

Vanderbilt, by Anderson Cooper and Katherine Howe

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

In *Vanderbilt*, the fascinating new book Anderson Cooper co-wrote with Katherine Howe, the esteemed CNN anchor explores his family's legacy. "The Vanderbilts," Mr. Cooper notes, "were the original newmoney arrivistes who used their wealth to buy prestige and respectability and churned through their fortune not in the cause of lasting change, but on massive outlets for conspicuous consumption. This is the story of the greatest American fortune ever squandered."

In the mid-nineteenth century, Cornelius Vanderbilt – Anderson Cooper's great-great-great grandfather – was the richest man in America. His shipping and railroad empires had built the family fortune. Cantankerous and ruthless, Cornelius, known as the "Commodore," left a fortune of \$100 million (over \$2 billion today) when he died in 1877. His will set off legal suits among his squabbling heirs.

Two of the Commodore's grandsons, Willie and Cornelius II, along with their Gilded Age social-climbing wives, used their wealth to build massive Manhattan mansions and summer "cottages" in Newport. In March 1883, Willie's status-seeking wife Alva threw a spectacular costume ball for 1,200 guests at their "Petit Chateau" on Fifth Avenue. It was rumored that the Vanderbilt ball cost about \$6.4 million in today's money.

The next generation of Vanderbilts began to deplete the family's fortune. Reggie Vanderbilt gambled and drank his way through his inheritance. When he was in his 50s, Reggie married Gloria Morgan, a teenage socialite. Their daughter, called "Little Gloria" (Anderson Cooper's famous mother), was born in 1924. A few months later, Reggie succumbed to his alcoholism. The only value left to his estate was a trust fund split between Little Gloria and Reggie's daughter from his first marriage.

Reggie's widow Gloria Morgan, who was left very little, used her young daughter's trust fund to support her own lavish lifestyle. Shuttled from one resort to another, Little Gloria was often left in the care of a wealthy aunt, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. In a sensational 1934 court case, dubbed the "trial of the century," Gertrude was awarded full custody of the "poor little rich girl." When Little Gloria came of age, however, she blithely burned through her inheritance, but later reestablished herself as a style-setting designer.

Gloria Vanderbilt, who passed away in 2019, was "the last to live a Vanderbilt life," observes Mr. Cooper. "She was the last to be born before the Depression, when the Vanderbilt riches seemed as limitless and eternal as the stars in the sky. She had lived her entire life in the public eye. That's what she would be to history. To me, she was my mom."

(Note: *Vanderbilt* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 11.)