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Ballroom teacher recalls a gracious era

By Emily Morrison

The social graces have seen better days, but that in itself doesn't deter the perennially polite from quietly asserting their impeccable manners in the face of an uncouth world.

Correct introductions, firm handshakes, white gloves, the intricacies of the punch table and the flawless execution of a two-step may be a dying art for most of us. But thanks to such accomplished masters of good form as Claire Leonard (who teaches ballroom dancing at St. Thomas More and Our Lady of Lourdes in Brighton, and St. Jerome's in East Rochester), the luckiest of our children may yet grow up clearly enunciating their words and mercifully refraining from stumbling over their own clumsy feet.

Those of us who are pushing the upper limits of the baby-boom generation will remember ballroom dancing classes. At the tender age of 10 or 12, we were ushered into private dance studios or grammar school gymnasiums and artfully persuaded to allow members of the opposite sex to put their arms awkwardly about our waists and guide us around the dance floor without stepping, as one could only hope, on the toes of our shiny, patent leather party shoes.

In my own case, the setting was a small, private dancing school in pre-Vatican II New Orleans, in the days when white gloves were *de rigueur* for church services or much-anticipated streetcar trips to downtown Canal Street, and sisters in long habits walked across the square in front of Mater Dolorosa when we disembarked again on Carrollton Avenue. I took ballet lessons from Jeanne Fernandez, the sister of famed New York City Ballet *danseur* Royes Fernandez, and ballroom dancing from my older brother's teacher, whose name I'm ashamed to admit I've quite forgotten.

My fondest memories are of the rare occasions when I had an opportunity to dance with his charming Honduran friend, Jose Rivera, rather than my brother himself, with whom I shared a mutual distaste for being partnered with a close relative. Nevertheless, I retained a good measure of the social graces my teacher attempted to instill in me, and my Southern manners remain so predictable that I often irritate even myself.



Claire Leonard poses before the bowed window in the living room of her East Avenue-vicinity Georgian Colonial residence. Designed in the 1890s by Andrew Jackson Warner and his son, J. Foster Warner, the home's gracious ambience recalls a more genteel era.

And though I can't distinguish a foxtrot from a tango, I can do a mean waltz, and the polka I trot out for occasional wedding receptions isn't half-bad, either.

Claire Leonard, in her day, studied both ballet and ballroom dancing with the late Enid Knapp Botsford (Orcutt), who at the time had a studio across from the Eastman Theatre on Gibbs Street. Later, Mrs. Botsford founded the Botsford School of Dance in Pittsford, for many years the local proving ground for generations of future professional ballet dancers and their hopeful colleagues, most of whom were to become lifelong balletomanes. After a brief but thrilling career on the professional theatrical

stage during the late 1940s and early '50s, Leonard returned to Rochester to teach ballroom classes at the school until Enid Botsford Orcutt's death in May, 1984.

A visit to Leonard's gracious Georgian Colonial home off East Avenue reveals more than a trace of her theatrical background, and the Andrew and J. Foster Warner-designed mansion has indeed had its own day in the limelight. Company members, ballet masters, and choreographers from the New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theater, the Pittsburgh Ballet and the Hartford Ballet have all been entertained in Leonard's home following local performances, and Mikhail

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