

THE SOCIAL REGISTER

by

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There are all sorts of directories in America, but the most exclusive, without doubt, is the Social Register. It's the closest thing to Burke's Peerage we have in this country, or the closest thing to Tiffany's mailing list in print. Of course we have no titled aristocracy in America, but we do have an aristocracy of family and wealth. The founders of the Social Register, Louis Keller and Bertha Eastmond of Summit, N. J., took it upon themselves back in 1887 to identify that aristocracy. Their first Register was 84 pages long with only 881 names. But that list was compiled at a time when all sorts of upstarts were making their way up the social ladder. So for a long time, it was quite a matter of social prestige among the newly arrived whether you got into the Register or not. Today, nobody really cares. Or so we suppose.

Getting listed is an involved process. First, you must be proposed by a friend

who's already in the Register. Then you are sent an application and asked to have three or four other listees write letters to the Social Register Association in New York. When these have been carefully reviewed, they are dispatched by registered mail to an unidentified advisor in the city where the applicant resides. This advisor is bound to secrecy and known only to the Association. If he -- or she -- approves the credentials, the letters are sent back to the Association, also by registered mail, and marked OK. Then an entry blank is sent to the applicant. Naturally, there are some people who don't want to be listed. John Hay Whitney, for example, insisted that his name be removed because he considered the Register a "travesty on democracy."

The 1978 Register has 1272 pages with about a quarter of a million listings and sells to subscribers for \$35. Since the listees are also subscribers, that makes the Register something of a best-seller on publication. Possibly that is what motivated Malcolm S. Forbes of Forbes Magazine to buy a controlling interest in the Association a few years ago. He proceeded to simplify the operation, discontinuing all of the separate city editions (New York, Boston, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Baltimore, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Dayton, and Buffalo), and bringing them all together in one fat volume in 1977. The price of the one volume is a lot less than the \$250 previously charged for all of the separate city editions. So as a business, the Social Register is potentially quite profitable. It sells a unique combination of prestige, snob appeal, and convenience to a lot of people -- from Palm Beach to Nob Hill -- who want all three at a reasonable price.

The big question, of course, is who's in and who's not. There are 43 du Ponts, 25 Rockefellers, 68 Biddles, 25 Auchinclosses, 45 Cabots, 17 Cadwaladers, 15 Freylinghusens, and 6 Vanderbilts. These are the easily recognizable rich. But

there are also 10 pages of Smiths, 6 pages of Browns, 5 pages of Joneses, but one lone Cohen. The Jewish names in the Register are, for the most part, associated with investment banking. Of course, Henry and Nancy are in. There are some blacks: Senator Brooke, for one, is in. But if the Register is predominantly WASP, it is because most of the old rich families are descended from America's original WASP settlers. That is history, not prejudice. After all, a lot of WASPS don't make it either. For example, Cyrus Vance is in, but Bert Lance is not. Neither are the Texas Hunts, Stewart Mott, Johnny Carson, or Truman Canote.

Jackie Onassis, of course, is in, and she has been for many years, but her sister Princess Lee Radziwill is not. Phyllis Schlafly is in, but Betty Friedan is not, not because of politics, but because the Schlaflys are an old prominent family in Illinois. Ethel Kennedy is listed, but mother-in-law Rose Kennedy is not. Julie Eisenhower is in, but Tricia Cox is not. Lynda Robb is listed, but sister Luci Nugent is not. Both the Gerald Fords and Richard Nixons are in because the Register customarily lists all living Presidents and all living wives of dead Presidents. There are 88 Carter listings, but only one refers to the Presidential family. The President is listed as James, not Jimmy. Brother Billy, Miss Lillian and the rest are left out. But they can console themselves, for not even Frank Sinatra is in, nor is Bob Hope, Liberace, or John Wayne.

Very few "show biz" celebrities have ever made the Register. In fact, Elizabeth Taylor's marriage to John Warner, who was formerly married to Catherine Mellon of the Pittsburgh banking family, prompted the Register to drop him. However, if he is ever elected Senator, he will probably be reinstated since the Register lists all U.S. Senators. Politically, the Register is neutral. It lists 35 Roosevelts as well as 28 Tafts. Conservative William F. Buckley, Jr., is listed along with liberal former New York Mayor John V. Lindsay. Senator Barry

Goldwater is in, but former Governor Ronald Reagan is not. If that disappoints you, take heart, for neither Nieman nor Marcus are in.

The Russian nobility is represented by Prince Serge Belosselsky-Belozersky, Princess Alexis Obolensky, and a smattering of others with exotic handles. But our television royalty is not even represented: no Walter Cronkite, or John Chancellor, or David Brinkley. Don't even bother to look up Barbara Walters! Nor does the pulpit fare any better: no Billy Graham, or Norman Vincent Peale. And there is no Katherine Hepburn, although she played the typical Registerite in "The Philadelphia Story."

Malcolm S. Forbes, of course, is in. He was in before he bought into the Association. He went to Princeton and belongs to the New York Yacht Club, Links, Racquet and Tennis Club, and the Essex Hunt Club. He is a bona fide Registerite, and that is probably why the Association sold him the stock. He understands the Register for what it is: a high-class address book that maintains its social glamour and mystique more by who it keeps out than by who it lets in. Is that a way to run a business? You bet it is!