

GRIZZY'S LARK AND A LEGEND

*Why Griswold Lorillard did not
introduce the dinner jacket*

*How two words in Town Topics
were misinterpreted*

*Written for the Tuxedo Park Library
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October, 1988*

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When we seek the origin of the dinner jacket - or *Tuxedo* as it is now known - we constantly come across a story about its introduction to this ~~country~~^{country} by Griswold Lorillard ¹ at the first Tuxedo Autumn Ball in 1886.

The trouble with this story ² is that it is based entirely on a quotation from a society journal called *Town Topics* ³. According to an October 1886 issue of the journal, *young Griswold Lorillard appeared (at the Ball) in a tailless dress coat, and waistcoat of scarlet satin, looking for all the world like a royal footman. There were several others of the abbreviated coats worn, which suggested to the onlookers that the boys ought to have been put in straight-jackets long ago.*

Taken literally, this quotation seems quite plausible but, unfortunately, it has been misinterpreted. A *tailless dress coat* has been taken to mean a dinner jacket and, as a result, we have a story which is hard to believe, Griswold, or Grizzly as his friends called him, may very well have worn a tailless dress coat as a lark but this does not mean that he introduced the dinner jacket. Such an assumption is wrong for several reasons.

First of all, Grizzly's tailless dress coat was much too short to be a dinner jacket. A dress coat, ⁴ which is a tailor's term for an evening tail coat, is cut above the waist, open in front, and tight fitting. A dinner jacket, ⁵ on the other hand, is cut well below the waist, buttons in front, and fits more loosely. Grizzly's dress coat - without its tails - was so short that it resembled a mess jacket, ⁶ and it is no wonder that *Town Topics* thought he looked *for all the world like a royal footman.*

Secondly, Grizzy would have been far too young to introduce a new fashion to his elders at the Ball. He was only 22 and the second son of Pierre Lorillard, distinguished founder of Tuxedo Park. His older brother, Pierre Lorillard, Jr., was one of the governors of the Tuxedo Club. The other governors were all prominent New Yorkers, while the members of the Club and their guests were for the most part leading members of New York Society. It is hard to imagine, therefore, a young man introducing a new fashion to such a sophisticated gathering.

Finally, a formal ball would not have been the right occasion to introduce what was then an informal dinner fashion. We should remember that the dinner jacket, when it was first adopted, was worn only at informal dinner parties ⁷ and it was not considered, as it is now, formal evening dress. If, therefore, Grizzy had been able to introduce the dinner jacket, he probably would have done so at a dinner party and not at a ball.

The Ball did, however, offer Griswold and his friends an opportunity to play a prank, inspired perhaps by the dinner jackets which his elders had recently adopted. Griswold loved clothes, and as he had two dress coats which were made by his father's tailor ⁸ in London, he probably took the tails off one of them. This prank must have distressed his parents very much and it is not surprising that Town Topics thought *the boys ought to have been put in straight jackets long ago*.

It should be apparent from this analysis that Griswold's lark has nothing to do with the dinner jacket and that we have to look elsewhere for its origin. Fortunately, there is a reliable, although little known, source of information. Some sixty years ago, Grenville Kane, last founder of the Tuxedo Club left alive, revealed to this writer that it was James Brown Potter, ⁹ one of Tuxedo's first residents, who, after staying with the Prince of Wales at Sandringham in the summer of 1886, brought back the new fashion to Tuxedo and introduced it to the members of

the club.

It may be sad for some to realize that Grizzly was not the one responsible for this new fashion but it should be a consolation for them to remember that his lark will always be a legend.

Footnotes

1. Nathaniel Griswold Lorillard ^{was} the fourth and youngest child of Pierre and Emily Taylor Lorillard and was named for his great grandfather Nathaniel Griwsold. He died in 1889, three years after the Ball, when he was only 25.
2. The story about Griswold first appeared in the Tuxedo Club membership book for 1936. As they believed it to be authentic, it was quoted by Cleveland Amory in *The Last Resorts* in 1948, by George M. Rushmore in *The World With A Fence Around It* in 1957, and by countless of other writers.
3. Town Topics began in 1879 as *Andrew's American Queen, a magazine of art, literature, music, and society*. In 1885, it was bought by E.D. Mann who renamed it Town Topics and launched it on a career of scandalmongering. After many vicissitudes, it expired in the depression of 1931.
4. In 1880 there were three coats which a well dressed man had to have in his wardrobe; a morning coat which was a tail coat with the front cut away, a frock coat which was a long skirted coat not cut away in the front, and a dress coat which was a swallow tailed coat for evening wear.
5. The dinner jacket was introduced in England by Lord Dupplin in the early 1880's and adopted by the Prince of Wales. It was first called a Homburg jacket, then in 1888 a dress lounge, and in 1896 a dinner jacket. In this country at the turn of the century it became known as a *Tuxedo*.
6. A mess jacket is a short military coat cut above the waist which is worn by officers when dining at mess.
7. The dinner jacket was adopted by the Prince of Wales in the place of the dress coat for informal dinner parties because it was more comfortable and convenient to wear. The dress coat, however, continued to be worn on both sides of the Atlantic at formal dinners and dances.

8. When Pierre Lorillard won the English Derby in 1881, he introduced Griswold, who was only 17, to his London tailor, Henry Poole & Co. Surprisingly, Poole still has a record of Griswold's purchases. His first order in 1881 consisted of several lounge suits, a riding jacket, a frock coat, and a hunt dress coat in the colors of the Queen's County Gill Hunt. In 1882 he ordered more lounge suits, a scarlet hunt coat and his first dress coat, and in 1883 his second dress coat and a double breasted overcoat. His last order, in 1886, the year of the ball, was for a driving cape.
9. See *The Prince and Mrs. Potter*: Why the dinner jacket is called a Tuxedo: Grenville Kane's account as told to J. Earle Stevens, Jr. in 1929, written with footnotes for the Tuxedo Park Library.

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Tuxedo, October 1988