

## Jack Jaffin, Mild-Mannered Dentist by day...

*But in 1941, he hung out with movie stars, royalty, literary greats, leaders of the Free World and some presumed Nazi sympathizers. What was his story? A photo in an old family album raises intriguing questions.*

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When I recently found the 1941 pic at right in a box of old family photos, the names written on the back in my grandmother Matilda's careful handwriting (inset at bottom) threw me a curve. What were these famous people of their day doing in my grandmother's family photo album? Was this a one-off occasion of some kind? Or more? Family who could have told me have all passed. I turned to Google. I didn't get all the answers I wanted. But I hit on troves of period celebrity trivia, World War II-era history and royal family intrigue, all weaving through the one person in the photo I had never heard of. A man named Jack Jaffin (far right in the photo.) Jaffin was my mother's maiden name. But who was *this* guy?



Mrs. Alfred Smith  
Duke of Windsor  
Gov. Alfred Smith  
Jack Jaffin

An ancestry search revealed that Dr. John Jay (a.k.a. "Jack") Jaffin was the first cousin of my maternal grandfather, Matilda's husband, although Jack was closer in age to my mother's generation. I learned that Jack had been a dentist with an office in the Empire State Building. Among his patients were celebrities representing politics and the arts, sports and royalty. Newspaper accounts revealed that Jack socialized with some of his famous clientele as well, and names were named. Such was the stuff readers liked to read, and apparently, patient confidentiality was not yet a thing.

I grew up in working class circumstances a 45-minute drive from Manhattan. My mother, to her last days, was a great teller of family stories, and her life, when young, had been much more glamorous and well-heeled than her children's ever were. It's odd that she never brought up Jack. What I since learned about his life

gave me a lot to think about.

Let's get the celebrity roll call done first. In the center of the photo above we have the man best known as the Duke of Windsor, Britain's Edward VIII, who famously abdicated the throne to marry the famously unsuitable but undeniably intriguing Wallis Simpson, a twice-divorced American socialite.

We see the Duke's elbows in the grasp of the cigar-chomping New York Governor Alfred E. Smith on the right (and a little behind), and a beaming Mrs. Smith on the left. We know "Al" Smith as a 4-term Republican governor of his state who also famously lost a presidential race to Dem Herbert Hoover. At the far right in the natty pin-stripes is Jack.

Among Jack's documented patients/associates were:

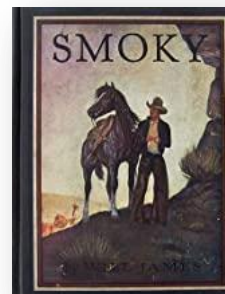
New York Governor Al Smith, seen in the photo, actor Cary Grant and boxer Jack Dempsey. There was Frederick Loewe of Broadway fame (of the Lerner and Loewe partnership that gave us the enduring music of *Brigadoon*, *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*) and also British-born Queen Marie of Rumania. (Rumania was spelled with a "u" until the 1970's.)

Marie's story provided an interesting twist to this roster. She was the first cousin of Britain's King George V, whose proposal of marriage she had once turned down. She paired off instead with a Rumanian royal, thus improving the diversity of the gene pool from which her children would be born. Her rejected suitor George V went on to father (*Ding! Ding!*) none other than Edward VIII, seen in the photo with Jack.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was also, on occasion, a patient of Jack's. About FDR there will be more to say in a little bit.

The name of another one of Jack's associates, Newberry Award-winning children's book author Will James, tugged at my heart when I saw it. His book *Smoky*, about an indomitable cowpony of the old west, was one I cherished as a child. Mine was a used copy given to me by my grandmother Matilda. Will James was the pen name for the Canadian-born Ernest Dufault who was not only a self-taught writer and artist, but a legit, down and dirty working cowboy of the American West himself – no matter that he warn't no son of the pioneers.

When I learned about this connection I was stricken with nostalgia and went hunting for an edition of *Smoky* that featured a painting by James on the cover, like the one I once had. (Right) I found one on a collectibles auction site that had an image of an inscription by the author that (*Ding! Ding!*) went as follows: "To Jack Jaffin. Sincerely as Hell," and under his signature James had sketched a cocktail glass with the words "First



one today.” Draw your own conclusions. Sadly, the book had been sold, and it went for a sum I wasn’t equipped to pay anyway. I couldn’t recall if the one my grandmother gave me had been a signed copy.

Jack also cared for the teeth of author and literary critic William McFee, famous for chomping on the egos of the writers whose books he reviewed -- even those writers whose work he actually somewhat liked. For a sense of his style, here’s an assessment he made of Zelda Fitzgerald’s novel *Save Me the Waltz* for the *New York Sun*:

*"In this book, with all its crudity of conception, its ruthless purloinings of technical tricks and its pathetic striving after philosophic profundity, there is the promise of a new and vigorous personality in fiction."*

What was going on with Edward VIII in 1941, when this photo of Jack was taken? How did Jack become involved? Here are some knowns I strung together via a bit of research:

We know of course that the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of that year brought the U.S. barreling into World War II, ending the much-debated question of whether or not it was a good idea, and we know that Edward and wife Wallis were already regarded as Nazi sympathizers. We know that they paid a visit to New York City that year, and that President Franklin Roosevelt had been keeping a close eye on them. Accounts abound



concerning the Windsors’ congenial feelings toward Nazis. The uncredited photo I found (left) of Wallis, Edward and the Fuhrer speaks for *something* going on, although it’s not perfectly clear what. Some believed that Nazi Germany had reason to think of Edward as an

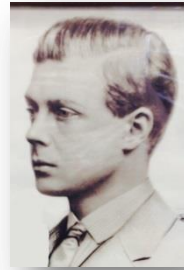
ally. Various sources claim to know for a fact that Wallis had an affair with Germany’s Foreign Minister to Great Britain (1938-1945), Joachim von Ribbentrop. U.S. intelligence reportedly advised Roosevelt that Wallis was passing notes to von Ribbintrop concerning the Windsors’ itineraries when they traveled about on the social celebrity circuit.<sup>i</sup> There was once even talk in intelligence circles (some accounts claim) of a Nazi plot to kidnap the Duke and offer him restoration to the throne once the Germans finished conquering England.

How complicit then, was Edward? Some accounts paint him as

a vacuous sort -- intellectually dim and racially bigoted. In a letter to a friend written while he in Australia, a younger Edward referred to the indigenous people there as “monkeys” and “the most revolting form of creatures I’ve ever seen.” Wow.

It’s fair to say that racism was the order of the day in Edward’s England. (Not that Americans can point fingers.) Even if you cared to view Edward as a product of his time and culture, his revulsions and their expression were unbecoming of England’s presumptive future constitutional monarch.

However, some saw Edward as more “the unfiltered fool” than a fiend, and believed him to be too soft of mind to engage in canny dealings with the Germans. But it did seem that the cannier Wallis had put quite a ring in Edward’s nose, well before he put one on her finger.



Whatever he turned out to be, in his youth Edward was once among the most press-worthy celebs of his time. The media cast him as a dashing young bachelor and fashion influencer of his day. For such acclaim you needn’t have genius or character. (Portrait of Edward as a young man, above.)<sup>ii</sup>

What, I wondered, did Jack Jaffin make of Edward and Wallis? Here’s more relating to that question:

Cousin Jack married twice. Of his first wife Frances I know nothing. Not even her maiden name. His second wife was Addie Merriman, about whom I learned only a little. She was an actress who went by the stage name Anne Garland, and her lineage reportedly tracked back to pre-Revolution, white European families who grew the original American colonies.<sup>iii</sup> Let’s imagine her, in Jack’s day, as an attractive young WASP. Notably, Jack was not a WASP.

Jack was the son of Jewish immigrants, and you would probably consider him Jewish at least in that respect. But even Jews don’t agree about what defines Jewishness. Is it solely about religion? For the non-religious, is it some lingering bundle of ethnic characteristics and values? Does Jewishness, if not embraced, simply melt away?

That Jack married someone who was not Jewish, so it appeared, doesn’t say much. Such pairings are as common as not in the Jaffin line. But the fact that Jack publicly walked shoulder to shoulder with the Duke of Windsor, a man whose hand congenially shook the hand of Hitler, does raise an eyebrow.

Was Jack so drawn to stepping out with celebrities that the Nazi thing didn’t bother him? At the time did he not appreciate what we now call the optics? Had he perhaps sought to step away from his heritage? This is nothing more than flimsy, mind-roving conjecture. But a lot of establishments – clubs, hotels, restaurants,

boardrooms -- still openly and legally excluded Jews in Jack's time. If you weren't feeling the religion anyway, no doubt becoming un-Jewish had its uses.<sup>iv</sup> Or was there something else going on that explained the photograph I found?

Given that President Roosevelt reportedly had intel chains set up to monitor the activities of the Windsors during their time in the U.S., how far a stretch would it be to think that FDR could have used a crack team of high-placed social hobnobbers to engage deftly with the Windsors and report back on anything that might lead to the uncovering of an active Nazi alliance? I could imagine that Jack might have been well cut out for the role of New York society eavesdropper. For grins, let's put FDR in Jack's dental chair, where he was known to occasionally sit. Could it have gone like this?

"Thack?"

"Yes, Mr. President"

"Ow."

"Almost done, Sorry."

"Wunnering if you'd do me a ferry imhortin fay-ther."

"A what, sir?"

"A fay-ther. How'd you lithe to helth me bust some Nah-thee butts."

"Nazis you say."

"Yeth."

"Love to sir. How?"

"I'd like you to go outh and spen som nithes on the thown with some very famouth Briths when they come to New York. You know, hang out with them. Lithen to what they thay about Hitler and the Germans. Get bath to me. I'll hooth you up with all the right thwell people.

"Glad to do it sir."

"Ow."

Perhaps Jack Jaffin was simply a well-situated dentist (address wise) of excellent repute and a charismatic individual who had a roster of famous patients who became friends, and famous friends who became patients. And perhaps whatever else they were didn't matter much to Jack. Who was he to discriminate? □

*(End notes below contain both some documentation and further interesting asides that I didn't want to cram into this piece.)*

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<sup>i</sup> Joachim von Ribbentrop's pedigree and capabilities were said to be held in low regard by his Nazi brethren, but it seems that they found uses for him and then didn't hesitate to throw him under the bus. In 1946, von Ribbentrop became the first of the Nuremberg defendants to be executed by hanging for his "role in starting World War II in Europe and enabling the Holocaust." A source for this and other interesting (if not



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verifiable) material herein concerning Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson was: <http://superfluae.blogspot.com/2011/05/duke-of-windsor-and-fuhrer.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> The photo of a youthful Edward is one I took of a framed portrait hanging on the wall of a second hand goods store. It was around the time the movie “The King’s Speech” came out, and I thought it was interesting. I was unable to determine who the artist was at the time and didn’t really need to know, then. If someone recognizes this work, I will gladly add attribution.

<sup>iii</sup> Thanks go to my older brother Dan for digging up the Addie Merriman story. Dan, as it turned out, vaguely recalled meeting Cousin Jack just once, when our mother brought him to Jack’s office at the Empire State Building. Dan was about 5 or 6-years old and thus not especially impressed.

<sup>iv</sup> With respect to Jews evading anti-Semitism in this time period, if such happened to be the case with Jack Jaffin, he had plenty of company. I’m reminded of the controversial *New York Times* decision to downplay coverage of the atrocities against Jews being committed in Germany prior to and through World War II. The paper then had been long in the hands of a family of Jewish publishers, and the aim was to dial down the common public perception of the *Times* as a Jewish-influenced newspaper. The thinking goes, now, that had there been better coverage sooner of the Holocaust, its end may have come sooner.

On an interesting related note, when we lived in East Montpelier, Vermont, my husband and I spent 20 years raising a family in a storied farmhouse built in the late 1700’s. (It had served as a stop for escaping slaves on the Underground Railroad and even had a secret staircase to a hidden room.) But something was always falling apart, and as we fixed things we’d regularly uncover crude repairs done by a succession of others before us. Once, when some wood siding rotted away, I found beneath the clapboards a bundle of old *New York Times* pages that had been used as makeshift insulation. Some pages were still legible.

One of them featured listings of summer cottages for rent and many contained the word “Restricted.” It meant that Jews and Blacks were not welcome. I knew this occurred in the past but had never held such an ad in my hand.

By happenstance, shortly after this, I heard a story about the man who would have been publisher of the *Times* in the period. He’d been criticized for allowing such restricted notations in ads. His defense was, it was better to be forewarned. He’d taken his family on vacation once, and was unable to stay in the place they had chosen. It was, they found on arrival, “restricted.” I wonder now if allowing restricted ads hadn’t something to do, also, with the making the paper seem less Jewish-influenced.