first to be held in the White House, has come to be known as the “toga, toga” party. Some people who were opposed to the New Deal measures being taken had begun calling FDR “prickly Caesar”. The theme for the dinner had been found. These pictures belonged to Kirke L. Simpson, one of the original Club members– he is just below FDR in the photo to the left. The person he gave them to later donated them to the Tacoma Public Library.

By this time the women were participating fully in the high jinks. In the photos below, Eleanor is standing to FDR’s right dressed as the Delphic Oracle; his daughter Anna seated just to his left is one of the “Vestal Virgins” surrounding FDR.



“Toga, Toga Party” Birthday Celebration, White House, 1934

1934 saw the start of another tradition – the Birthday Balls. These were balls held in thousands of communities across the country on FDR’s birthday to raise money for the Warm Springs Foundation and the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. Since Franklin, Eleanor, Anna and their friends would have to appear at the many Washington venues, it meant that less time was open for the Cuff Links Gang dinner and revelries. By January, 1936 Louis Howe was gravely ill. FDR drove out to Washington’s Naval Hospital to see him, went back to the White House for the dinner and then with Eleanor and their entourage to four of the balls. With Howe’s death in April a major driving force behind the Club’s meetings was gone. In succeeding years surviving Gang members simply became invitees to the Birthday Balls. The Club and the Birthday Balls ended together with the death of FDR in April, 1945.