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1931, 1941, 1951 ... 2011, 2021: The Waldorf at 90

By James Barron

Impressions: 43,264,806

It's Monday. We'll look at what Hurricane Ida told climate experts and urban planners in New York about infrastructure that wasn't built for torrential rain. We'll also say happy birthday to the Waldorf Astoria as it turns 90.



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The Waldorf Astoria Hotel hired Hugh Weir as a trainee in the banquet department in 1958, when he was in his 20s. He rose through the ranks and was the director of events — the senior banquet manager — when he retired in 1994.

He worked there for slightly less than a third of his life.

That was also slightly less than a third of his life, because he and the Waldorf are almost the same age.

The hotel is six months older. It opened 90 years ago this week, on Oct. 1, 1931 — a few months after an even taller icon, the Empire State Building.

The ballrooms and suites where presidents, princes and princesses partied are off limits to all but construction workers at the moment. The Waldorf closed in February 2017 for renovations. It is expected to reopen in 2023 with fewer hotel rooms and new apartments — condominiums starting at \$1.8 million.

The Waldorf always had long-term tenants, but they were renters. From the beginning, the Waldorf Towers, reached through an entrance separate from the hotel's, was home to residents like former President Herbert Hoover, the songwriter Cole Porter and the gossip columnist Elsa Maxwell. She brought in luminaries for parties like the April in Paris Ball. It was neither held in Paris nor in April: It was a social-calendar fixture of the fall.

The Waldorf's long history also includes eggs Benedict and Waldorf salads, both created there. Andrew Miller — the chief executive of the Dajia US, the new name for the remnants of the Chinese insurer Anbang, which added the Waldorf to its portfolio of properties for \$1.95 billion in 2014 — said the Waldorf was perhaps the only hotel that had not only archives but an archivist.

What's in the archives? Items like Frank Sinatra's lease. Sinatra paid \$1 million a year in the 1970s for a six-room apartment, "which he wanted," Miller said, "specifically because it had been Cole Porter's apartment."

As if the Waldorf does not have enough history, it is celebrating its 90th by looking for more. It is running an oral history project called Waldorf Stories that will preserve the

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memories people submit. The hotel will choose a winner for a weekend stay when it reopens.



Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

Weir (pictured above, in his Manhattan apartment) has more Waldorf memories than most. He met his wife Chaquet at the Waldorf — she also worked there — but they had their wedding reception in the Persian Room at the Plaza. “I wanted it there because my wife and I used to date there,” he said. Also, he knew the bandleader. And he knew Jerry Kravat, the pianist there at the time. Kravat was later the bandleader at the Waldorf for New Year’s Eve broadcasts after Guy Lombardo’s death in 1977.

When the Waldorf opened, Hoover hailed it with a speech from the White House. And, according to “New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars,” the owners probably figured no hotel could outdo what they had built. The Waldorf opened as the largest, tallest and most expensive hotel in history.

“Surely,” the three authors wrote, “they remembered that the contract to go ahead with the \$42 million project had been signed on the day the stock market crashed, Oct. 29, 1929.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/27/nyregion/safeguarding-the-city-against-extreme-weather.html>