

Private Clubs in America and around the World - The Reprise Edition is a funny and perceptive glimpse into the world of private clubs. Everyone with a sense of humor will thoroughly enjoy the author's blatant irreverence and sarcastic wit.

Private Clubs in America and around the World: The Reprise Edition

By Norm Spitzig

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Private Clubs in America and around the World

The Reprise Edition

A Humorous Peek
into the Wonderfully Zany World
of Private Clubs

Norm Spitzig
(aka Clive Endive Ogive IV)

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What the Readers Are Saying

“If you like the biting sarcasm of Nelson DeMille’s John Corey, the charismatic intellect of John LaCarré’s George Smiley, the irreverent wit of Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch, you will absolutely adore Norm’s Clive and Esther.”

—Anne Richardson

“Clive Endive Ogive IV (Norm Spitzig) is the Bodhisattva for the world of private clubs.”

—Arch Stokes

*“Clive’s **Private Clubs in America and around the World** has given me a lot of chuckles and some humongous belly laughs. The year I was president of our country club I purchased copies for everyone on the board of directors, all the committee chairmen and the general manager.”*

—Norm Matthew

*“**Private Clubs in America and around the World** is a gleeful parody of the stereotypical private club, with its selective membership, distaste for the hoi polloi, and zany cast of über-*

Norm Spitzig

rich oddballs with some of the silliest names you're likely to encounter outside of a P. G. Wodehouse novel. The club, Old Bunbury, is nothing short of a riotous temple to old-school capitalism and Clive Endive Ogive IV its devoted priest."

—Lavanya Karthik

*"I believe that Norm Spitzig (aka Clive Endive Ogive IV) is, without question, the most insightful writer EVER regarding the wonderful world of private clubs. **Private Clubs in America and around the World** is an absolute must-read for anyone, in ANY occupation and ANY socio-economic class who has a sense of humor."*

—Terry Gilmer

"The definitive guide to understanding one of the great traditions of all truly free societies—private clubs."

—Dave Matthews

"An edgy, searingly memorable, razor-sharp, high octane read."

—Bernice Mangostein

Private Clubs in America and around the World

“Clive (Norm) accurately captures the fanciful foibles—and, at times, the wonderful lunacy—in the private club environment. His many characters, who seem to be right out of central casting, can be found frolicking in utter abandon through the book. I KNOW these people—YOU KNOW these people! Every page is a hoot and laugh-out-loud moment.

***Private Clubs in America and around the World** is a
FANTASTIC read!”*

—Peter Kite

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Chapter VI: Esther

Without question, my all-time favorite person in the world of private clubs is a waitress named Esther. (To protect her privacy, she has asked that I not reveal her last name.) Esther is a long-time waitress—and I DO mean long-time—at one of the private clubs lucky enough to have me as a member. Esther is about 82 years old (give or take a decade), has by now had at least seven “official” retirement parties thrown on her behalf (the club just can’t seem to get rid of her), is stone deaf in one ear and reacts more slowly than a Democrat on FOX News (neither of which is particularly conducive to quality service), has the personality of Bea Arthur when she played Maude (which some would optimistically characterize as “feistily endearing”), and works whenever and wherever she wants (if you were the club manager, you wouldn’t mess with her, either). She also has a heart of gold, knows all the members’ children and grandchildren by name, and, to no one’s real surprise, can tell you at any given time exactly who at the club is having an affair with whom (thus granting her job security *in perpetuity*).

For some strange reason, Esther also likes me a lot. During my long tenure in this particular club, I have been President, Green Committee Chairman, and House Committee Chairman on multiple occasions, so Esther, rightly or wrongly, will often confide in me—far more than I want, I might add—when I am at the club. My first suggestion, of course, has always been to

have her take it up with the club manager, but her response is always the same. “Mr. Ogive,” she will say, “I’ve outlasted at least fourteen managers at this club, and it’s likely that I will survive several more. When I have an issue, I need to go straight to the top—to a member I respect and trust.” *Well, what can I say to that?*

In her honor, this chapter is a compilation of some of the very best “Esther stories” I know. Although some of these I have witnessed directly and others were told to me either by another member or one of the club managers, you should have no doubt whatsoever about their complete and utter veracity. Esther is a true legend in the world of private clubs—and any club would be VERY lucky to have her on its staff.



Although Esther will neither confirm nor deny, some members believe that Rodney Johnstone (second from left) has been secretly porking Muffy Inglequat (far right) for decades.

One day Esther was waiting on two very nice elderly ladies at the club. Not that it matters, but she wasn't even scheduled to work that day, and, as was her practice, she had just shown up right at the beginning of the lunch period—something only Esther, as previously mentioned, was able to get away with. These ladies were long-time members of the club and, as such, were well aware of Esther's, shall we say, unique character traits. Anyway, as the story goes, the ladies were the first two people in the club for lunch that particular day, and Esther, recognizing them and deciding that, because they were “acceptable” members and she had nothing better to do, she might as well take their order. Somewhere between the table and the kitchen, however, she forgot to turn the order in to the kitchen staff. After almost an hour, when the rest of the room had filled up and after nearly everyone else had been served, Esther suddenly realized her mistake and turned the order in. She then sauntered over to the table, looked directly at the two ladies, who were none too happy at this point, and calmly but resolutely announced, "I know your order is taking a long time, but don't you two worry about it. It's not your fault!" Another club service problem solved—Esther-style!

Somewhere between Esther's third and fourth (or was it her fourth and fifth?) retirements, the club had been fortunate enough to locate and hire one of the very best pastry chefs in the business. This man was absolutely fabulous. His daily fresh breads and croissants became an immediate hit with the membership. His mouthwatering tortes and pies, temptingly

displayed on the club's new pastry cart, had significantly increased dessert sales in a membership that heretofore had not shown itself so inclined. The membership, for the moment at least, was genuinely happy. All was well in the club's culinary world. And then Esther returned.

During her latest retirement, unbeknownst to almost everyone, Esther had once again radically changed her lifestyle, this time focusing on the total elimination of sweets from her personal diet. She had become a zealot about the evils of sugar, preaching fire and brimstone to anyone who even thought about having a bit of dessert after a meal. To her, the local doughnut shop was no more than a gathering of culinary heathens destined for eternal damnation.

Well, the confrontation was inevitable. As one of the other waitresses pushed the pastry cart around the room, attempting to entice the members with the latest dessert creation, Esther would follow close behind, lecturing anyone and everyone who even THOUGHT about ordering on the inherent evils of sugar. Her most-often used warning, as I recall, was "A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips." Suffice it to say that during this period, dessert sales did not exactly skyrocket. After several weeks of this, the club had no choice but to call Esther onto the carpet and coax her into entering her fourth or fifth (or was it her sixth?) retirement. Reluctantly, she agreed, indicating that she could not be comfortable working at a place that openly encouraged its clientele to wantonly partake in anything so morally reprehensible as apple pie.

Esther loved to work Sunday brunch. (Well, what I mean to say is, IF Esther weren't currently retired once again and IF she were presently in town and IF she actually decided that she had nothing better to do than show up for work that particular week, she much preferred to waitress at the club's traditional Sunday brunch.)

As I said earlier, Esther knew all the members, as well as their children and grandchildren, by name. In addition, she knew those members who were currently healthy and those who weren't feeling so well, including the specifics of their particular ailments (as well as several potential “surefire” home remedies, something that she was always eager to share with anyone who might listen). She knew which schools all the members' grandchildren attended as well what sports they played. She knew which area of the club dining room individual members preferred to be seated in and exactly what type of brunch food everyone at the table preferred. All of this information helped to make Esther a big favorite with many of those who attended Sunday brunch.

Unfortunately, Esther also knew EXACTLY who attended religious services before coming to the club for Sunday brunch and those who didn't. In Esther's mind, coming to Sunday brunch without first going to church was immediate cause for burning at the stake. Those who came directly from home, no matter how long they had known Esther or how otherwise religious they were, were greeted with an icy stare reserved for those obviously condemned to eternal fiery damnation. Getting Esther to wait on them was close to impossible. At best, Esther would offer curt, icily delivered reminders about the many

benefits of Sunday services as she sullenly poured them lukewarm coffee—if she even bothered with them at all.

To those who arrived straight from church, however, Esther was all sweetness and light. No table was too good, no service request too difficult. Piping-hot coffee was immediately available for the adults, and Esther's "special oatmeal recipe" was lovingly served to the youngsters, even though this item wasn't officially on the Sunday brunch menu. (As I am sure you have surmised by now, adherence to the club's rules and regulations was not Esther's strong suit.)

Trying to talk with Esther about changing her view on this matter was like trying to tell Vince Lombardi that losing was an acceptable lifestyle choice. It did absolutely no good. Accordingly, the dining room manager and hostess on duty, with the reluctant concurrence of the Board of Directors and House Committee, deemed it best for all concerned to allow Esther to determine exactly who she wanted in "her station" before the members arrived to avoid any potential "religious confrontations" between Esther and the Sunday brunch crowd.

In fairness to Esther, she truly didn't seem to care whether the members attended Catholic Mass, a Presbyterian sermon, a Lutheran service, or, for that matter, a Buddhist incense burning. She was very ecumenical in that regard. The only criterion that mattered to her was whether or not the members worshipped SOMEWHERE. Also, Esther truly didn't care whether those who were seated in her station (at least on Sundays) were big tippers or known curmudgeons. Again, the only criterion of relevance was whether or not the family had come directly from some sort of religious service. Within her

own rather unique standards, Esther was always as fair and moral as a newly elected judge.

I remember that most everyone at the club was glad when Esther retired (again).



After Gordon and Doris Shumway began to regularly attend Mass, the quality of service they received from Esther at Sunday brunch noticeably improved.

Esther was bizarrely superstitious. At any given moment, one might find her clutching a rabbit's foot, brandishing a cross, wearing a garlic necklace, or being in a mild state of semi-agitation because a stray black cat had been sighted on the club's premises. Esther wouldn't even consider waiting on table number 13 in either the main dining room or the mixed grill for fear of some as-yet unforeseen dire consequences. If no one stopped her, she would shred any prenumbered waitress check

that had a 66 or a 666 on it because those numbers were "clear signs of bad things to come." She crossed herself more often than a mediocre free-throw shooter in Division 2-A college basketball.

Most everyone at the club viewed Esther's superstition fetishes as just another "Estherism" and dealt with her accordingly. So when she came to my table one Thursday afternoon all teary-eyed, frantic, and surreptitiously clutching her cross, I wasn't all that surprised.

"Mr. Ogive," she sobbed, "I hate to bother you, but you know those new members who just joined the club, the Levids?"

"Yes, Esther, I do. Ed and Sylvia Levid. They own a couple of furniture stores in town. I've known them for a long time. They're real nice people. What about them?"

"I JUST WAITED ON THEM," she screamed, the rising hysteria in her voice not lost on me.

"So?" I inquired, completely befuddled. "Did something happen? Were they rude to you?" This was always a good question to ask a "worked up" Esther, because in her mind, ANYONE and EVERYONE who didn't fully understand and graciously accept all of her assorted unique personality traits were, by definition, rude.

"Not exactly," she answered. The conversation, I had noticed, was helping her to partially regain her composure. "Actually, they were sort of nice to me."

"Well then, Esther, what exactly is the problem?" I coaxed.

"It's their name, Mr. Ogive. Levid. L - E - V - I - D. DON'T YOU SEE?" The hysteria was beginning to reassert itself.

"Er, not exactly," I stalled, not having a clue what was going on. *This time Esther has really gone off the deep end.*

"Mr. Ogive," she said, now talking to me as a third-grade teacher might to a particularly obtuse student. "Don't you get it? If you rearrange the letters in "Levid," it spells 'DEVIL!' I cannot and will not wait on these people ever again." She had unconsciously tightened her grasp on the cross in her right hand and began, I think, mumbling something in Latin.

"Esther," I said, attempting my most conciliatory and understanding tone of voice, "Please try to stay calm. The Levids are really wonderful people. Even you said they were nice to you. But," I added quickly, "if you feel uncomfortable waiting on them, I'm sure the manager will make arrangements so that you won't have to ever again." *Looks to me like the Levids are going to be the winners in this deal,* I remember thinking.

"Thank you, Mr. Ogive. I appreciate your listening. But I'll tell you, I'm not taking any chances. Just be sure that someone else waits on them from now on."

"I understand completely, Esther," I said, not understanding anything at all.



Although most everyone at the club thought Ed and Sylvia Levid were fine people, Esther had grave doubts.

And then there was the time Esther took a drink order from one of the brand new members. Seems that this person had ordered a Miller Lite. After Esther returned to the bar and placed her order, the bartender scolded in a truculent tone, "Esther, you've worked here your entire life. You know we don't have Miller Lite; you know we've never had Miller Lite; and since this club happens to have several very influential members whose family owns the Budweiser empire, I doubt if we'll ever have Miller Lite." To which Esther replied, "Then why in the world did he order it?"

Esther loved to travel. When you added up the times she was either in retirement or away from the club because of one

of her ailments, phobias, or vacations, you discovered that she actually had quite a bit of time to fulfill her globe-trotting fantasies (which was absolutely fine and dandy with most of the members). Things always seemed to run better at the club when Esther was out of town—and, for some mysterious reason, even better yet when she was out of the country.

I remember one time in particular when Esther had gone to New Zealand with her church group on the "deluxe three-week, two-island tour." (When Esther was out of the country, I always made it a special point to check *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* every day to see if she had caused any international incidents.) Apparently, she had made it there and back without starting World War III, because one day not long after her triumphant return, she came over to my table so bubbly and enthused that she could barely contain herself.

"Mr. Ogive, I just had the most fantastic trip," she gushed without preamble.

"Good for you, Esther," I responded, not trying to match her enthusiasm. I had a lot of things to do that particular day, and it would be tough enough getting rid of Esther without giving her additional encouragement.

"Mr. Ogive, please listen to me," she demanded. "I've got the most fantastic idea for the club. You know how the club is always looking for new ideas, right?"

"Yes," I mumbled cautiously. It was always best not to actually agree to anything with Esther without *beaucoup* thought and research (and a couple of TUMS).

"You know how New Zealand has those primitive people called the Maoris?"

"Yes, Esther, I know a little bit about the Maori tribe," I responded. I was indeed impressed. It didn't sound like the kind of thing that would interest Esther. Still, it was Esther I was dealing with here, so I remained vigilant.

"Well, sir, I learned a lot about the Maoris when I was in New Zealand. I even got to meet some real Maori people and learn firsthand about their culture on our trip. I think the club should put on a Maori Culture-Appreciation Month. I can help out with all the details. It'll be great." She was about to burst with pride and enthusiasm.

"Esther," I said patiently, "We're a traditional family country club right here in the good old US of A. What makes you think that our members would want to celebrate the Maori culture for a whole month?"

But she hadn't even heard my question. She had, in fact, already launched into the details of her plan, as if it were a *fait accompli*. "We can, to begin with, have all the waiters and waitresses wear authentic-looking Maori dress. And we can run special Maori food on the evening menu. We'll have a new item each night. If you want, I can give some lectures on the many accomplishments of the Maori people. If everyone thinks it's a good idea, I can also show the slides that I took on the trip. I took thousands of them. We can even have a golf and tennis tournament where the winners get a genuine Maori spear to hang over their mantelpieces at home. I learned a lot. I can help with all the details. It'll be a big hit. I guarantee it."

"Esther," I said as gently as I could, not wanting to burst her bubble, "tell you what. Let's give it some thought. The yearly social calendar at the club looks pretty full, but maybe the club

can work something for next year. No promises. But thanks for the idea. And, Esther?"

"Yes, Mr. Ogive?"

"It's nice to have you back."

"Thank you, sir," she beamed, her pride obvious. "You're always so nice. You just let me know when you want to have Maori Culture-Appreciation Month. You know that I'll be more than willing to help."

"I know, Esther. I know." But I also knew Esther well enough to know that within a month, she would either be retired once again or into something else with equal fervor. The problem would take care of itself.

In retrospect, maybe I WAS being a little too hasty. Maori week at the club might be a big hit after all. Hell, I could always use a spear over my fireplace.



Esther brought home this wood carving of a Maori warrior as a souvenir of her fifth trip to New Zealand.

Billy Baumgartner is a good guy, long-time club member, and close personal friend. In his younger days, however, Billy was a hell-raiser widely known for his short fuse and fiery temper. Many years ago, right after Billy had joined the club, he had his first encounter with Esther. It seems that Billy came in for lunch on a particularly busy and hectic day and, by the luck of the draw, had Esther for his waitress. When his food was slow in coming out of the kitchen, Billy began to read Esther the riot act. Esther listened for a bit, then lowered her glasses, looked Billy straight in the eye, and said, "Mr. Baumgartner, right now there are only two people in this entire club interested in your lunch—and one of them is rapidly losing interest."

Pablo Picasso had his insolent and moody Blue Period, Paul Gauguin, his adventuresome and sybaritic "island period," and Gautama Buddha, his contemplative and mountainous "isolation period." Even the sport of hockey has its frenetic and climatic third period. All pale in comparison to Esther's ridiculous and annoying "antiseptic period."

Esther had returned about a week earlier from her latest retirement and/or vacation and/or medical leave of absence. (Who could remember these things?) Since her return, word had it that she was surreptitiously dousing everyone and everything in the building with what appeared to be a mystery air spray of some kind. I was hoping beyond hope that the problem would take care of itself, but of course I knew better. The current club manager, smart man that he was when it came to Esther, had asked me for my help.

"Ah, Esther, always wonderful to see your lovely face," I said as she approached my table.

"Hi, Mr. Ogive," she answered jauntily. "I know you're trying to be sarcastic, but I also know deep down that you really ARE happy to see me. And you'll be even happier when you see what I've brought with me."

Way deep down, I thought. I put down my newspaper, grimaced, and braced myself for the worst.

"Sir," she began, "I've been studying a lot recently about germs and viruses and microorganisms. Do you know that, even as we speak, MILLIONS AND MILLIONS of them are right here on your table? Not all of them are bad for human beings, of course, but lots of them can make us sick. Very sick. You don't want to be sick, do you?"

I was tempted to say "yes" just to interrupt her flow, but I knew that, at best, it would only be a temporary reprieve. So instead, I dutifully mumbled, "No, Esther, I don't."

"I didn't think so. Neither does anyone else in the club. Well, I have the answer right here in this bag." At this point, Esther excitedly reached into the bag she had brought with her and, *voila*, there it was! Whatever it was.

"Er, what is it Esther?" *Maybe an oversized can of Endust or Pledge?* But what the hell did I know?

"Mr. Ogive, it's a new, extra-strength antiseptic germ spray that I saw advertised on television late one night. It's ABSOLUTELY GUARANTEED to kill ALL harmful germs, virus, bacteria, and microorganisms on the spot—AND I BELIEVE IT! Since I've been using it at home, I've never felt better in my life. Plus, I haven't had a cold in two weeks. TWO

WHOLE WEEKS, sir, and not a single sniffle. You know that's VERY unusual for me. I almost always have a tickle in my throat this time of year. I think we should use it here at the club."

This was not going to be easy. *I just hate it when Esther gets fired up like this.* "Esther," I began cautiously, "you know that the club does a good job of keeping the club cleaned and sanitized. Even you've said so yourself many times. What makes you think that some new miracle product is going to kill only harmful germs, spare all the good ones, and eliminate the common cold from the face of the planet? Sort of makes you suspicious, don't you think?"

"Oh, Mr. Ogive, you're such a stick-in-the-mud sometimes. Try something new! Plus, it WORKS! I feel GREAT! Plus, I got this large can for only three easy monthly payments of \$19.95. To tell you the truth, you're starting to look a little peaked, if you don't mind my saying so. Let me spray some all around your table right now. What do you say?"

She had the can aimed and was ready fire when I said, "Wait, Esther. I've got a better idea. I'll make you a deal. If you use this stuff at home for six months and you can honestly say that you've stayed perfectly healthy the entire time, then I'll recommend that the club seriously consider using your miracle cure. How's that?"

She hesitated for a moment, clearly disappointed. "Okay, Mr. Ogive, I guess that's fair. Listen, why don't you just take this can home and give it a try for a day or two? Maybe THEN you'll be convinced. Give it to Mrs. Ogive. I'll bet SHE'LL try it." Her emphasis on the word "she," obviously a parting shot at my general obtuseness and lack of intelligence on the important

subject of germ warfare, was not lost on me. And with that, she was gone.

But I knew that six months hence, Esther would have had at least four "bad colds," three "spells," two vacations, one official retirement, and half a dozen other pet projects. I had helped the club successfully dodge another "Esther bullet" and was feeling pretty good with myself right about then. That manager owed me big time.

Later that morning, however, when no one in the office was looking, I did give my desk a good spraying just to be safe. *Probably can't hurt*, I remember thinking to myself.

Esther was never particularly fond of wearing a waitress uniform. For all the years I had known her, she was always complaining that uniforms "just made her look frumpy." (If you knew Esther, you also knew that she would have looked frumpy no matter WHAT she was wearing.)

Many years ago, Esther once carried her aversion to wearing club's required waitress attire to an extreme. As the story goes, the club's House Committee had just picked, after seemingly endless meetings and long-winded discussions, probably the ugliest and most impractical uniforms in the history of private clubs. As my senior club member friend Nick Mitchell once told me (he was ON that particular House Committee), the company that was finally selected to supply the new sartorial monstrosities was "owned by the brother-in-law of one of the committee members. In addition to being terminally ugly, these god-forsaken things were impossible to

keep clean and were made of some burlap-like material that would make the waitresses sweat like pigs in the summer and freeze their tushies off in the winter. To top it all off, they clashed beyond belief with the traditional decor of the clubhouse. Other than that, they were fine.”

Anyway, Esther, to her credit, also recognized the great folly of the situation, because when the newly selected uniforms arrived, she and her minions tried to “rationally” talk the House Committee out of their decision. The House Committee held fast to its sartorially stupid decision however, and forced the waitresses to don the attire that the group had selected.

After several days of wearing the new uniforms "under protest," Esther and her growing cadre of sympathizers, which by now included a broad cross-section of staff as well as many newly “recruited” club members, decided that it was time to take drastic measures. So one day, right in the middle of the lunch hour rush, Esther, on behalf of her fellow waitresses, announced to everyone present that, “unless the House Committee immediately reconsiders its decision and allows the waitressing staff to have some say in the selection of more reasonable uniforms, we will all work in the nude.”

Several of the more adamant members of the House Committee, of course, were incensed and wanted to fire Esther and the entire waitress crew right on the spot. However, as my friend Nick tells the story, Esther had enough people at the club who liked her (or were having an affair that Esther somehow knew about) and who also knew that, in this case, she and the other waitresses and sympathizing members were right. The uniforms selected by the House Committee were indeed

dreadful. The Board of Directors and the more reasonable members of the club ended up persuading the House Committee to reconsider its decision—and the club’s sartorial crisis was successfully averted, thanks in part to a "rabble-rousing, youthful Esther."

Nick still smiles and shudders every time he thinks of this story. He smiles, he says, “because it was Esther at her best” and shudders “because of the mere thought of Esther in the nude.” It gives me the willies, too.

The proverbial good news is that the club had been through the drill before and therefore knew exactly what to expect. The accompanying bad news was that the club had been through the drill before and knew exactly what to expect. The President of the United States, in all his glory, was coming to the club for a fundraising dinner.

For the entire week before his scheduled arrival, the premises were swarming with Secret Service agents. They were everywhere. Even the sacrosanct Board meeting room, for all practical purposes, was essentially off limits to both members and staff alike, having been commandeered as a sort of headquarters/command center to prepare for a smooth-flowing, incident-free visit.

For both the membership and staff, these Presidential visits were always a nerve-wracking, fingernail-chewing time. The chef spent half his time preparing for the dinner and the other half answering the latest barrage of questions from one of the agents assigned to supervise his every move. The entire staff

who would work that evening had to be investigated and "cleared" to insure that they weren't secretly Guantanamo escapees hell-bent on assassination rather than students earning extra tuition money or housewives trying to meet their next car payments. Of course, the very top waitresses would be assigned the heady privilege of serving the President's table.

So, by the appointed day and hour, everything was ready. After a full week of nonstop planning and rehearsal, the members, guests, and staff knew exactly what to do. Those lucky enough to attend, people who had generously paid \$25,000 a couple for the privilege of hobnobbing with the President, were in high spirits. And then the word came. The President's limousine had just pulled up to the front door!

Right on cue, the President and his entourage of Secret Service agents, press people, and assorted lackeys walked into the reception to a hearty round of applause. Surveying the crowd, the President, I am sure, recognized that virtually every "heavy hitter" in the state was in attendance. So who did the most powerful man in the free world first focus on and talk to? Esther!

"Esther!" he beamed with genuine delight, purposely striding right up to her. "God, it's good to see you! How have you been?"

"Fine, Jerry. Just fine," she replied as casually as if she were talking with the local grocer. "How's Betty?"

"She's doing great. Just got over a touch of the flu."

All those within earshot were stunned into silence. Here they were, paying 25 large to be with the President of the United States (or, more likely, the companies they owned were footing

the bill—but no matter), and here he was talking with ESTHER! *How the hell did Esther get to be friends with the President of the United States?*

"Listen, Esther," the President finally said, after about 10 more minutes of this totally unexpected and unplanned-for chitchat (the entire evening's perfectly choreographed schedule had by now been thrown completely off), "I better circulate. Politics, you know," he said with a final conspiratorial wink. "Great to see you again. Tell the family I said hello."

As it turned out, the evening was a great success. The dinner was magnificent, the President raised over a million dollars for his forthcoming reelection bid, and Esther spent more time with "Jerry" than any 10 "paying guests." She even managed to reassign herself to the President's table, and given the situation, no one dared object. Other than the one time when she absentmindedly poured coffee on the governor's lap because she was busy gabbing with "Jerry," the evening went just fine.

The following morning, during the Secret Service "follow-up" team's wrap-up meeting, one of the men remarked how he had never, in all his days of working with the President, seen him spend so much unscheduled time with one person. "You sure are a lucky guy to have Esther working with you," he said.

"Right." It was all I could think of to say.

Buddy Lazenby and I were once having lunch together at the club, and on that particular day, we had the mixed blessing

of having Esther as our server. Buddy was also one of Esther's favorites.

Upon putting down Buddy's lunch in front of him, Esther remarked, "You know, Mr. Lazenby, there are a lot of things on the menu I would have ordered today, but this isn't one of them." As I recall, Buddy didn't eat much of his lunch.

Esther spent a good portion of her career working in the club business before the advent of computers. During those prehistoric days, most club food-and-beverage prices were set by the House Committee and conveniently kept on typed sheets of paper for the waiters and waitresses to refer to as needed when hand-preparing the members' checks for signature (a procedure now as extinct as conservative Republicans, property appreciation, and dinosaurs). "Internal controls" (an oxymoron in many private clubs) were limited to having someone in the bookkeeping staff occasionally cross-reference and confirm that the amounts listed on the checks were, in fact, the correct, "club-approved" prices. I know people under 40 will find this hard to believe, but the system worked reasonably well, although by today's standards, it was highly labor intensive, fraught with errors, and excruciatingly slow. Perfect for a private club.

Esther, as I have often been told, was an expert at beating this system. In those days, she reputedly charged WHATEVER she wanted, WHENEVER she wanted and to WHOMEVER she wanted—the Board, the House Committee, management, tradition, and policy be damned! Apparently, she got away with

this for a long time because she had convinced Hazel, the club's long-time, pre-computer-era bookkeeper that Esther, AND ONLY ESTHER, knew the REAL prices to charge.

I want to make it clear that, whatever her faults, Esther does not have a dishonest bone in her entire body. She wouldn't even dream of altering the official club-approved prices for “personal gain” (you know, the old give-me-a-discount-on-my-bill-and-I'll give-you-a-big-tip routine that some less-than-scrupulous private club members have tried to pull from time immemorial). Esther just charged what she “knew in her heart to be right.” Whatever the hell that was.

Take an instance with Bill Smitherstone, for example. (God rest his soul.) Bill was the sort of member who never complained about ANYTHING. So if Bill told Esther that his steak “just wasn't up to par,” Esther would, if she agreed, give him an “appropriate” (i.e., Esther-determined) discount on his bill. (In those days, Esther pre-sampled everything she served—in her words, “just to be sure.”) She then might charge Bill \$3.27 for a meal that normally went for \$5.95. How Esther would arrive at such an odd price was always a mystery, even to Hazel.

If, on the other hand, Andy Watson, a known chronic complainer, had ordered the very same steak, Esther would, in all likelihood, have told him to “keep his mouth shut and clean his plate.” If he protested further, she would insist, in no uncertain terms, that he “stop his incessant whining and finish his dinner” and, on top of that, charge him \$7.33 instead of \$5.95 “just to teach the old fart a lesson he wouldn't soon forget.” If Andy's steak was indeed bad (again, Esther deemed

herself sole judge and jury in this matter), Esther might or might not give him a discount, but if she did, it would typically not be as much as the one given to Bill Smitherstone. In this particular case, Andy Watson might have ended up paying \$5.43 for his \$5.95 steak dinner.



Even as a lad, Andy Watson was always a handful.

I have been told that very few, if any, members argued with the prices that Esther charged back then. Most everyone just knew and accepted the fact that Esther's pricing methods, no matter how arcane and unofficial, were just good old Esther's highly intuitive and uncannily accurate attempt to be fair to all concerned. Or something like that.

Esther and the modern point-of-sale system for placing and recording food and beverage orders, as you might expect, don't get along all that well. On occasion, she tries to adjust to the mysteries of modern technology, but without much success. (Don't we all!) I know she rues the demise of the "good old individual waitress pricing responsibility days."

Only once did I actually ask her about her history and reputation in this regard. "Esther," I said one day at lunch, feeling unusually adventurous, "you know the old stories about how you charged members prices that were different than what you were supposed to? Tell me, how could you do that?"

"It wasn't easy, Mr. Ogive," she replied immediately, and, with a noticeable touch of pride in her voice, added "but SOMEONE had to." And that was the end of THAT conversation.

Andy Watson is still alive and kicking. He may even be older than Esther—and is as mean and ornery as ever. But I'd bet my new driver that if Esther could get away with charging him \$31.77 for a \$24.95 steak dinner, he wouldn't say a word. Not a single damn word.

And then there was the time about 10 years ago when Esther decided to become a strict vegetarian. More accurately, she became a vegan. For about a month, she lived on food—and I use the term loosely—that would have made Ewell Gibbons proud. What's interesting about the story is not that she eventually returned to a more normal American diet, but how. She broke her Spartan regimen by consuming two full Whoppers, a large order of french fries, and a Coke—and then immediately went to have her stomach pumped.

When I went to see her in the hospital the next morning, she already looked more embarrassed than sick. All she would say on the subject was "What the hell, I gave it a shot." And that was that.

For as long as anyone can remember, Esther has lied about her age. She has, in fact, lied so often and so cavalierly about the matter that I doubt whether Esther herself knows—or cares—how old she really is.

Esther is only mildly aware of, and could care less about, the potential bureaucratic complications that might result from her lack of honesty with regard to the actual amount of time she has spent on this planet. (As I have mentioned previously, Esther is completely truthful—in fact, almost fanatically so—in every other aspect of her life. For whatever reason, she just takes a different approach when it comes to chronology.)

Contrary to what one might at first think, Esther doesn't always claim to be younger than she actually is. Her matter-of-fact distortions of the truth in this area, whatever their deep-

seated psychological and emotional bases, are not rooted in some weird Freudian vanity. At times, Esther will claim to be older by as much as a decade, perhaps because it makes her a contemporary of some club member's parents—or perhaps, in her convoluted logic, it makes her appear “wiser.” (Now there's the paradigm oxymoron for you—“Esther” and “wise” in the same sentence.)

On other occasions, Esther will swear that she is many years younger than most everyone knows her to be. For example, just mention of the word “retirement” will instantly cause her to chop at least 15 years off of her currently claimed age. Basically, I think Esther just settles on whatever age is most convenient at the moment.

Quite honestly, Esther's whimsical presentation of her age has never bothered most of us at the club in the slightest. Actually, we sort of enjoy the whole thing. The members also collectively view Esther's age peccadilloes as just another part of “Esther's charm” (another classic oxymoron, for sure). As I recall, I discussed the topic with her on only one occasion, many years ago.

“Hello, Esther,” I said as neutrally as I could muster one day when she dropped by my table “just to chat.” (The best way to keep Esther away, I have learned over time, is to schedule a formal appointment with her. She can't be bothered with such things and, consequently, rarely, if ever, actually shows up.)

“Hi, Mr. Ogive,” she said cheerily. When Esther was this friendly, I knew to watch out.

“Listen, Esther, as long as you're here, I need to ask you a question that was brought to my attention by the manager.”

“Sure, Mr. Ogive. Anything for you. What’s up?”

“I was going over the employee pension reports a while back and noticed that the birth date you have listed is different from the one on your application for employment. In fact, we did a little research and found out that NONE of the birth dates on your medical claim forms, life insurance files, or Social Security records match each other. You’ve got different days, months, and years of birth listed on just about every form.”

“So, what exactly is the problem?” she asked, as if I were being the most obtuse and petty bureaucrat in the world.

“Well, Esther, most people find that sticking with one birth date generally helps make life a lot easier,” I said, trying to take the soft approach. “Of course, using one’s real birth date is always an added plus.”

“Mr. Ogive, you know me. I don’t care much for forms and things. I might have made a mistake on one or two of them. Someday maybe we can sit down and straighten this out.” And, before I could say another word, she was gone.

Someday, I am sure, the entire military-industrial complex will collapse when Esther’s 37 “official” birth dates are discovered and cross-referenced. I hope I am still around to see the fireworks.



Two of the many questionable IDs Esther used during her decades of loyal service to Old Bunbury.

One of my favorite Estherisms is the time she informed me at lunch that she wouldn't be "in to work tomorrow because she just knew that she was going to be too tired from working especially hard today."

Esther has told me on numerous occasions that she's been arrested only once in her life—and I have no reason to doubt her. I am proud to say that, in her one brush with the law, she called ME to come and bail her out of jail.

Here's what happened. Over a decade ago, after several years of legal protests and delaying tactics by the club (in concert with the local neighbors), the city finally gained its long-sought "official approval" to widen the road that partially

cut through the club's property. It had been a long and often rancorous battle between the people living in the area to preserve the "residential nature" of the community and the perceived need by the city to accommodate the growing amount of traffic that used the road to commute to and from the downtown area. After a number of creative appeals on the part of the local residents in partnership with the country club, city hall had finally gotten its way.

On the day that the widening work was scheduled to begin, I was at my usual table in the grill room when a staff member told me I had a telephone call.

"Hey, Mr. Ogive, it's me."

"Esther? Is that you? Why are you calling me this time of day?"

"Er, Mr. Ogive, we've got a bit of a situation here. To tell you the truth, I'm in jail, and I need you to come and bail me out."

"YOU'RE IN JAIL? What are you doing IN JAIL? Esther, is this one of your weird jokes or what?"

"No, Mr. Ogive. It's for real. I'm in the old downtown hoosegow, and I need someone to come and get me out. So I thought of you. You're always helping me out, and besides, your bark is worse than your bite."

"Thanks, Esther," was all I could think to say. Had Esther just given me a compliment? *What was this world coming to?*

"Listen, Mr. Ogive, I'm getting kind of claustrophobic in here, so could you please come and rescue me as soon as possible? I'll fill you in on all the details when you get me out of here."

I could tell from the tone of her voice that she was indeed serious—and going on frantic. “Sure, Esther. Hang in there. I’m out the door.”

The police, as you might expect, were only too anxious to release Esther to me. Or, for that matter, to anyone who would claim her. They were, in point of fact, ecstatic to get her out of the building and off the property. Having such an outspoken little old lady in the city lockup, I am sure they had quickly come to realize, was not exactly a potential “image builder” with the local citizenry.

As Esther and I were heading back to the club, she recounted for me what had happened. Unbeknownst to anyone at the club, Esther had decided of her own accord to stage a sit-down strike in the middle of the road to prevent the bulldozer from beginning work on the controversial widening work. The construction crew had had no option but to call the police when she absolutely refused to budge. And the police, of course, were not exactly thrilled at the prospect of arresting someone like Esther, but they, too, had no other choice. And the rest, as they say, is history.

My final question to her, when we were almost back at the club, went to the very heart of the matter. “So, Esther,” I found myself saying, “why exactly did you do it?”

“C’mon, Mr. Ogive, you of all people should know. It’s just not right that the city is going to widen Maple Lane. Someone had to stand up in protest. You know this club has always been good to me, and I just wanted to help out.”

I couldn't have been more proud if one of my children had just won the Congressional Medal of Honor. "Thank you, Esther. You know, you're really something."

"Yeah, sure, Mr. Ogive. Now, don't go and get all mushy on me. It'll ruin your image."

When the membership found out what Esther had done, even those who weren't exactly enamored with her unique waitressing abilities were, at least for the time being, singing her praises. She was, in fact, so proud that she postponed her next retirement by three whole weeks.



A previously unreleased photograph of Esther in jail.

Rod Lassiter wasn't, shall we say, a "big fan" of Esther and certainly didn't go out of his way to hide this fact. Esther, who was well aware of how Rod felt about her, had nevertheless reluctantly agreed to take his lunch order one Friday afternoon.

“Esther,” he said, in a noble attempt to be especially conciliatory, given the awkwardness of the situation, “does it make any difference whether I order the salmon patties or the meat loaf?”

“Not to me,” was all Esther reportedly had to say. It was more than enough.

Well, there you have it. I could go on with Esther stories until President Obama appoints a conservative to the United States Supreme Court, but I suspect that you’ve read enough about Esther to get the picture. If every private club had a waitress or two like her, the world would be a better place—a better place, indeed.

It is now time to take a closer look at some of the other employees who “reportedly” work to make private clubs what they are.



Esther as a young woman.

About Norm Spitzig

Norm Spitzig is internationally recognized as an eloquent and visionary leader in the worldwide private club industry. His groundbreaking book, **Private Clubs in America and around the World**, continues to inspire and challenge club aficionados as well as all people who simply enjoy a great belly laugh. Norm is also the author of four other books centered around the wonderful world of private club, **Perspectives on Club Management**, **Murder and Mayhem at Old Bunbury**, **How Now, Norm's Tao** and **Soul on Nice**.

Norm's professional contributions to the global private club industry have been ongoing, varied and significant. Elected a national director of the Club Management Association of America in 1989, he served as national president in 1995—the same year he became one of the six original general managers to earn the prestigious lifetime Master Club Manager (MCM) designation. Norm has the singular honor of having twice been named the private club industry's "Educator of the Year".

Before his recent retirement, Norm served as a Principal & Senior Partner in Master Club Advisors, a global firm that specialized in private club executive search, strategic planning and leadership training. Norm now spends his time relaxing and traveling with his wife Cody, adding to his lifetime total of logged running miles (currently over 109,000), doting on his six grandchildren, and working part time at Cody's wildly successful café, Cody's on 4th, in Mount Dora, Florida.

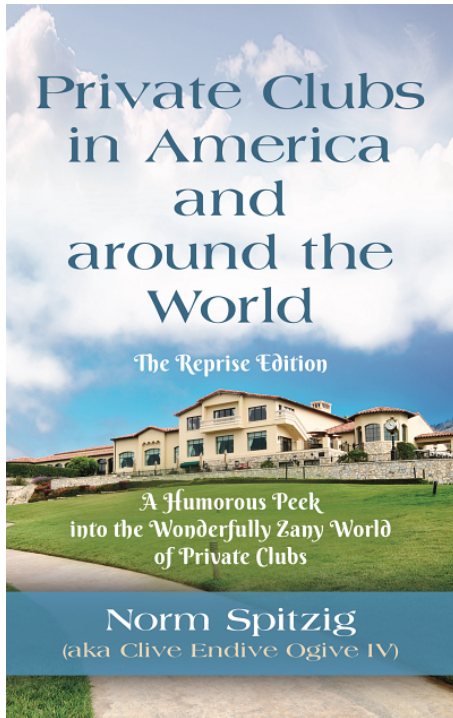
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