

The Puzzle of Cousin Jack Jaffin:

*Did Franklin Roosevelt ask him to bird-dog a pair of Nazi sympathizers? Or was he just inclined to hang out with them?
Or, both.*

by Ricka McNaughton
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When I found this 1941 photo (right) in a box of family papers, and when I saw the names penciled on the back (shown in inset), one question loomed larger than others. *Who the friggity was Jack Jaffin?*

My mother's maiden name was Jaffin. The handwriting I recognized as my grandmother's. I don't recall having heard one word from anyone in the family about a relation named Jack Jaffin. There was no one left, that I knew of, who could tell me about him.

A bit of simple digging revealed that the full name of the man in the natty gangsta pinstripes at right was John Jay Jaffin, better known as "Jack," who'd been a Manhattan dentist with an office in the Empire State Building. An ancestry chart shows that he was my grandfather's first cousin but closer in age to my mother's generation. No other info accompanied the lone photo. So how did cousin Jack come to be on promenade with these newsworthy personages of that time, one of whom had highly questionable Nazi associations?

In the business of classic detecting, when faced with a central unknown, you collect all the knowns you can and keep staring at them until you start hearing "*dings*." Through a process of free associative thinking and careful logic, you might form a probable theory. Or, a dingy one. Let me unspool the historical knowns and fair assumptions I collected and what they led me to think:

To Jack's left in the photo we have the Duke of Windsor. We know that he briefly served as Britain's Edward VIII, and that he scandalously abdicated the throne to marry twice-divorced American socialite Wallis



Simpson. Thanks to the Oscar-winning film, "The King's Speech," a new generation came to appreciate the story that in its time had rocked the royal family and set tongues wagging worldwide. Edward's brother was unhappily obliged to become King George VI and struggled to overcome a severe speech impediment.

We see the Duke's elbows in the grasp of the cigar-chomping, then-New York Governor Alfred E. Smith on one side (and a little behind) and a beaming Mrs. Smith on the other. We know "Al" Smith as a 4-term Republican governor of his state, before which he famously lost a presidential race to Dem Herbert Hoover. Chances are this photo was taken on the streets of New York City.

We know that Jack, at the time I found his date of birth, would either have been 113 years-old or had an obituary somewhere that I could look up. The obituary I found listed some of Jack's better-known dental patients. There was the cigar-chomping Governor Smith (photo above), probably in need of regular tobacco stain removal. There was Cary Grant, he of the winningly ironic Hollywood smile, and also boxer Jack Dempsey, he of few teeth he could call his own. Most likely.

And there was also the British-born Queen Marie of Rumania (spelling of the time), likely possessed of the means to cross the ocean for a royal dental appointment. We know that Maria was the first cousin of Britain's King George V, whose proposal of marriage she had turned down. She paired off instead with a Rumanian royal. She gained the love of the people of her adopted homeland and the chance to bear children with normal chromosomes. Her rejected suitor George became father to throne-abdicator Edward VIII, seen in our photo of Jack. *Ding*.

We know that Jack also cared for the teeth of literary critic John McFee who needed them to chomp on the egos of the writers whose books he reviewed. Even those he liked. 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."

Zelda's name snagged my attention on two counts. I've become newly curious about the Fitzgeralds, and it just may be that Jack, like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, sought acceptance into the orbits of people with certain kinds of social status. Jack may well have done it purely for business purposes. But maybe more?

I recently came to live a ten-minute drive and several income brackets down from Minnesota's White Bear Yacht Club, situated on White Bear Lake. I drive by it several times a week. It's not an ostentatious place. It has a certain tasteful, low-key sense of exclusivity. Local historians say that native St. Paulian Scott Fitzgerald and wife Zelda once spent a riotous summer there. Scott had picked up much needed bread-and-butter work writing and producing plays for the entertainment of the summer folk who came out from the Twin Cities to enjoy the cooling lake

breezes and could afford the Club life. The members never lacked for revelry of a summer's eve. But the Fitzgeralds, allegedly, were tossed out on account of Scott's "unsuitably drunken behavior." He must have exceeded the suitably-drunk threshold.

Some believe that before his tossing, Fitzgerald had spent part of that summer setting down the bones of his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*. Even though the story was set elsewhere, the White Bear Yacht Club in that time would have been a great place to think about the theme of class envy.



You have to be curious how a dentist goes about acquiring the kind of clientele Jack Jaffin had. Did he strive for their approval or did they fall in line for his topnotch skills? He seems to have done exceedingly well for himself by means of education, hard work and reputation. But I don't imagine that highly competent dental work alone would be the key appeal to this star-studded crowd. It doesn't appear, either, that a pledge of utmost dental discretion or secrecy was the attraction.

Weaving together strands of historical fact, we know that the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 brought the U.S. barreling into World War II, ending the much discussed question of whether it was a good idea. We know from a 2011 *New York Times* story -- that recounted a 1941 *New York Times* story -- that the Duke and Duchess of Windsor paid a two-week visit to New York City in December of that year. But no exact date was given.

We know that the Duke and Wallis Simpson were openly regarded as Nazi sympathizers. We know that President Franklin Roosevelt wished to keep a close eye on their wanderings in the U.S. in case they were either communicating with Nazis imbedded here at the time or inclined to pass information back to Germany themselves. And it's known that – *ding* – Jack Jaffin served as dentist to Franklin Roosevelt.



Accounts abound concerning the extent of the Windsors' congenial feelings toward Nazis. (*Photo: Wallis, Edward and Adolph Hitler, uncredited in the online source. If you know who has rights to this image, let me know.*)

Many believe that Nazi Germany had reason to think of Edward as an ally.

Reports claim that Wallis had an affair with Germany's foreign minister from 1938-1945, Joachim von Ribbentrop, a man not even the Nazis liked but endured for one useful reason or another. U.S. intelligence had reported to Roosevelt that Ribbintrop was usefully receiving notes passed from Wallis concerning the Windsors' itineraries in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Actually, Edward had not entirely wanted to give up the throne but felt he must in order to marry Wallis and also to avoid serious political repercussions for Great Britain. In July 1940, there was, it's been claimed, a Nazi plot to kidnap the Duke and offer him restoration to the throne once the Germans finished conquering England. This was five months prior to his visit to New York. *Ding*.

Various accounts say that Edward was a vacuous sort, intellectually soft and openly bigoted. In a letter to a pre-Wallis paramour written from Australia, he spoke of the indigenous people there as "monkeys" and "the most revolting form of creatures I've ever seen." Some ruled out sophisticated collaborations with Nazis because they thought Edward would have been incapable of canny dealings with international powers. It did seem that the cannier Wallis had put quite a ring in Edward's nose, even before he put one on her finger.

One online ancestry notation said, with a question mark, that Jack Jaffin may have been adopted. That might somehow account for the generational age difference. Whether or not he identified as Jewish, Jack came into a family with at least one very long Sephardic taproot. He would be hard put not to have feelings about Hitler's efforts to wipe the earth clean of Jews. He might well be motivated to help up-end Nazi plans for world domination, especially if it meant continuing to do pretty much what he was already doing. But with a twist I'll soon explain.

We don't know what month in 1941 the photo of Jack was taken. It likely predated the December 7 bombing of Pearl Harbor because if it was taken outdoors in New York, and if it was December, the people in the photo ought to look much colder than they do.

Still, Roosevelt had cause to be concerned about the Nazis and the Windsors before the U.S. entered the war. He had intel chains set up. He could well use a crack team of high placed social hobnobbers around the globe to engage deftly with the Windsors and report what they were doing, and if possible, who they were reaching out to in their many world jaunts. I imagine FDR in Jack's dental chair:

"Thack?"

"Yes, Mr. President"

"Ow."

"Almost done, Sorry."

"Wunnering if you'd do me a very imphortin fay-ther."

"A what, sir?"

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

"Love to sir. How?"

"I'd like you to go outh and spen som nithes on the thown with some rich and famous people when they come to New York. I'll hooth you up.

"Glad to do it sir."

"Ow."

The 1941 photo my grandmother had was printed on regular photostock. It wasn't a newspaper clipping, but no doubt there were photographers at the scene sent by news agencies, whatever the occasion. The Windsors

were very bankable news. Edward had had enormous star power before the abdication. As a then-handsome young bachelor and enormous fashion icon, he was considered one of the most press-worthy celebs of that time. For this, as we know today, you needn't have genius or character.

We learned that Jack Jaffin married twice. Of his first wife Frances we know nothing. His second wife was Addie Merriman, about whom we found only the following: She was an actress who went by the stage name Anne Garland and her lineage reportedly tracked back to early Merriman settlers in the American colonies. Let's imagine her as an attractive, talented, vivacious young WASP. She performed in New Haven, Connecticut, summer stock productions, as did my mother, who studied at the Yale School of Drama. They were contemporaries, and since theater folk ran in packs, they may even have known one another before Addie married Jack. This rates a *ding* with a *donk*. Meaning, no telling what this means.

It turns out that my older brother did know Jack existed, barely, and as a little boy was taken to his Empire State Building office by our mother to meet him. And that was the sum of his acquaintance. Which raises more questions than dings.

As to whether Jack was ever on a mission to bust Nazi butts for FDR, there's more I could add of an interesting nature, but to be professional about it, the premise still falls somewhere between probable and dingy. I may have selected the dings that suited my story purposes. Which, to a stunningly greater degree these days, is the way a lot of history gets written, in the hands of those with the power to publish it.

Although, just take another look at Jack's expression in the 1941 photo. Half smile, half not. Is that not the face of a man experiencing an exhilarating social high, tempered by sober patriotic duty? □

Author note: In taking some creative license with the subjects of this piece, in no way do I wish to disrespect the memory of Jack Jaffin or his descendants, wherever they may be. Ditto for FDR. I'm in awe of what Jack's generation of the family achieved as young immigrants or the children thereof. How impossibly interesting it would have been for my older self now to have met him before he died. (Not sure I got the tenses right there.)

As for the characterizations of the Windsors, I relied on those of many others. It may be that Edward was a case of long-arrested development. Who knows how he may have finally matured in his thinking, after people stopped reporting his every move and thought. In public life, he seemed more the unfiltered fool than a fiend. I would not say as much for his friend Hitler.