



George Ross Photographs

december inspiration...when aesthetics mattered

This holiday season, I found myself setting the dining room table for a Victorian family by the name of Trevor. They lived in a manor house called *Glenview*, perched high on a hill overlooking the mighty Hudson River in the town of Yonkers, a quick boat ride up the river from New York City. The year was 1876.

For years, *Glenview* was the scene of many Trevor gatherings, Christmas being only one. Eventually, the family dispersed and their *Glenview* home was sold to the city of Yonkers. It is now it is part of the *Hudson River Museum*, and the mansion has been restored to its former Gilded Age glory. This holiday season, the halls of *Glenview* have been decked with boughs of holly, stockings have been hung by the chimney with care, and decorated trees stand in every room as if awaiting the Trevor family's yuletide celebration to begin.

Setting the table for a Victorian meal did take a bit of effort. The actual placement of the table setting took a full day and that didn't take into account conceptualizing the design, polishing the silver, selecting the table ornaments or the hunting and gathering of all the items that were needed. The holiday dinner, circa 1870, was an extravagant affair consisting of many courses. Usually starting off with a soup course, the meal then moved on to courses of fish, meat, salad, fruit and cheese and ended with extra special holiday desserts such as a Bouche de Noel and a fool or two (I'm referring to the dessert, not the guests).



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Silver flatwear was arranged based on the menu, placed in chronological order, with each course's utensils starting from the outside then working in to the center. You can understand why a yardstick is needed to make sure all forks, knives, and spoons are laid out with precision. With that many instruments, one fork out of line would visually throw off the symmetry and the persons seated at the table's heads, (I assume Mr and Mrs Trevor), would view a zig zag of cutlery working its way up and down the table- definitely a housekeeping faux pas!

Nineteenth century families still "dressed" for dinner every night. No one arrived in sweat pants and tee shirts with smartphones in hand or jumped up from the table because the Yankee/ Red Sox game had started. It was all very civilized. It was the time of day when conversation centered around the day's events, opinions on politics and what was on the schedule for the next day, and I can guarantee, those Trevor kids didn't need to be told what fork to use!



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Call me old fashioned, but aesthetics and decorum have always mattered to me. It was important that my sons were taught from an early age to conduct themselves properly at the dinner table. We ate dinner in the dining room even on weeknights so we could repeat the nightly litany of, "Sit up straight/wait until everyone is served/feet on the floor/elbows off the table/ don't speak with food in your mouth/napkins on laps/do not leave the table until you are excused and **YOU ARE NOT EXCUSED!**"

It was so exhausting to repeat that mantra over and over after a long day at work. If on some nights, my husband didn't make it home for dinner, I bent the rule and the boys and I would eat at the kitchen counter. What interested me was, at the counter, their manners went to hell in a hand basket but when they ate in the dining room, there was a definite improvement. Hmmm.....

When my four sisters and I were growing up, my mother used a harsher method to get her point across. She sat at her place at the dinner table with a fly swatter at her side. At the first misstep she would issue a warning, after that, there was no warning. She would just reach across the table with a light "snap" of the swatter. After 2 warnings, it wasn't so light a "snap". I have to say, it worked and it seems like it would be a much easier way to teach table manners than the Table Manners Mantra my husband and I employed. After many years of our mantra being drummed into our boys' conscious and subconscious, my sons left home for boarding school. On their first visits home, I was crestfallen to see that most of our efforts in table etiquette had fallen by the wayside. Not only had they seemed to forget what had been drilled into them day after day, week after week, year after year, they added a few horrifying habits to the list! Sigh...

Creating something special does take extra effort whether it is table manners, holiday decorations or preparing a special meal for those you love. Our lives are so busy that we have little time for those tweaks that really make a difference. For me, there is nothing more rewarding (or fun) than setting a beautiful table for my family and friends. Even for our own holiday meals, setting the table is an "all day affair". It is also the reason why our Holiday cards get mailed AFTER Dec 25th.



Christmas dinner, Linden Hill Farm, 2016

Last Christmas, we had 18 for dinner. It was a challenge to squeeze that many diners at our table but we were able to find a small table in our barn, we raised the height to fit flush with the dining table, and then layered tablecloths to accommodate the extended length. I like to call it *Magical Makeshift*.

After a day of table preparations and another day of preparing the holiday dinner, I usually arrive at the dinner table on Christmas Day a little cranky and a bit worse for wear. But when the family is seated and the toasts begin, everything suddenly seems right with the world. The extra time and effort is really a small price to pay for a wonderful moment with those we love. Our guests feel special and our family sits tall with napkins on their laps -no fly swatters needed. For one brief, shining moment, we are all transported to a time when aesthetics *really mattered*.

Hark...I think I hear the dinner gong...

Happy Holidays to all and best wishes for a New Year filled with an abundance of things that matter.

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