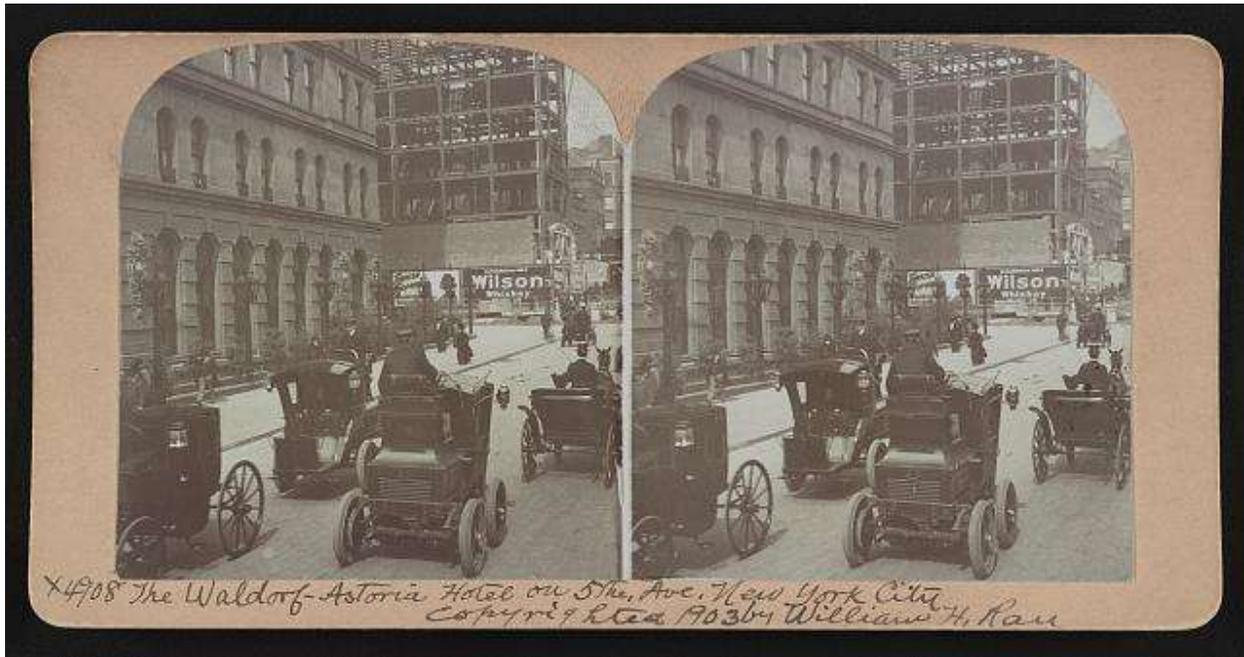


IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress

Iowans gathered at the famed Waldorf Astoria in New York City in 1906

Women Not Welcome

Early in 1906 a group of former Iowa residents living in New York City decided to form a club they named the Iowa Society of New York. It was described by the *Des Moines Register* as “a little Iowa oasis in the desert of the great metropolis.” Club members included insurance executives, railroad presidents and “plain millionaires,” as well as politicians, military and newspapermen.

The founders made it clear that women were not welcome as members, something that angered some of the female transplants who threatened to form their own club. And when someone reminded the male organizers that the very glamorous actress and singer, Lillian Russell, was a former Iowan living in New York City, the men joked they might reconsider their ban of women. But they didn't.

As plans developed for the first annual meeting to be held in April, organizers expected as many as 200 members for a lavish dinner affair. Iowa's congressmen and several ex-governors would attend. The subject of women came up again and there was discussion about allowing women to “sit in boxes and watch the men eat” during the gala.

On April 28 the first annual meeting of the Iowa Society of New York was held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The dining room was filled with orchids. Speakers delighted the crowd with Iowa quips and stories. One reminded the group of the state's reputation as a leader in

education thanks to the founders who were avid “advocates of the highest education.” Another boasted that every 40 acres of land in Iowa could support an entire family.

One politician said that Iowa was remarkable for many reasons, including having the “worst weather to be found in the country.” He regaled diners with a humorous anecdote. “I stood in a street in San Francisco when the thermometer stood at 70 degrees. My uncle pointed to a mountain 28 miles away and assured me that it was down to zero at the mountain top.” The storyteller replied, “That’s nothing, you can stand still in Iowa for 28 minutes and get more change than that.”

There was a lively discussion about the accurate pronunciation of Iowa. It was generally agreed that ‘Ioway’ was favored. A congressman reminded the group that Iowans considered themselves rich if they could “put a little money in the bank” every year after they paid their debts. A renowned preacher assured listeners that “it takes less pine lumber to build a ladder to heaven from the hills of western Iowa than from any other part of the earth.”

It’s unclear if women were actually allowed to come to watch the men eat, but some of the speakers mentioned the state’s women. One gave a talk titled “Iowa’s Best Product: the Iowa Woman.” And another congressman boasted that none of the other states surpassed Iowa in “recognizing the status of the wife, in regard to the control of her property, her children, and so on.”

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