

After Hours

SOCIAL STUDIES

Cotillion makes a comeback

In which you will discover the ultimate importance of the curtsy, the bow, the two-step and the fox trot.

BY D.B. TIPMORE
REVIEW STAFF WRITER

IN the late afternoon and early evening of every recent Friday, at Miami Beach's Bath Club, at Coral Gables' Riviera County Club, at the Fort Lauderdale Yacht Club and the Beach Club in Palm Beach, among others, the children of many of South Florida's most privileged families have been slipping on white gloves and learning the fox trot in that annual 10-week rite of passage Society refers to as cotillion.

Not *the* cotillion. Not *a* cotillion. Simply *cotillion*.

With cotillion, we are not talking about *debuts*, those can-be-costly bows to Society made by eligible young women in their late teens.

Nor are we talking strictly about etiquette classes such as those still held on Boston's Society Hill.

No, a South Florida cotillion might better be thought of as the ultimate after-school activity: part dance class, part etiquette class and part feeder system for *our kind*, which, among certain children between 6 and 16, is enjoying a resurgence almost 40 years after its local origin in Coral Gables and Palm Beach.

Despite *our kind's* sanction, however, these children learning the fox trot are not from families whose names appear regularly in local "society" col-

umns. Nor do pictures of cotillion classes ordinarily appear in local newspapers, for cotillion is a very, very private affair and the families who sponsor it desire publicity to the same degree that Howard Hughes desired fingernail scissors: Dade families such as Bertram, Fuchs, Muir, Matheson, Fascell, Bassett, Livingston, Adams and Caldwell; Broward families such as Dixon, Thompson, Maurer and Richardson; Palm Beach families such as Sang and Krumholz and Luntz and Wilson and Matthews.

In South Florida, perhaps more so than in, say, New England, the world these families inhabit is not impossible to enter — provided your education is suitable and you remember to observe a polite give-and-take. Among these families, it is not simply that you cannot accept champagne and then repay with Thunderbird. It is more that if you offer Thunderbird, you will be expected to do so *attractively*.

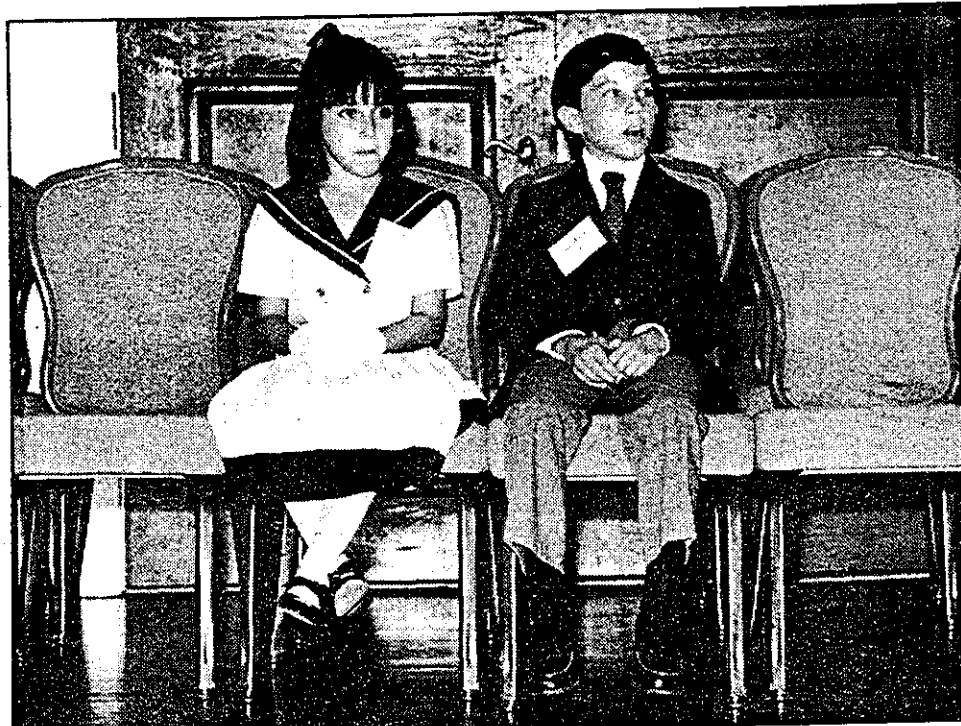
And the early acquisition of a personal attractiveness — at least one very specific *style* of personal attractiveness — is very much the point of cotillion: to learn to behave attractively, that is, with the same low-key courtesy of your parents; to learn to groom yourself attractively, that is, in the same natural fabrics and minimal trimmings your parents prefer; to learn to dance attractively, that is with a minimum of toe-crunching and "pump-handling"; and to learn that standing so that a bowling ball could fit between your legs is no prettier to observe than picking your nose.

A haze of attractiveness is one of the first things you will notice upon entering the chandeliered ballrooms of the Bath Club or the Riviera Country Club late on a Friday afternoon as cotillion is about to begin: the attractiveness of the little blue blazers, under which shoulders are already squared with an executive confidence; the attractiveness of the expensive little cotillion frocks, so similar to the ones to be worn later at required galas; the attractiveness of the parents serving as hosts and greeters; the attractiveness of the beautiful hair, and teeth, and complexions and smiles.

Ruling over all this attractiveness are the cotillion directors, elegant men in well-fitted blazers and shoes, slender women in careful coiffures. Often these men and women have retired from managing Fred Astaire or Arthur Murray Dance Schools and are looking for something to do. Directing cotillions fits the bill exactly. If they are successful, as are Jon and Vivian Williams at



Caroline Blake prepares for the waltz in the fourth-grade cotillion class at Dade County's Riviera Country Club.



Between dances at the Riviera, Christina Alvarez sits in correct cotillion posture with Sander Fort.

the Bath Club and Frank Paige at the Riviera, they can enjoy some particularly lustrous golden years by sewing up entire *regions* of cotillions. The Williams, with their 20 cotillions stretching from Colorado Springs to the Bath Club, appear to have conquered most of the country's South-South Central region. Frank Paige reigns supreme in the East, with cotillions stretching from the Riviera to Connecticut, including almost all the major cotillions in South

Florida. Consider that these classes each have on the average of 60-80 children, and that cotillion costs on the average of \$100 a child for 10 hours of class, and you understand how the Williams can afford to have both a home in Dallas and a getaway home outside Colorado Springs.

When talking to cotillion directors about their line of work, one must ad-

SEE COTILLION, PAGE 17

**Bete-ing
on the Arts
— On the Circuit**
— Page 16

**Brown meets
Bach on Artscape**
— Page 14

**Grand Slam
— Executive Diner**
Page 15

S O C I A L S T U D I E S

Beyond the box step

COTILLION, FROM PAGE 13

just to a rather narrow perspective on recent American history, a perspective that can afford to revolve solely around manners and their importance. According to this perspective, everything — the economy, foreign affairs, personal finances, matters of health — seems to have been going along swimmingly until the 1970s. People knew how to behave, cared about how to behave, taught their children how to behave. *Before* the 1970s.

"But in the 1970s and early 1980s," says Frank Paige, "families got very lax in raising their children. 'Why do children have to get dressed up and go to dancing class?' seemed to be the attitude. When I think of that attitude, I always remember John McEnroe's refusing to go to the ball held in his honor after his victory at Wimbledon in 1979. He later admitted that he wasn't sure he could handle the protocol. That sums up the '70s attitude toward polite behavior — and the consequences of that attitude."

The attitude prevailed, according to this perspective, until the heyday of the Reagan years, when an interest in cotillion seemed once again appropriate. In a culture so bent upon eating purple lettuce and drinking foreign wines and knowing the artist of the moment, attention to what some may consider refinements once again seemed to apply. No longer was it irrelevant — or, snobbish, for that matter — for a mother of a fifth-grader in one of the "nicer" local preparatory schools to be on the committee that determined whose children would be sent cotillion invitations.

The process by which that mother gets to be on a cotillion committee seems vague — and yet somehow canny in its lack of clarity. To talk to some of these ladies — attractive down to the last perfectly placed hair — is to hear that they *themselves* are not quite sure how they became committee members.

"We just kind of find each other," they will tell you. Or, "No, our cotillion is not sponsored by any one organization. We just put the word out."

Equally mysterious is exactly how that word is put out, why certain children receive a cotillion invitation in the early part of every year and why others do not. Committee members will tell you that invitations are sent to a wide list of schools — "37 South Dade County schools" in the case of the Riviera, schools from "all over Dade County," according to Terry Schecter who presides over the Bath Club cotillion. Or Frank Paige will explain how the invitation process works for the Riviera cotillion: how invitations are first sent to children who were in last year's cotillion, and then to children of members of the host private club and finally to schools in the area.

"Exclusivity doesn't apply to most cotillions," he will add. "If it's in a good community with lots of nice children, our host clubs allow any child to participate."

And, yet, from all appearances, these cotillions would not make a very good United Colors ad campaign for Benetton. Jesse Jackson would not find his Rainbow Coalition in these ballrooms. In fact, few children spoken to at either the Bath Club or the Riviera seemed to be from a "good" public grade school or a "nice" public junior high. St. Thomas Parish School was a favorite, and St. Stephen's Episcopal Day School and Miami Country Day School.

Which has raised certain questions, not the least of which is a charge of social discrimination. This charge is probably most relevant in Palm Beach, for example, where there is, or has been, the difficult issue of "going over the lists" — the polite way of describing the process of eliminating Jewish children from the Junior Assembly invitation lists, lists based on class rolls of the exclusive Palm Beach Day School: (Junior Assembly is another name for cotillion).

In 1983, according to Louise Shure, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League of Palm Beach County, the process became cruel and pronounced enough that a Committee of Concerned Parents sent a letter to the Day School board asking that the school intervene. When the school did nothing, the committee approached the ADL, which issued a statement in December of 1983 accusing the Day School, the Junior Assembly Committee, and the Flagler Museum, the public facility in which the cotillion was then being held, of "carrying on a policy of social discrimination." As a result of this pressure, and a number of attention-grabbing newspaper headlines, Palm Beach now has two cotillions: The Junior Assembly, which remains determinedly exclusive by holding its classes at the private Beach Club; and the more "open" cotillion in the Parish House of St. Edward's Church.

But, of course, this is Palm Beach, a town for which exclusiveness is mother's milk. Besides, cotillion logic goes, why insist on being so unpleasant? Why dwell on such issues? It's like talking about money — inappropriate to good manners. And never forget that good manners — whether or not they are founded on discrimination — are at the heart of the matter.

"People have learned that good manners and nicer-looking parties make you feel special," Frank Paige believes. "No one asks me — as they occasionally did in the 1970s — if Jimmy can wear Dockside's to dance class."

But what about Jimmy? Does he prefer to spend whole minutes of late Friday afternoons trying to get his stubborn feet to "step ... slide ... step, step ... slide ... step" just like Mr. Paige keeps telling him to?

Yes, surprisingly, in part because cotillion psychology rests firmly upon the smart idea that, at this age, manners can be learned most effectively from anyone other than parents; in part because cotillion means music, and refreshments, and fun; and, in part, because these children have already been taught to identify strongly with adult behavior.

"I like coming to cotillion because it relaxes me," Felipe Pedroso will tell you, sounding as though, at age 9, life's stresses are already problematic. Felipe, and his twin brother, Carlos, are students at Coconut Grove's St. Stephens School. They are also two of the best dancers in the fourth-grade cotillion class at Riviera, boys in demand, boys who seem to enjoy

both the attentions of girls and the respect of other boys.

And although they may not attend cotillion with the same degree of anticipation with which they play basketball or over-night at a friend's, Carlos and Felipe — and Jimmy and Stephanie, too — nonetheless get the message quite early on that these classes will produce an invaluable pay-off later on in life: that behavioral semaphore which is often called "good breeding."

"When, at age 12, I began going to cotillion, [the long-gone, but revered, cotillion at the Coral Gables Women's Club directed by Dr. Frank and Hazel Novakowski]," recalls William Torbert Muir, a partner with Miami's Steel Hector & Davis, "I thought I was a victim. I had been sent there by my parents to be civilized and I didn't particularly want to be civilized. But, it turned out, all my friends were there, so it wasn't so bad. There were games, and it wasn't stuffy or full of parents who were socialites. I might add that in my life I have felt a greater confidence in social situations because I learned at cotillion what the rules were. I have never been in doubt."



At cotillion, the gentleman always gets refreshments for the lady.

I have never been in doubt. To be never in doubt is a state of mind devoutly to be wished. Considering the going price of inner peace, cotillion classes — despite all that waltzing and curtsying and bowing *stuff* — may not be such a bad bargain after all.



Hands and feet together, a boy-girl-boy-girl line-up of sixth-grade children at Miami Beach's Bath Club cotillion.



Under the chandeliers of the Bath Club ballroom, children prepare for the fox trot.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARBARA ELLEN KOCH