

BY ROBERT KLARA
PHOTOS BY HOWARD EARL SIMMONS

There's No Place Like A Name

Live here, and you're not just a number



The Palais Royal

Addresses, for most of us who don't live on Park or Madison Avenue, are usually not something to boast about.

How many pains have been taken to install some personality with potted plants or lobby carpeting, most apartment buildings nowadays are known by little more than a number—which may mean all the difference in the world to the mail carrier, but doesn't do very much to set out a cozy,

recognizable welcome mat for tenants and their guests.

The builders of apartment houses at the turn of the century must have known that ponderous structures of brick and mortar would be a tough sell as homes for New Yorkers who considered themselves respectable. Europeans had been living in apartment buildings for years, but Americans were unwilling to take up with this aspect of European flair. Common walls and hallways were considered inconsistent with "family values," and so in an attempt to give apartment houses more of the flavor of home, many builders added kitchens, closets, parlors—and names.

Today, many of those buildings survive in familiarity, perhaps even envy: The Ansonia on 73d and Broadway, The Gramercy off the park of the same name and The Osborne at 205 W. 57th St. Others are lesser known, like

The Loyal on 161st and Riverside Drive, The Enid at 104 W. 96th and The Primrose at 551 W. 174th.

Many names borrowed from the classics, such as The Kenilworth, at 75th St. on Central Park West, and The Monte Cristo, which once stood on 123d St. and Seventh Ave., or nodded directly to men of letters: The Shakespeare, at 151 W. 123d, The Washington Irving, on W. 151st St. at Broadway, and The Victor Hugo, at 200 W. 114th.

Others took on the trappings of British society with names like The Lancaster, at 936 West End Ave., and The Chatsworth, on 72d St. and Riverside Drive. A respectable pile erected at 51st St. and Broadway in the late 1870s was called The Albany, after the English manor of the same name, which, after being converted to multiple dwellings in 1803, housed Lord Byron himself. The Albany has long

since fallen to the wrecker's ball, and New York would not finally build a Byron until the 1960s, on E. 32d St.

Inevitably, the multiple new names prompted complaints. In 1894, Harper's Weekly barked: "This naming of apartment houses is a custom we have to a very great extent borrowed from the English, and, as is the case with most borrowed things, we would be better off without it."

That maxim was certainly not lost on some buildings, for, in 1910, one could have come home to dinner at places with names like The Lulu and The Mortimer (which have not survived) and, at 323 W. 83d St., The Savage (which has).

But for these, building names were treasured tokens of individuality, which could be readily dropped in conversation; a reassuring sign of social advancement in the form of letters chiseled into a lintel or painted on a transom window. They catered to occupants' dreams of sophisticated living: The Imperial Court, at 307 W. 79th St., The Majestic, at 680-684 Saint Nicholas Ave., and The Palais Royal, at 113th St. and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd.—which still boasts a yawning courtyard. The also recognized a pioneering spirit—even if that pioneering was taking them only a few blocks uptown.

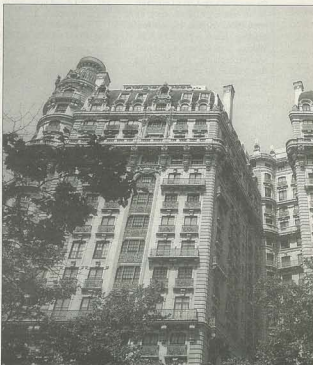
In 1877, Edward Clark, owner of the Singer Sewing Machines Co., bought 2 acres of land on 72d St. bordering the west side of Central Park. When New York learned that he planned to build an apartment house a full 30 blocks north of what was then considered the uppermost reaches of the city, the building



The Iroquois Hotel



THE DAKOTA at 72d St. and Central Park West



THE ANSONIA in all its ornateness dominates the Upper West Side

was touted as "Clark's Folly." A friend of Clark's is said to have quipped that he might as well be building in the Dakota Territory, and Clark looked no further for a name. The Dakota was fully rented before it opened in October 1884, and as the West Side population exploded, it started a naming trend that read like a grade-school geography textbook. By 1906, the upper West Side and points north boasted of two Alabamas (550 Riverside Drive, and Lenox Ave. at 125th St.), two Colorados (76 W. 82d and 234 Central Park West), a Montana (35 Mount Morris Park West), an Illinois (17 W. 113th), and an Iowa (133 W. 104th).

For those who preferred names closer to Gotham, rooms were ready to let at The Michigan (a twin of the Illinois), and the Ohio and Indiana (both on W. 79th St.). Alas, we have lost one Alabama and Colorado, the Ohio, too, but added another Montana to the roster in 1984, on Broadway and 87th St.

The first inhabitants of New York were not forgotten in the naming game, either. In 1902, a modest apartment hotel known as The Puritan opened on W. 44th St. Puritan manager Frank Case soon decided that the name was not exactly in keeping with his idea of cosmopolitan living. In search of a better one, Case took a walk one afternoon a few blocks to the New York Public Library, where he

continued on next page



skyline at 73d St. and Broadway.

NEXT WEEK
IN N.Y. LIVE

SEX SURVEY RESULTS

Do you *make a lot of long distance calls*?

Do you *spend \$40 a month or more*?

Do you *call one U.S. area code a lot*?

Do you *want to save 25% off those calls*?

Do you *want to save 15% off the others*?

Do you *want to save all day, all night*?

Do you *have a phone handy*?

Why don't you call **1 800 426-4752** ext. 3313?

Now there's a way to save off AIR&T's basic rates, with no monthly fee. Save off direct-dialed, AIR&T Long Distance calls to anywhere in the U.S.* Real savings made simple. Just another part of **The i Plan**.

*AIR&T Simple Savings™ cannot be combined with domestic savings options. Minimum usage requirement. Subject to billing availability. Certain exclusions apply. Call for details.



© 1995 AIR&T

There's No Place Like A Name

continued from previous page

declared to the librarians he would rename his hotel after "the first and strongest people in this neighborhood." And so, years before Harold Ross and the Round Table would make it famous, the Puritan became The Algonquin.

The little apartment hotel on 44th St. may also have rekindled some spirits of tribal rivalry: In 1903, the Iroquois Hotel, at 59 W. 44 St., opened for business two doors away, while the rest of the League was well represented uptown at the Onondaga, on 152d St. and Riverside Drive, The Seneca, on E. 84th St., and The Seminole, at 2020 Broadway, all of which stand today. And, in 1907, The Hendrick Hudson opened its doors complete with a barbershop, roof garden and cafe, at 110th St.

New York City has a rich legacy of fanciful names assigned to its dwelling places by builders.

and (where else?) Riverside Drive. While Upper West Side names often reflected a kind of bohemian playfulness, most East Side monikers were couched in smugness and sophistication. The city's wealthiest families had congregated on Fifth Ave. since the early 1800s, and as the Vanderbilts, Whitneys and Huntingtons built their mansions farther up the avenue in the decades that followed, socially conscious apartment-hunters kept their noses turned up and east.

There was The Wellington, at 92d and Madison Ave. — weathered and tired-looking today, but respectable enough to be cited in the New York World's selective 1905 directory of apartment houses; The Mayfair, one of the first duplex apartment houses in the city, at 471 Park Ave., since replaced by a white-brick 13-story structure that stands today next to the Ritz Tower at E. 58th St.; and The Hoffman Arms, at 640 Madison Ave., considered one of the premiere East Side dwellings when erected in 1884. The Hoffman was demolished in the early 1930s.

But if ever a name was intended to capture the spirit of a building, the one given to four stories of flats on the upper East Side was a *coup de grace*. In 1882, a clothier by the name of Hyman Sarner decided to erect an apartment building on his property at E. 83d St. Unfortunately, Sarner's property fell



The Shakespeare



The Imperial Court



The Algonquin Hotel

short of a frontage on Lexington Ave. by a strip of land 5 feet wide and 104 feet in length.

Sarner determined that the narrow parcel was owned by Joseph Richardson, and offered Richardson \$1,000 for the deed. Richardson demurred, claiming the land was worth at least \$5,000. Refusing to pay that

much, Sarner went ahead in building the apartments on his plot, where he directed the architect to incorporate huge picture windows overlooking Lexington. Infuriated, Richardson declared he too would build an apartment house on his property, and within a year the narrowest multiple dwelling

on record was completed. It not only blocked out Sarner's picture windows but boasted Richardson as a tenant. Until his death in 1897, Richardson would live cramped but triumphant within the since demolished "Spite House." ■

(Robert Klara is a freelancer.)



THE SEMINOLE gracefully turns the corner at 69th St. and Broadway.