

2. Early WNBA Fund-Raising Dinners

From the start, the WNBA understood the importance of raising funds through social events. On January 30, 1919, the organization invited members to attend its first banquet at the literary-minded Aldine Club at 200 Fifth Avenue, New York. Among the speakers was Kate Douglas Wiggin, author of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, who described a chance meeting with Charles Dickens on a train when she was only eleven years old. Wiggins was followed by Ida C. Bailey Allen, who addressed the then controversial issue of “the professional woman and her home.” (Allen was the popular author of more than fifty cookbooks; in 1924 she became the food editor of the Sunday *New York American* and later had her own radio show.)

At the time no one knew how many guests to expect, but the first dinner drew such an overflow crowd for its third speaker, novelist Edna Ferber, that there weren't enough chairs for all the attendees. Another early dinner at the Aldine Club, however, produced a different type of embarrassment when the WNBA treasurer, Josephine Pfanstiehl, found she didn't have enough money to pay the bill, since the crowd was far larger than anticipated. Consequently she had to sign an IOU for the organization “until the crisis was resolved.”

Humor was an integral part of those first banquets. The archives revealed that Bob Sherwood, co-owner of Sherwood's Book Store and the husband of WNBA cofounder Pauline C. Sherwood, who was a circus clown for P.T. Barnum in his youth, often delighted audiences with his capers. Memorable too was a 1922 dinner during which WNBA leaders prepared a skit in which they played marionettes representing prominent figures in the book trade. However,

during a rehearsal that afternoon, the current WNBA president, Belle Walker, got stuck in a barrel and “had to be pulled out by the legs.” And that, as Madge Jenison, one of the organization’s founders, drily recalled in her memoir, “put a damper on the marionette show.”

Fortunately the entertainment section of that evening was rescued by Doubleday author Dorothy Spears, who, having previously studied singing with Caruso, left the speakers’ table for the piano and sang to the guests. Other speakers included a prominent journalist from the *Manchester Guardian*, novelist Fanny Hurst, and best-selling Canadian author Martha Ostenso. The event was chaired by author Alexander Black, “the most hilarious toastmaster ever born,” who introduced Belle Walker as Mr. Harold Belle Walker in a sly reference to the male-dominated publishing profession.

By March 5, 1925, the WNBA’s banquet was so popular it was moved to the Hotel McAlpin at 34th Street and Broadway to accommodate its 465 guests. Among the speakers were Kathleen Thompson Norris, a popular journalist and best-selling author, who amused the audience with a personal account of bookselling in San Francisco; and short story author Edward J. O’Brien, who predicted those tales were the wave of the future. O’Brien was the founder of the annual anthology *The Best American Short Stories*. By then the publishing industry so enthusiastically supported the WNBA that guests received copies of books as souvenirs of the evening.

Musical accompaniment was always part of earlier WNBA banquets but by 1927, at the peak of the Jazz Age, the tenth anniversary dinner included dancing to the Edwyn Allen orchestra. That year the speakers included noted authors Honore Willis Morrow (novelist and wife of the

founder of Wm. Morrow and Co.), novelist Hervey Allen, Dorothy Canfield Fisher (author, educational reformer, and social activist), and poet Edmund Vance Cooke. To the astonishment of the WNBA, 700 guests appeared for the event and made the banquet room feel overcrowded. As a consequence, by November 1928, the secretary reported that the banquet required larger accommodations. A report from that era observed, “WNBA saw no black cloud on the horizon in 1928.” The invitation for March 6, 1929, was headlined “Make Way for the Ladies” at the “Grand Ball Room of the Hotel Commodore,” at Lexington Avenue and East 42nd Street. Tickets included “dinner, souvenirs [books] and dancing, four dollars and fifty cents each.”

Then came the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, followed by the Great Depression. In 1930 the despairing WNBA president wrote that only “three speakers, two reporters from *Publishers Weekly*, and eleven members attended the meeting that year. In that grim economic climate, the WNBA banquets immediately became more modest. While the fifteenth anniversary dinner of 1932 still included five speakers, the event was relocated to the less costly Hotel Pennsylvania. And by the organization’s eighteenth anniversary of March 11, 1935, tickets were reduced to three dollars and fifty cents. Two years later on March 12, 1937, at the WNBA’s twentieth dinner, the price was only twenty-five cents higher. Tellingly, a *Bookwoman* report praised one of its author-speakers, Morris Ernest, by observing that “the book trade has reason to be grateful...for his alert and sympathetic interest in its problems.”

Despite those strains, women were finally acknowledged as full-fledged members of the publishing industry. Proof of their inclusion happened on February 17, 1937, at the Booksellers’ League’s annual Ladies Night at the Aldine Club where the WNBA was represented by past

president Alice E. Klutas. As a WNBA report chortled, “In passing we might say that it only took the American Booksellers Association three years to recognize the importance of the Women’s National Book Association, but it took the Booksellers’ League twenty years! Who knows, perhaps in another ten years we may hold our annual parties together!”

Three years later that partnership became a reality. On February 16, 1940, the WNBA’s twenty-third dinner dance was held in partnership with the Booksellers’ League of New York to celebrate its First Annual Dinner Dance. “For many years, the two organizations have held separate parties, and so near together that sometimes it was difficult to choose between them... This year we seized the opportunity afforded by the Printing Anniversary to combine forces...the five hundredth anniversary of the invention of printing from movable type, the four hundredth anniversary of printing on the American continent, and the three hundredth anniversary of printing in the United States.” Apparently worried that the program might be too long, its two speakers, the acclaimed author-educator Mary Ellen Chase and prominent Chinese author Dr. Lin Yutang, were monitored by a “very noisy alarm clock which acted as a brake on such speakers as might forget time limits.”

After a dinner of filet mignon or lobster thermidor, the first Constance Lindsay Skinner Award was presented to Anne Carroll Moore, superintendent of children’s work at the New York Public Library, and guests danced to the music of Harry Meyer and his orchestra. “So ended another successful party. We may continue to join forces in our annual party and we may not, but the committee of the WNBA wishes to express our appreciation of the enthusiastic help given by the

committee from the Booksellers' League. To have a lot of good looking men doing all the heavy work was a most gratifying experience, and we're all for more combined parties."

On March 20, 1942, in the wake of America's declaration of war against the Axis Powers, the WNBA hosted its silver anniversary dinner dance. While it was "rather a small party" at the Hotel Pennsylvania, the WNBA reported it was "the most enjoyable in several years." The toastmaster was the publisher and punster Bennett Cerf, who delighted the audience with his introduction of the evening's author-speakers Rex Stout, Helen MacInnes, and Margaret Lee Runbeck; and Princess Zophia Sapieha. A highlight of that event was WNBA past president Alice E. Klutas' presentation of the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award to Irita Van Doren for "dramatizing books to the masses." Despite that gala celebration, America's entry into World War II dominated the night. In honor of the WNBA's twenty-fifth anniversary, publishers had donated twenty-five books to the guests who, in turn, contributed most of them to the Victory Book Campaign, which collected books for American soldiers. That night members of the WNBA contributed "enough money to buy one \$25.00 War Bond and two \$5.00 books of War Stamps."