

Marching Along

—The Knickerbocker Greys

by Thomas Lee Jones

“What do you suppose *they’re* all dressed up for? Halloween was weeks ago!”

So said one perfectly coiffed young Manhattan matron to another as, strolling on East 68th Street, they passed some 10-year-old boys in formal military dress complete with swords and sabers.

“I think they belong to something called the Knickerbocker Greys,” answered the taller of the two. “My brother was a member years ago, but I haven’t heard much of them since I was at school.”

Most New Yorkers don’t know anything about the Knickerbocker Greys. And even those who are familiar with the name might well think of them as something that existed in the past. What were they—or more correctly—what are they?

Put simply, the Greys are an after-school activity for children aged 6 to 16, at which they are taught some of the regimens and disciplines of the armed forces and which offers them a social life outside of the classroom, as well as an opportunity to participate in a variety of field trips and other similar adventures—a kind of Junior ROTC or Scouts with, if you like, a more pronounced military bent. And in today’s world, where playing soldier is often discouraged if not forbidden outright, it is not surprising that such an organization is no longer well known.

But it has not always been so.

The Socially prominent Mrs. Edward Curtis founded the Knickerbocker Greys with some of her friends in 1881. Born Augusta

Lawler Stacey, she was a descendant of Captain Davis Bevan, who served on Washington's staff at the Battle of Brandywine. Her husband, Edward Curtis, was a physician who had served on the staff of the Union Army in the Civil War. Interestingly, he actually assisted in the autopsy of President Lincoln.

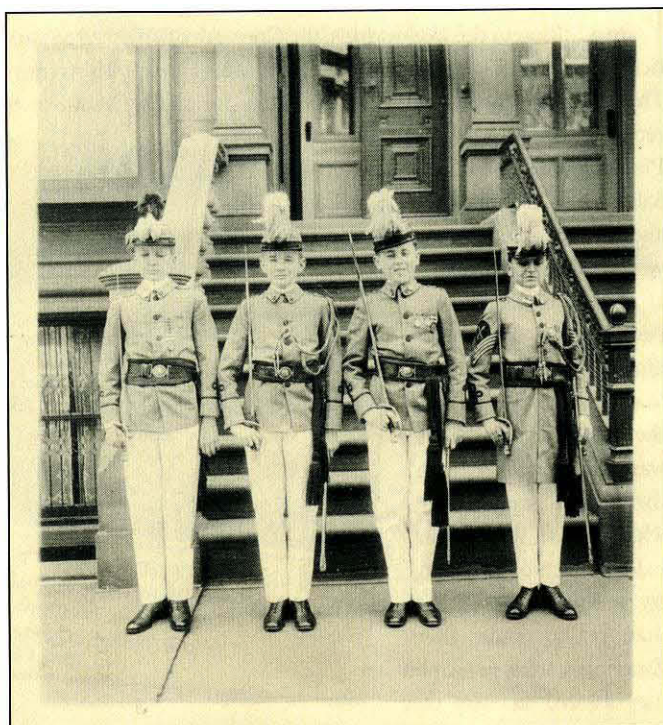
Inspired by an English model, Mrs. Curtis conceived of the Greys as something to help tame her sons and their playmates, reportedly a nearly out-of-control bunch of upper class hooligans. The object of the organization was to provide its charges with some military training, and by means of the tough love and discipline so beloved in that age, to shape their characters in a positive mode. The ladies took the name from Father Knickerbocker, mythical patron saint of New York, and from the color of the uniforms they had selected. It has been said that the double meaning of the name amused Mrs. Curtis—"knickerbockers" also being the standard jargon for the three-quarter-length pants sported by the group.

In its first year of existence the entire corps consisted of twelve boys and a drill leader, but this number was to expand rapidly. By the Greys' 50th anniversary in 1931, at around the zenith of the group's history, the corps numbered some 200 cadets and boasted a two-year waiting list for induction. In fact, it was so popular that many private schools were forced to close their athletic programs on Tuesdays and Fridays—the days many students would be going off to the Armory to report for duty. Dick Ford, a lawyer who was born in Manhattan and grew up there, was in the Greys from 1938 to 1942 while he was a student at Allen-Stevenson. He recalls that in his time there were three battalions, each composed of two or three companies and that the membership totaled a few hundred boys. "We saw the Greys as something of an athletic diversion," he says. "The school, on a corner of 78th Street, didn't have any real area set aside for sports. So twice a week there was the Greys, and they had all that drilling."

Early in the second year of the Corps' existence, Mrs. Curtis organized a board of directors for her fledgling organization; this board was mostly composed of her friends—the mothers of the members. To this day, still made up of the mothers of cadets from the present and the recent past, it is responsible for everything away from the drill floor. The drill floor is the domain of a military commandant, currently Major David Menegon, an officer in the US Army Reserve who has seen active duty in Bosnia and in Iraq.

Major Menegon grew up in Greenwich, CT, and did not know of the Greys' social pedigree when he first became involved. "Through the military I knew a great guy, Col. (ret.) Michael Hess, US Army Reserve, who was the former commandant of the group. Mike thought that this was something that might interest me. It was. I assumed that it was a kind of Manhattan version of the US Naval Sea Cadets that I had participated in when I was a boy but which wasn't 'social' at all in that sense. The Sea Cadets are a terrific organization and so are the Greys. Both teach boys and girls how to be people of character—people who have great empathy for others. That's very important to me."

F. Richards "Dick" Ford III was also initially unaware of the group's social clout. "I only discovered later just how social a thing it was. In those days, there was a secretarial service, Tappin and Tew,



Opposite page: Douglas Fairbanks Jr., age 11.

Above: Four Greys before Spring Review, April 20, 1924.

which pretty much controlled who was invited to debutante parties and that sort of thing. The women who ran Tappin and Tew used the Greys' list among others. Since I was on it, and since most of the women remembered me, I was immediately included. That was very helpful while I was growing up."

On the other hand, Mrs. Richard Bright, current President of the Board, was almost always aware of the group's very social reputation. "I grew up in New York," she says, "and went to Miss Hewitt's. When I was a young girl—in the late '50s and '60s—I was greatly influenced by my parents and what they thought. The Greys were just a part of their world. I myself thought of the boys who were members as slightly snooty. But when my own son, Murphy, was 7, a good friend of mine kept encouraging me to look into the Greys for him. As it was, my son had a big interest in military history even though my husband and I did not. He loved playing with toy soldiers and building forts with Legos. I guess he inherited that from my father, who was an avid Civil War scholar."

Today the Knickerbocker Greys meet every Tuesday afternoon during the school year from 4:45 until 5:45 in the afternoon at the 7th Regiment Armory on 68th Street and Park Avenue, where they have been meeting since 1902. The main focus of these weekly meetings is to learn traditional armed forces marching and drill routines, but the ultimate aim is for the participants to learn more than the drills themselves. The stated goal of the Greys is that in the process of this military training, youngsters will develop leadership skills: how to motivate others; how to deal with them correctly; how to command a group of peers.

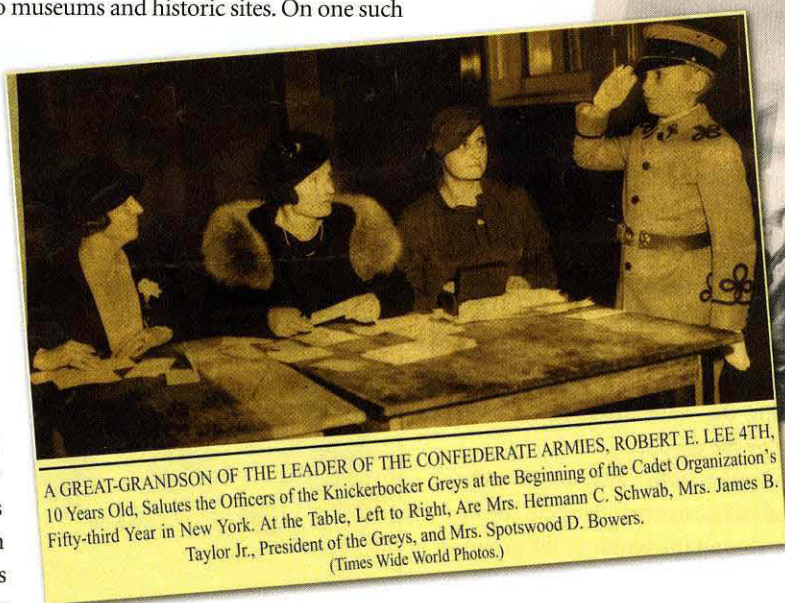
In addition to the weekly drills, the Greys are often asked to participate in patriotic ceremonies and in parades along Fifth Avenue. They also travel together to museums and historic sites. On one such recent trip, to Philadelphia, Joseph Sahid, an 18-year-old alumnus of the Greys who is currently a Junior at the University of Pennsylvania, spoke at a dinner. He paid tribute to Major Menegon and to the Greys, saying that it was his experience with them that taught him what he felt it was that made citizens of this country unique—what it was that really made them Americans, what principles they aspired to, why they are special. And he thanked both the Major and the organization for, as he put it, teaching him “how to love other people.”

Each spring the Greys travel to upstate New York for a traditional sham battle in the hills of Camp Smith opposite West Point. Here U.S. Army personnel volunteer to lead these troops in exercises while demonstrating the use of tactical vehicles and armory.

When asked about the value of this kind of training in today's world, perhaps the most interesting comments came from Peter Ames of Cambridge, MA, a member of the St. Bernard's School class of 1959 who went on to graduate from St. Paul's and Harvard (class of '67).

Mr. Ames, now a consultant to museums and other non-profit organizations around the world, says that he joined the Greys in the late '50s at the instigation of his mother, and that, overall, it was not a part of his youth which was particularly happy. “It was a bit of a pain in the butt,” he recalls, “going down to the Armory all the time. But I got so that I appreciated it—I appreciated learning about a different world.” He elaborates on this point: “The benefit I got from my experience with the Knickerbocker Greys was appreciating the team spirit required for effective military defense. It was important to me that so many in the civilian society whom I knew and looked up to recommended it. The people I respected, respected the Greys because it was not about being a bully. It was about having high values and a strong commitment to defending the country. And personally, although I still consider myself a pacifist, I know that the only time I would probably take weapons into my own hands would be to defend my family or my country.”

After some reflection he adds, “If more well-educated, gentlemanly men were involved in the military it would insure the better use of America's military might.”



A GREAT-GRANDSON OF THE LEADER OF THE CONFEDERATE ARMIES, ROBERT E. LEE 4TH, 10 Years Old, Salutes the Officers of the Knickerbocker Greys at the Beginning of the Cadet Organization's Fifty-third Year in New York. At the Table, Left to Right, Are Mrs. Hermann C. Schwab, Mrs. James B. Taylor Jr., President of the Greys, and Mrs. Spotswood D. Bowers.
(Times Wide World Photos.)

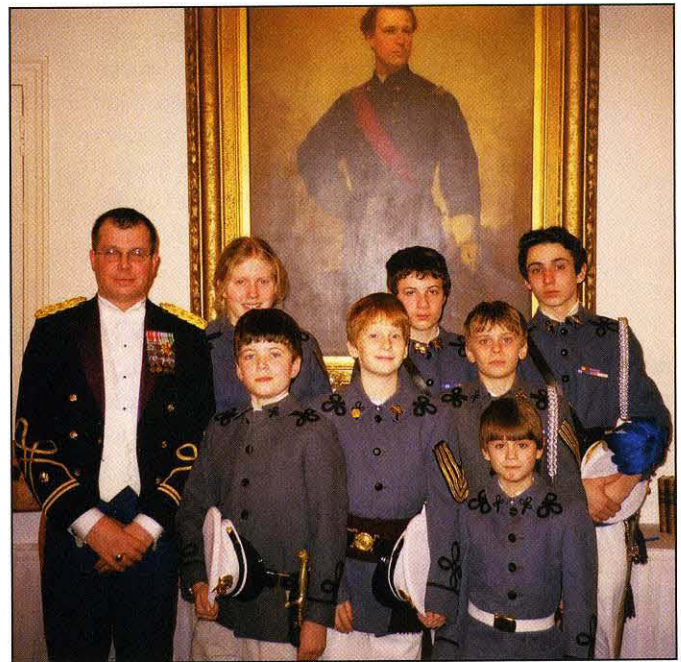


Above right: Mothers of Knickerbocker Greys on a ferry en route to Governors Island for a review in 1924.

Other alumni also have favorable things to say about their experiences with the Greys. Dick Ford, who left the Greys having achieved the rank of Major and was head of one of its battalions and a member of its crack company, looks back on his experience with the Greys as being totally good. “I don't remember any of my peers saying anything negative about the Greys,” he observes. “People always gave you a positive response when asked about them and I feel the same way.” And Stephen Houghton, a broker with Douglas-Elliman in his 30s and the current president of the Greys' alumni group, says that his involvement with them helped him to overcome some learning difficulties and also markedly improved his social life by substantially expanding his network of friends.

As the Greys march past another big milestone in their history (they are celebrating their 125th birthday in 2006), Mrs. Curtis no doubt looks down on them with great pride as well as with some surprise. The corps is now racially diverse, female cadets are included in its ranks, and public schools are represented as often as private ones. She might decide that all of this is probably a good thing. And she would certainly be amused by a story describing a very practical application of lessons learned in the Greys that appeared on “Page Six” of the *New York Post*:

“It isn't every evening in New York that a bad guy is colared at sword point, but that's what happened Monday night when a burglar, fleeing from a previous break-in, climbed from a 5-story roof into a kitchen window on East 75th Street. Public Relations guru Doug Deschert



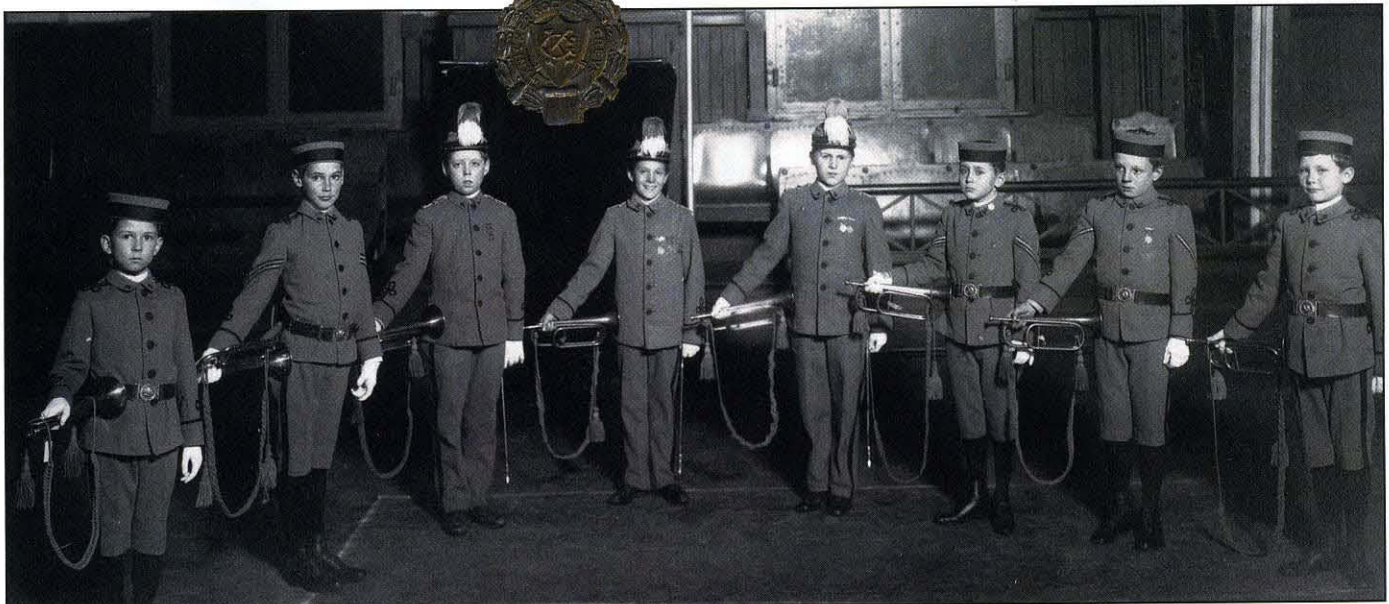
Left: Cadet Col. Edmundo Gerli Jr. and Lt. William H. Warrick, Commandant of the Knickerbocker Greys, in front of 7th Regiment before Spring Review, 1934.

Above: Commandant Maj. David Menegon with Color Guard at the Yale Club for the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution Annual Ball, January 2006.

Left: Bugle Corps and Attendance medals (l-r).

Below: The 1906 Bugle Corps.

Following page: Unknown Grey models the uniform that Warnock & Co. made from 1910 onwards (top). Church Parade down Fifth Avenue, 1935. Lt. William Warrick of the 7th Regiment and Cadet Col. Edmundo Gerli (bottom).



and his fiancée, actress Desiree Harcourt-Heaver, were watching television when they heard the intruder. Deschert—a veteran of the Knickerbocker Greys...—had his officer's saber handy, plus a less fancy sergeant's sword with which Desiree armed herself. The two swash-bucklers then confronted the 'filthy blighter,' as Deschert called him, and held him for the cops. "He's lucky I didn't run him through," said Deschert...."

Alas, Dick Ford's experience with military regalia was somewhat more embarrassing. "When I was in the Greys," he recalls, "My father suggested—or I should say insisted—that I take a course at the Katharine Gibbs secretarial school. I was going away to boarding school and he felt that it was important for me to learn shorthand and typing. But the way my schedule worked out, I had to run directly over to Katie Gibbs from the Armory. Still dressed for the Greys! At different times that meant being in different uniforms – formal or foot soldier, non-com officer or special parade dress complete with white pants and a cape. The others in my class were all 16- to 18- year-old girls and here was this 12, 14-year-old boy, all dressed up. For the first couple of months it was tough. All those Bobby Soxers and me. But, you know, ultimately it was a maturing experience because I had to learn to deal with the embarrassment. Eventually I became proud of the fact that I was different."

And so the Greys keep marching. Proud to be a little different, but keeping up with the times. 