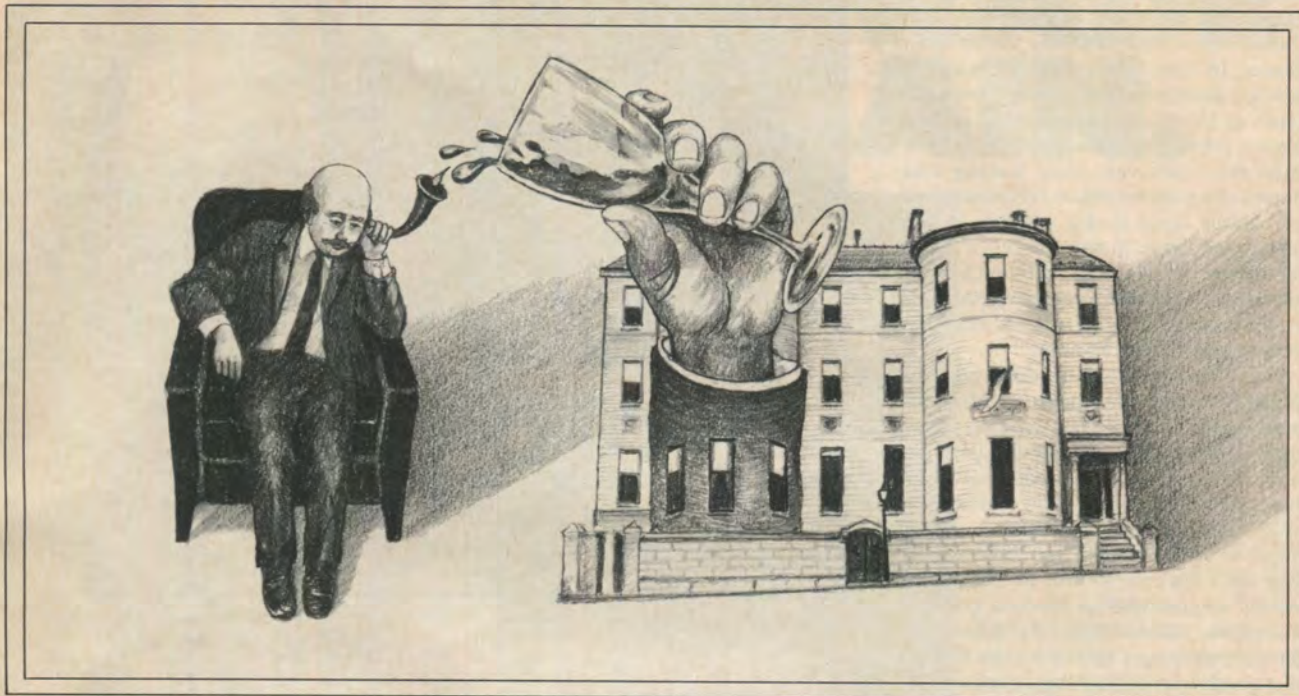


THE WAY WE WERE

By John Sedgwick

Sunset at the Somerset Club



One evening in January, 1945, a stove blazed up and set fire to the kitchen of the Somerset Club, Boston's oldest and most exclusive social club. Fire engines raced to the scene, and soon firemen pounded on the door of the clubhouse. The door opened, and the headwaiter, Joseph, appeared. He looked horrified. "Gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "This is the members' entrance. The service entrance is down the street." Then he shut the door, calmed himself, and returned his attention to the dinner still in progress in the dining room. When the last entrée had been cleared, Joseph went around from table to table and said quietly to the diners, "No dessert tonight, gentlemen. The kitchen is on fire."

The story is more myth than fact, but never mind. It might just as well be true. The Somerset takes the derivation of the word *club* seriously: it comes from the verb, meaning to beat with a cudgel. The Somerset was founded on this vigorous exclusionary principle and—come flood, pestilence, or fire—is determined to keep out intruders, even if they do happen to be fire fighters.

John Sedgwick, a regular contributor to Boston, has written for Esquire, Harvard Magazine, and the New York Times.

The Somerset's Beacon Street quarters reflect the firmness of the club's resolve. Three stories of Rockville granite swell imperiously into two sturdy bays. A line of pretty rectilinear scrolls—cartouches—have been carved across the front of the building in an attempt to relieve its grimness. The attempt fails.

But even the careful façade of the Somerset Club is not unassailable. Not long ago, a section of the cast-iron railing on the cement wall that protects the club from the sidewalk was pried loose by vandals and hauled off. One of two growling lion heads was liberated from the massive iron-studded oak door off Beacon Street; the other has since been taken indoors for safekeeping. But the assault on this last bastion of Brahminhood applies to more than its exterior. The bulwark is breaking up from within as well. Replacements for the old boys who die off are hard to come by; and those who join do so for reasons that would have seemed a sacrilege to the club's charter members.

Still, thanks to its considerable number of elderly members—relics of the club's heyday—the Somerset manages to keep up appearances remarkably well. A former president of the club, J. Hampden

("Ham") Robb, took me inside the club early one morning to show me around. Now a bit hunched over with age (he's seventy-nine) and arthritis, Robb has been a member of the club since 1925, when he was twenty-seven. During our tour, I felt as if I was being led about some vast allegorical structure, like Spenser's House of Pride. This was the House of Manliness. Although the Somerset prides itself on the fact that it does admit "the ladies," it doesn't admit them very far. They are confined to the Ladies' Dining Room in the basement, reached by what is called the "Strangers' Entrance." A basement kennel was renovated to provide a Ladies' Powder Room. Members eating with their wives use the Ladies' Dining Room. In recent years, a few small children have even been served here. One member had the temerity to bring along what Robb termed "a basket case"—an infant in a baby carriage. That didn't sit very well with some of the older members. "There were quite a few letters to the Executive Committee over that one," said Robb.

Two flights up in the clubmen's affections are the card rooms. (There's also a library, but about the only people who use it are the employees, who go there to watch TV.) The badminton court and the

THE WAY WE WERE

bowling alley that used to be there burned down in the 1945 fire, along with the clubmen's desserts. The desserts were more sorely missed. Badminton and bowling required far too much exertion to be popular club activities.

Card games are just the clubmen's speed. Many a poker game has been played up here for high stakes, late into the night. A large Cruikshank cartoon illustrating the joys of intemperance hangs on one wall (not that the members of the Somerset Club need any instruction). Several of the best poker hands ever dealt in the club decorate another wall, framed and accompanied by the lucky players' signatures. J. Hampden Robb has held two royal straight flushes. "The thing about a hand like that," he said, "is that it's just impossible to keep it to yourself. So you never make anything off it." All it's good for is framing.

Between the basement and the second floor is a middle, formal zone where members sit about stiffly and attend to the business of leisure. In the Morning Room, clubmen read the newspaper, grouse about the weather, and generally brace themselves for the day. Or they might converse in more subdued tones in the Gold Room, so called because of the gold clock on the mantel, the gold-framed mirror above the mantel, the gold brocade on the walls, the gold frieze, and the gold medallions in the thick crimson carpet. "Sometimes I think this room is a little much," Robb confessed as we walked through. The drawing room next door, called simply Number Five, has a carved marble fireplace, a Chippendale mirror, Austrian chandeliers, and a card table. By far the most populated room in this formal area is the main dining hall, whose wood pilasters with leafy capitals give it the air of a dark Victorian forest.

Practically everywhere in this formal zone are squat black leather chairs, the kind that stick to you on a hot day. The Somerset has these chairs, Robb explained, because the English clubs have them. What is good enough for the English is ideal for the Somerset. The *London Times* is delivered daily to the Morning Room. The Somerset maintains an exchange program with a London club on St. James Street called Boodles. One Somerset member reported happily that he felt right at home there. "All the members looked familiar," he said, "even though I didn't know a soul."

The clubhouse is built around a large courtyard. Two dogwoods have taken root in the thin topsoil there and grown to a good height. In warm weather, the members sip mint juleps (a special Somerset Club recipe) under an awning on a broad terrace that is called, with deep affection, the Bricks. "A perfectly tranquil, lovely retreat," one member rhapsodized.

The members' only care is the swallows that nest in vines over their heads.

For Robb, as for many Somerset old-timers, every corner, every piece of furniture, no doubt evokes a time he spent with his friends, swapping stories, playing cards, tipling. He has belonged to the club, after all, for over half a century. He told me that he'd hoped to live out his retirement in a club apartment at 41 Beacon, adjoining the main building, but 41 had to be sold two years ago to meet expenses. Robb was clearly sorry about this, but he was too discreet to say anything about it.

The Somerset is not thought of by the members as simply a nice place. It's a nice place to drink. The Somerset is a drinking man's club. It runs on alcohol. At the Somerset, they take their martinis mixed ten to one. No one has fussed very much over the loss of the lion's head or the section of wrought-iron fence, but when some firemen walked off with seventy-eight bottles of hard liquor stored in the club cellar (they concealed the bottles in their boots), dammit, that was serious. Clubmen importuned the fire commissioner, who happened to be a fellow member, to *do something*, but he reported that there was nothing to be done.

The Somerset's 1977 treasurer's report stated that the club, which is famous for its good food, lost over \$75,000 on the dining room but showed a profit of over \$25,000 on its bar. Clubmen don't remember the Depression. They remember Prohibition, though; that's what made the Depression so depressing. It nearly ruined the club. If members couldn't drink, what could they do? Happily, they were allowed to smuggle bootleg liquor into the building, and it was stored for them in lockers in the basement. Alexander Williams, a member of the Somerset Club who has written a book about Boston's clubs, *A Social History of the Greater Boston Clubs*, told me that the Somerset "only just survived." It was eleven o'clock in the morning when he spoke. A silver tumbler bearing the family crest and filled with whiskey was in his hand.

The Somerset may forbid whistling in the clubhouse, but it is extremely tolerant of high spirits that have been raised artificially. Hampden Robb said that one night his cousin came into the club dead drunk as usual, fell into conversation with a certain Mr. Martin, then editor of *Life Magazine*, and poured his drink down the old gentleman's ear trumpet. Martin took it surprisingly well, and the prodigal cousin remained a member of the Somerset in good standing. When the spirits moved them, it used to be quite common for younger members of the Somerset to engage in what were called "indoor steeplechases" over a course of chairs and sofas in the Gold Room. The older members, meanwhile, would be playing poker upstairs, with winnings to



EASTERN MASS JEEP DEALERS ASSOCIATION

BELMONT
Zarren Motors
484-7500

BILLERICA
Gervais Bros.
663-8258

BOSTON
Back Bay Motors
734-7550

BRAINTREE
Pearl St. Motors
843-3860

BROCKTON
Brockton
AMC/Jeep
584-4100

FRAMINGHAM
Midway AMC/Jeep
879-8300

GLOUCESTER
Sudbay Jeep
283-4730

HANOVER
Hanover AMC/Jeep
826-8378

LAWRENCE
Border AMC/Jeep
683-9571

LINCOLN
Lincoln
Auto Service
259-9595

LOWELL
DeSantis Motors
458-8701

LYNN
Lynngate Motors
599-1600

LYNNFIELD
Courtesy
AMC/Jeep
581-6000

MANSFIELD
Mansfield Garage
339-3400

MEDWAY
Medway Auto Sales
533-7900

MELROSE
Cutler
Motor Sales
662-8900

NATICK
Brigham-Gill
AMC/Jeep
235-8050

NEEDHAM
R. C. Muirhead
444-2726

NEWBURYPORT
Insero Motors
465-5306

PEABODY
Pioneer Garage
531-0319

QUINCY
Hassan Bros.
773-8810

RAYNHAM
Anderson
AMC/Jeep
823-4544

SOMERVILLE
Rigazio Bros.
864-4045

STONEHAM
Pettengill
Motor Sales
438-0842

WAREHAM
Kerry American
295-2700

WATERTOWN
Community Garage
924-2912

WATERTOWN
Seminara
AMC/Jeep
924-5802

WEST ROXBURY
Clair Jeep
325-4700

WHITMAN
Temple St. Garage
447-3261

WILMINGTON
Wallace
Motor Sales
729-4128

be spent on champagne cocktails all around.

Dedicated tipplers as they are, the clubmen proved no match for a trio of Russian diplomats when they came for gin fizzes on the Bricks one famous sunny afternoon in 1905. The contest started off when a clubman, just to be sociable, suggested a toast to the Tsar. The diplomats insisted that the Americans observe the old Russian custom—to drink a toast properly, one had to drain the whole glass. Agreed. To the Tsar, then! Bottoms went up all around. The Russians certainly weren't going to let it go at that. To the President! Bottoms up. The clubmen rose to the challenge. To the Tsarina! Up they went again. Then the Russians again: To the Vice-President! And so it went through the executive branch and the imperial family. Finally only one clubman was left standing. The rest were comatose on the Bricks. The Russians said goodbye and marched off, according to one account, "as though they had been drinking ice water."

The Somerset Club took up residence at 42 Beacon Street over a century ago, in 1872. Over a century before that, in 1738, the painter John Singleton Copley had been born in a farmhouse on the site. There used to be a bronze plaque outside the clubhouse commemorating the event, but someone ran off with it a few years ago. David Sears bought the property in 1819 and built the structure that is now the Somerset clubhouse with a fortune he inherited from his father. Alexander Parris, who later designed the Quincy Market, drew up the plans, which called for a single bay capped with a high dome in the Greek revival style then in vogue. Sears expanded the house considerably before he died in 1871. The Somerset Club bought it and moved in the next year.

The Somerset had been founded just up the Hill on Somerset Street twenty years before by forty-one members of the now-defunct Tremont Club who were eager to establish a "Club upon the plan of the English Clubs," as their statement of purpose put it. Composed largely of wealthy industrialists and their heirs, the Somerset Club was a den of conservatism from the start. It was formed as a place of refuge from what members regarded as an increasingly chaotic city. The influx of Irish immigrants into Boston after the potato famine of 1846 was not the least of their worries.

Then came the Civil War, and with it an incident that the Somerset has never been able to live down. Boston was the center of the abolitionist movement, which the Somerset Club opposed. Their sympathies went out to the southern patricians, whose style of life they rather admired. Furthermore, the clubmen's manufacturing interests depended on a steady stream of cotton coming up from the

South. So they were utterly horrified when Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a fellow clubman no less, led the all-black Fifty-fourth Regiment of the Massachusetts Infantry through the streets of Boston on its way to fight against the South. His route was mobbed with an adoring throng. William Lloyd Garrison watched from an Essex Street balcony, one hand on a bust of John Brown, tears streaming down his face. Shaw was cheered wildly from every corner. Except the corner of Somerset and Beacon, where the members of the Somerset Club had drawn the curtains against the offensive spectacle. Some say that hissing could be heard from within the building.

A few liberal members, including Charles Eliot Norton and James Russell Lowell, were so outraged by their fellow clubmen's behavior that they withdrew from the Somerset in protest to form a new club. They called this new club the Union; it is still in existence at 8 Park Street. On the surface, the Somerset Club continued as always. Two years later, however, when the Confederates had surrendered and Lincoln was shot, one-fifth of the membership, seventy-nine men in all, resigned en masse to join the Union. No one knows why, but Alexander Williams, in his book on Boston clubs, proposes an explanation: he speculates that someone in the club offered a toast to John Wilkes Booth.

Except after the 1945 fire, the Somerset has not been in the news since, which is, of course, just the way the club wants it. The post-Civil War walkout did not seem to affect the club's fortunes, which continued to rise through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. There were a good many Brahmins in the city, and they used their money to insulate themselves from social change. By the 1880s they had lost political control of Boston to the Irish. When the first of a long line of Irish mayors was elected in 1884, the Brahmins' reaction was to turn up their noses and keep to themselves. That decade saw unprecedented interest in social clubs in Boston. The Algonquin, the St. Botolph, the Tavern, and an exclusive nautical association called the India Wharf Rats were all founded during this period. The Somerset became more popular than ever.

In those days, the club was extremely close-knit, a little race all of its own. The clubmen sprang from the same genetic pool. They grew up together on Beacon Hill. They went to Harvard together and joined Harvard final clubs together. They worked together in Boston, married one another's sisters and cousins, and lived together, once again, on Beacon Hill. And they joined the Somerset together.

After the First World War, however, all this began to change. The late Walter Muir Whitehill, a Somerset member who, with Hugh Whitney, had written a hundred-year history of the club in 1951,

TREAT YOUR HOME TO A LEVOLOR RIVIERA™ TREATMENT.



Riviera Blinds by Levolor

The imaginative new idea for windows available in more than 100 beautiful colors. The only 1" slat blind with the Magic Wand® Guardian Tilter® that lets you tilt your blind easily, without overturning it. They also feature unique safety brackets. So, when you put them up, they stay up. No other window covering combines as many functional virtues with as much beauty.



Riviera Tiltone™ Blinds

Perfect for rooms in which you want to use dramatic colors without affecting your home's exterior. Color is on one side, a neutral white on the other. Call (800) 447-4700, in Illinois (800) 322-4400, for name of dealer.



Levolor Lorentzen, Inc.
720 Monroe St.
Hoboken, N.J. 07030
Dept. X-6-78

Please send me a copy of "Window Magic."
I enclose \$1.00 for handling and mailing.
Please allow 4-6 weeks delivery.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

RIVIERA BLINDS BY LEVOLOR

Charley's Angels.



LADIES INVITED/FREE VALET PARKING/344 NEWBURY ST., BOSTON, THE MALL AT CHESTNUT HILL, SOUTH SHORE PLAZA, BRAINTREE.

Russo's

The Total Look

It's Not
Just The Look...
It's The
Feeling.

FACIALS
HAIR DESIGN
NAIL WRAPPING
WAXING • PEDICURES

244-8900

Twelve Twenty-Nine Center Street • Newton Centre, Mass. 02159

talked to me shortly before his death about the change. When his wife was growing up in the Back Bay, Whitehill recalled, "probably a dozen aunts, uncles, and first cousins lived within spitting distance of each other." And the whole family belonged to the Somerset Club—all the males, that is. But during the Depression, when what Whitehill called "a rather evil government" raised property taxes in Boston, many eminent residents had to pull up stakes and move out to the suburbs. Relatively easy commuting by automobile made the move possible. Most of these emigrants maintained their club memberships, but now they used the club much less frequently. Revenues from the dining rooms and the bar declined seriously. At the turn of the century, the main dining room had been so popular for lunch that there were regularly two seatings of one hundred people every day, and cigar smoking was banned from the dining room so that clubmen wouldn't linger over their meals while others were waiting. In the twenties, the numbers started to dwindle, and today no more than fifty lunches are served on the best of days. For dinner it is closed; all members have to eat in the much smaller Ladies' Dining Room downstairs.

Whitehill himself was living in North Andover when he joined the club in 1946. At that date there were vestiges of the club's golden age. There was a special table in the dining room, Whitehill said, where only the "old dinosaurs" in their eighties and nineties sat. It was known as the Mt. Auburn table because everyone figured that Mt. Auburn Cemetery would be those gentlemen's next stop.

"These were for the most part delightful, opinionated, and, I dare say, explosive people," said Whitehill. "Charles Lowell Barlow, a lawyer of the [Harvard] Class of '93 was sitting in the Gold Room taking his coffee and I was gossiping with him. John Adams and Charles Jackson of the Class of '98 were a few chairs away, and Mr. Barlow suddenly called to them, 'You boys are somewhat younger than I am. What class were you?' 'Ninety-eight,' said Charles Jackson. 'Hah!' said Mr. Barlow. 'There are two members of '91 in this club.' To which John Adams responded, 'All I can say is, it's time both of them *died!*' Mr. Barlow roared, 'I'll die when I *goddamn well please!*'"

As these dedicated old geezers have gone to their reward at Mt. Auburn Cemetery, the club has been having difficulty recruiting new blue bloods to replace them. Half a century ago, there was a ten-year waiting list for new members. Now there is no waiting list at all. The club, in fact, expanded the constitutional limit of membership from 500 to 550 several years ago, but the number of clubmen has remained at around 500. And though the club was founded "for the promotion of social intercourse"—club dinners, club drinking bouts, club card games—and

such activities, both formal and informal, were the mainstay of the club, now members tend to regard it as merely a convenient facility, a kind of private hotel, for their personal use. They rent the small dining rooms for private parties with such frequency that the club now derives a major portion of its income from the fees. Rent from the upstairs bedrooms is another major source. And even after selling off 41 Beacon in 1976, the Executive Committee has had to hike yearly membership dues to \$625, three times what they had been twenty years before, in order to meet expenses.

With aristocrats in such short supply, the Somerset has had to settle for slightly lesser citizens. It used to be that to be "clubbable," a man had to have a good background (meaning Beacon Hill-born, Harvard-educated, and WASP), good connections (meaning several friends and relatives in the club), and good character (meaning that besides fulfilling the first two requirements, a candidate had to be "nice"). And even if a man demonstrated strengths in all three departments, it wasn't always easy to get in. Walter Muir Whitehill recalled a Mr. Rodman Weld's advice to a nephew who was planning to delay joining the club until he was older and ready actually to use the place. "My boy," said the wise uncle, "someday you will do something, and no matter what it is, some member of the Somerset Club will object to it. So it's essential that you join before you do anything at all."

Nowadays, however, the club is facing a seller's market. Whereas before, the Somerset's list of members was a long, tedious haul through Ames, Gardners, Lawrences, and Peabodys—all eminently pronounceable, Anglo-Saxon names—today some exotic strains of humanity are in evidence: Irish Catholics, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Chinese, Jews. Blacks have been admitted as guests, though none have been taken as members.

One gentleman explained that no black has ever applied, which is somewhat understandable. But no whites have ever applied either. One does not ask to be a member of the Somerset Club. One is asked: "put up," as they say. That's only the beginning. One must then be "posted"—name and relevant details circulated among the membership. The Executive Committee must convene to weigh the evidence. And finally, the president must bring out a large, lidded box and hold it up before each committeeman, who reaches into the compartment on the right and gropes about for either a little round ball (white) or a little cube (dull gray) and plops it into the compartment on the left. When all the committeemen have voted (there must be at least ten out of a possible fifteen present), the president retires to another room and opens up the box. Two or more of the dull gray cubes among the collection of little balls and the candidate has been rejected; in

We stereotype.

Different types of people

look for different types of stereos. And no matter how much or how little they spend, they want to be sure their stereo is right for them. And right for their budget, too. That's why we stereotype.

At Tweeter, stereotype means comparing the different stereos within your price range, and picking the type that's right for you. With quality brand names to choose from. Like Bose, Yamaha, Dual, Nakamichi, Bang & Olufsen, plus much more. So you'll find the best value in every price range.

We're sure you'll be happy at Tweeter. Because, if you're not, we guarantee to give you all your money back within 7 days. No questions asked. We also guarantee the lowest price: should you find the same stereo for less, just show us proof within 90 days and we'll refund the difference.

And we'll work together to design a stereo system that will fit your living style. That's all part of stereotyping, Tweeter style.

**We can
stereotype a
music system
for you.**



Tweeter etc.

Burlington, MA — The Market Place,
82 Burlington Mall Road — (617) 273-2200
Harvard Square — 102 Mount Auburn St. — 492-4411
Boston University — 874 Commonwealth Ave. — 738-4411
Chestnut Hill Mall — Rt. 9, Newton — 964-4411
Framingham — 86 Worcester Road — 879-1500
Brockton — 862 Belmont St. — 583-5146
Manchester, NH — Manchester Mall,
1500 S. Willow Street — (603) 627-4600

STUART COHEN



* Eyeglasses-clear glass or plastic lenses between plano and ± 7 dioptors and 2 dioptors of astigmatism with plastic or metal frame from such companies as Variety and Terri Brogan. **\$29.95**

* Contacts-Soft (B&L, AO) \$120/pr.
Hard \$60/pr.

* Does not include eye exams and other professional services.

CAMBRIDGE EYE ASSOCIATES

1174 Mass. Ave.
Harvard Sq. Cambridge 547-6080
Optometrists

It doesn't hurt to look.



Good dental care begins with a thorough examination and complete communication between you and your dentist.

Cambridge Dental Associates, a unique dental practice, offers a complete range of prevention-oriented diagnostic and referral services for all phases of dentistry, in a relaxed professional atmosphere.

Initial exam and treatment planning appointment fee is \$27. This includes evaluation of your dental condition (including all necessary x-rays and diagnostic study aids), diagnosis, consultation and individual treatment planning.

CAMBRIDGE DENTAL ASSOCIATES, INC.

857 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass.

Dr. Gary A. Sloan, D.D.S. and Assoc.

CALL FOR APPT. 492-8210

club talk, he has been blackballed.

The average age of the members is somewhere in the late fifties. Still, the club has been more successful than other Boston social clubs in attracting younger members. Real estate developer Neil St. John Raymond, now in his thirties, participated in antiwar demonstrations when he was a graduate student in the late sixties, but he is now a member of the Somerset Club. He says that old college friends are "horrified," but he himself is perfectly content. "Sure the club is anachronistic," he says. "But it is what it is. And I find it a very pleasant place to have lunch."

Another recent member, who is now in his twenties, has a much less relaxed attitude toward the Somerset Club. He insisted that his identity not be divulged because, he said, he didn't want his non-club friends to know. He had to think it over for a year and a half after he was asked before he decided to join. "The Somerset is an exclusive club," he says, "and that has bad connotations to people my age." Still, it makes a good place to see some of his older friends. Also, it gives him what he calls a "psychological locus," a place to come back to once he leaves Boston.

Joining the Somerset used to be considered part of the natural progression of things, as inevitable as going to Harvard or having cocktails before dinner. It was simply on the program. Now joining the Somerset Club is a proposition much like any other. It has its advantages (good food, in-town location) and its disadvantages (expensive, reactionary image). No matter how this cost-benefit analysis comes out, the mere fact that membership in the Somerset has succumbed to such practical considerations is significant.

A number of years ago, the Somerset Club decided to have the dining room redecorated in a more modern style, and the Executive Committee called in architect J. Hurleston Parker to discuss the renovation. Parker was kept waiting in the anteroom for so long while the committee attended to the business of elections and bills that he became annoyed and marched out. So the dining room remained as Victorian as ever.

Such is the nature of change at the Somerset; the gestures seldom have tangible results. When I arrived at the club for my lunch date with the current president, Ronald T. Lyman, the liveried club manager directed me to the Gold Room, where I found Lyman going over accounts with three members of the House Committee. He bade me wait in the bar. There, I ordered some dry sherry; it came with a few bits of cork floating in it, but I didn't complain. I took a seat under a picture of a duck and waited.

Presently a tall gentleman with graying hair and a soft face came in. "Hello, Mr.

**If you could
spend an entire
evening lingering
over a good meal**

You'll enjoy dining at Dunfey's at Lexington. Set in the shelter of murmuring pines, the atmosphere enhanced by carefully chosen antiques and furnishings, the menu a marvel of sophisticated country fare, Dunfey's caters to those who savour the whole banquet of life.

A tradition in gracious country dining.

Open daily for Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner.
Sunday Brunch. Please call for reservations.
862-8700.

**DUNFEY'S
... AT LEXINGTON**

At the Sheraton-Lexington Motor Inn
Corners of Rt. 128 & Rt. 2A at exit 45 W, Lexington, Mass. 617 / 862-8700



Witherby," said the barman. Witherby started to chat with him about the weather, but the barman, who had been quite garrulous on this subject with a waiter a few moments before, clammed up and fumbled with a line of glasses on the counter before him. Then Lyman appeared. A crusty old gent (he's seventy-two). Lyman looked at me over his half-moon reading glasses and asked if I'd had anything to drink. I said yes. "Good," he said. He asked the barman for my check and signed it. He explained that they'd just been going over their wine list. Witherby suddenly perked up and said that there should be a "wine for the people, a what do you call it? A *vin ordinaire*." Then he smiled, obviously pleased to have thought of the French phrase. Lyman worked his lips into an indulgent half-smile. Nothing came of the suggestion.

Lyman, Witherby, and I then made our way to a large round table in the bay of the high dark dining room, gleaming with silver and china. Two other gentlemen joined us, a kindly, puffy fellow and a man with a lively pair of eyebrows and plump, scarlet lips. All four clubmen wore suits of tweed or flannel. All four immediately set to figuring out the luncheon menu. Just what exactly was Braised Beef Tongue Florentine? With spinach, someone said. Decided. Nobody was going to have that. We settled instead for Grilled Bass and Baked Apple, Scallops Meunière, and Brochette of Beef. We chatted about membership fees, which, at \$625 a year, according to one clubman, seemed a bargain compared with his country club's asking price of \$1,000. "I have just sent in my resignation," he said. Then luncheon was served, and the platters placed before us commanded, and deserved, all our attention.

After lunch, we strolled back to the front hall. Some other members had come in and were grouped in a circle by the staircase, hands in their pockets, rocking back and forth on their toes. Lyman seemed eager to join them, so I took my leave.

Walter Muir Whitehill extolled the "small-town sociability" of the club in the old days. "People were always going on foot and seeing their friends," he said. "They'd stop by the club to have a drink and fool around for a bit. It was awfully pleasant."

No more. The small-town sociability is long gone, and an air of prim, dry urbanity has taken its place. For all its refinement, the club is just dull. There's a story that the Somerset Club refused a bequest of Admiral Byrd's stuffed penguins on the grounds that they looked too much like the members. Until I sat in that one-hundred-year-old room in that one-hundred-twenty-year-old club with those fifty-, sixty-, and seventy-year-old men and their two-hundred-year-old manners, I had thought it was a joke. □

**Give your home
an ounce of
prevention.**



The most thoughtful gift you can give your family and home is ADT fire and burglar protection. Protection that is custom-designed to your home and life style. ADT, the world's largest electronic security company is on the job at the Pentagon, and in banks and museums throughout the country. Shouldn't we be on the job at your house? Call us today for a no obligation analysis of your security needs.



120 Monroe St., Cambridge, MA 02142
(617) 661-9710