

# Uncoverings 2000

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## An “Old-Fashioned Quilting” in 1910

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*A newspaper report of a local quilting event in Seneca, South Carolina, in 1910, recorded the participation of a group of eight women. The event is examined within the context of other local social events and quilting activities in an attempt to determine the significance of this event for its participants. The event narrative reveals the existence of a practical joke performed by the hostess as part of her enactment of an “old-fashioned quilting.” An unintended response to the event illustrates some of the tensions created by competing values among different social classes and by the changing roles of women. This study demonstrates the complex context of a single quilting event and focuses attention on women who were not active quiltmakers but who used quilts and quilting to achieve personal and social goals.*

*On last Tuesday, Mrs. J. H. Thompson entertained her friends at an old-fashioned quilting, which proved a happy climax to the many delightful social affairs of the holidays.<sup>1</sup>*

This opening statement prefaced a detailed item in the “Local Matters About Seneca” column of the January 12, 1910, issue of the *Keowee Courier*, a weekly newspaper published in Walhalla, South Carolina, the county seat of Oconee County (see figure 1).<sup>2</sup> This paper is the result of additional research conducted in an attempt to determine the *significance* of this event to the participants in this particular time and place. There is no evidence that suggests that these women met to quilt on a regular basis. Instead, this appears to have been a one-time event presented by the hostess as a novel form of entertainment within the local social structure.



## *Uncoverings 2000*

### *The Setting*

Located in the northwestern corner of the state, Oconee County adjoins Georgia and North Carolina. The county's boundary encompasses forests, rivers, and rolling farmland in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. By 1910, there were several recently constructed textile mills in the county, but the principal economic activities continued to be agriculture and forestry. According to the 1910 census, Oconee County had a predominantly rural population of 27,337. That year the town of Walhalla, established in 1849, had a population of 1,595, while that of the town of Seneca, founded in 1872, had grown to 1,313.<sup>3</sup>

During the early twentieth century, the *Keowee Courier* published a mix of local, state, national, and international news items; some syndicated features; local and national advertisements; railroad schedules; and commentary. Typical of rural newspapers serving predominantly rural areas, a major feature of the *Courier* was the community news columns submitted by local correspondents scattered throughout the county. To a modern eye, community news columns include items that seem trivial, meaningless, or even comical, such as "Miss Sue Haley spent the week-end with Miss Sue Daly," or "W. H. Hughes has recovered from a severe attack of erysipelas [a skin inflammation], and his friends are delighted to see him out again." But for a predominantly rural population without telephones, connected by unpaved roads over hilly terrain, the publication of such news served a vital communicative function.

### *Women's Social Events*

The newspaper account of Mrs. Thompson's quilting was only one of a large number of items listed in the community news columns. While individual correspondents included short accounts of visits and illnesses, by far the most extensive coverage was given to descriptions of social events, especially daytime women's gatherings. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, women's voluntary associations proliferated throughout the country. Women formed clubs



Figure 1: The published report of Mrs. Thompson's "old-fashioned quilting" appeared in the January 12, 1910, issue of the *Keowee Courier*.

and societies for a variety of purposes, including religious and missionary work, literary and art study, and civic improvement.<sup>4</sup> Those that have received the least attention from historians are those formed primarily for social purposes.

The women who joined local clubs "were drawn for the most part from a small minority of the prosperous, usually wives and daughters of substantial farmers, or of white-collar and professional men. Thanks





to the increasing availability of factory-made goods and of poorly paid black and white household servants, these women were relieved of much domestic responsibility.<sup>5</sup> The pages of the *Keowee Courier* document the social interactions of the wives of farmers and merchants through narratives of club meeting activities.

#### *Newspaper Reports of Quilting Activity*

Although for the period 1909-1910 there are relatively few specific mentions of quilting activity in the *Keowee Courier*, the meetings of local women's groups typically included an hour of "fancywork," usually defined as decorative or ornamental needlework, such as crochet, knitting, or embroidery.<sup>6</sup> For example, the newspaper reported a weekly meeting of the Emery Club of Walhalla: "For an hour or more fancy work furnished occupation for the busy fingers, while the latest news, fashion dots, etc., gave play to the busy brains."<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of such domestic activity in a social context may have helped dispel criticism that the meetings were distracting women from their responsibilities to homes and families.<sup>8</sup>

Of the newspaper items that mentioned quilting activity, the majority involved church groups and Sunshine workers making quilts for charity.<sup>9</sup> All three references during 1909, and nine of twelve references for 1910, described charity quiltings in the outlying rural communities of Fair Play, Coneross, and Bountyland, not in the towns of Seneca or Walhalla. The products of these quiltings were designated for the Connie Maxwell, Epworth, and Thornwell Orphanages, all in South Carolina, and the "Blind Babies' home in New York."<sup>10</sup> Although the reports of charity quiltings, particularly those held in the homes of individuals, occasionally included descriptions of refreshments and comments that the participants enjoyed themselves, these reports typically placed more emphasis on the number of quilts completed and their intended disposition than on the social amenities of the event.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the account of Mrs. Thompson's quilting dwelt on the social nature of the occasion.



### *Entertaining the Ladies*

*When the guests arrived the quilt was in frame and ready for quick fingers, and quicker tongues. Good old songs were sung and the quilt was free of its frame and finished with decorative monograms of the guests who participated in its making.*

A reading of hundreds of published accounts of ladies' social events of this era reveals that the principal goal to which hostesses aspired was to provide novel entertainment within an atmosphere of refinement and gentility. Katherine C. Grier described "gentility" in this context as an "eighteenth-century European cultural ideal, . . . a model of personal excellence originating in the uppermost classes of society, [which] stressed individual cultivation and social display."<sup>12</sup> The chief elements of a successful social event were elaborate decorations, sumptuous refreshment, and delightful entertainment, and the hostess who could provide these with little apparent effort received special commendations from the newspaper correspondent. The Seneca correspondent to the *Keowee Courier* submitted this detailed account of one event:

Miss Mary Cherry was hostess to the Gossipers last week at a "St. Patrick's Day" entertainment. Elaborate preparations were shown in the decorations and in the refreshments, both of which were in keeping with the spirit of the occasion. Progressive hearts was played, the score cards representing the shamrock. For the highest score, Miss Sue Thompson was awarded the prize, a hat pin set with an emerald. At the close of the game the guests were ushered into the dining room where a three-course luncheon was served. The guests were seated about the large dining table, which was ablaze with many tapers of green candelabra. The centerpiece was a mirror decoration representing, of course, the Emerald Isle, native moss and ferns being used in its perfect representation. Bonbon dishes of mints in green were seen on the table. Ferns and palms were used in pyramidal shape, the beauty of which was greatly enhanced by the use of lighted candles, and tracings of ivy were seen on the curtains. Favors of gauze shamrock were found at the places, which were designated by hand-painted place cards. The pièce de résistance was the elegant cake, which was embossed in most artistic design, showing the dainty shamrock and miniature pipes. There was a full attendance of the members who voted it one of the most thoroughly delightful meetings in the history of the Gossipers.<sup>13</sup>



Mrs. Thompson's "old-fashioned quilting" must be examined in the context of other weekly, daytime, women's social events of this time and place. Although the guests were invited to sit at a quilt frame and stitch, the quilt itself, the quilting activity, and the "good old songs" functioned as props for the novel entertainment provided by the hostess. The designation "old-fashioned" suggests that the activity was perceived as more typical of the past than the present.<sup>14</sup> No detail is provided in the newspaper account of the physical description or the intended disposition of the resulting quilt. Mrs. Thompson's quilt was "finished with decorative monograms of the guests," which suggests that she intended to keep it as a memento of the occasion rather than to donate it to charity.

#### *An Elaborate Joke*

The published narrative of this event described an elaborate practical joke designed by the hostess. After working on the quilt during the morning, the guests anticipated being served a lavish luncheon. But the hostess continued her interpretation of the "old-fashioned" theme through her choice of luncheon decorations and menu.

*When dinner was announced the party repaired to the dining room, and found a long table set after the fashion of ye day when quiltings were "all the go." A nice fresh oil table cloth adorned the table, and for the center-piece a square from a woven Marseilles spread was used. The menu was not an elaborate one, but was recommended for its "staying" qualities. Water was the strongest beverage served.*

The correspondent relied on understated humor to convey to her readers that the spread provided by the hostess was meager. Traditional rules governing hospitality in Western culture require that hosts provide ample refreshment for invited guests, and at the same time preclude guests from commenting on any deficiencies. Although Mrs. Thompson committed an offense by not providing the expected elaborate repast for her friends, the guests would not risk further offense by mentioning the deficiency. Likewise, the correspondent, herself one of the guests, could not describe the spartan nature of the offering in



her narrative directly and instead relied on subtle irony. Her narrative provided subtle clues to the bogus nature of the meal. Describing the menu as “not an elaborate one” would have tipped off contemporary readers immediately, because a universal paradigm for such events is a meal that is “sumptuous,” “delightful,” or at the very least, “tempting.” The further comment, “Recommended for its ‘staying’ qualities,” contrasts with the usual epithet in such cases, “dainty.” Providing water rather than, perhaps, tea or punch also suggests that the spread was not up to expectations.

*The last course was toothpicks, served from a tiny pitcher which was imported from across the water by a friend of the family, and dated back a hundred years. The above mentioned centerpiece was made by a relative of the family befo' de war, and the tablecloth an heir loom of a hundred years. These interesting facts made history, which was continued through the delights of the day and were given by the hostess in her easy, charming style.*

Describing toothpicks as “the last course,” suggesting their use in public, would have struck contemporary readers as uncouth, further marking this event as an anomaly. In addition to conveying the humor of the situation, however, the correspondent also reported the significance of certain material objects used by the hostess to enhance her “old-fashioned” theme. The description of the hostess’s “easy, charming style” may suggest the correspondent’s admiration for her ability to maintain the hoax.

*The guests partook heartily of the repast and were asked to resume their quilting with a promise of dessert later. In a few moments the dining room was again thrown open and a splendid course dinner was served.*

Although the guests may have “partaken heartily” of the first meal, they clearly could not have sated their appetites. They were ushered from the dining room, still uncertain of the hostess’s motives. It would have been only after the dining room was reopened to reveal the actual meal that the elaborate joke could be acknowledged, allowing the guests and their hostess to share the laughter along with the “splendid course dinner.”



*Mrs. Thompson's Guests*

*Those enjoying the day were: Mesdames F. M. Cary, W. S. Hunter, J. F. Alexander, J. W. Byrd, C. V. McCarey, T. S. Stribling, and T. E. Stribling. Toward the close of the day a suggestion was made that the photographer be sent for and a picture made of the quilting party. This was done, and so ended the day, which goes into Seneca's social history as one of the most thoroughly enjoyable in her calendar. M. V. S.*

A photograph of the eight women who attended the quilting is published in a book compiled by Frances Holleman (see figure 2).<sup>15</sup> The portrait does not include a quilt, but it may well be the photograph mentioned in the narrative. Details of the clothing suggest that the photograph dates from 1909 or 1910.<sup>16</sup> The published photograph is credited to Miss Nora Carver, who with her sister Cora "operated a studio on North Depot Street and later upstairs in the Harper Building across from the park."<sup>17</sup> Either studio location would have been an easy walk from Mrs. Thompson's home, and there is no record of another photographer in business in Seneca during 1910.

The notation that a photograph was taken to document a social event is unique among the hundreds of published narratives in this newspaper. It seems to be an indication of a feeling of communality and cohesiveness. The participants wanted their participation in the event to be recorded. From additional issues of the *Keowee Courier*, census data, church histories, cemetery records, and books on local history, it is possible to piece together admittedly incomplete portraits of the eight participants in Mrs. Thompson's quilting.

The hostess, Lida Alexander Thompson (1869-1941), was the daughter of Henry F. Alexander, a Confederate veteran, and Rebecca Doyle Alexander. The Alexanders first lived in Walhalla, and in the 1890s they moved to Seneca, where Lida's father was engaged in the real estate business and served for a time as Treasurer of Oconee County. In 1891, Lida married James H. Thompson, the son of Seneca's first mayor. The couple had one son, Alfred H., born in 1893. Lida (also listed variously as Lidie, Alida, or Lyda) Thompson was thirty-nine years old in 1910.<sup>18</sup>

Annie Mildred Fant Cary (1866-1941) was a native of Anderson, a



Figure 2: The eight women who participated in Mrs. Thompson's "old-fashioned quilting" were identified by the author of a local history publication. Photograph from Frances Holleman, *The City of Seneca, South Carolina, The City of Opportunity: Its Centennial, 1873–1973*.

town thirty miles southeast of Seneca. In 1888, she married Frank M. Cary (or Carey), who was self-employed as a cotton dealer, a director of the First Citizens Bank in Seneca, and served as a state representative. In 1910, the Carys lived with their six children, ranging in age from two to twenty. Also living in the household were Frank's twenty-two-year-old niece—a bookkeeper in a dry goods store—and Sallie Clark, a black cook. In 1910, Annie Fant Cary was forty-four years old.<sup>19</sup>

Nina Dickinson Lewis Hunter (1867-1943) married William Simpson Hunter in 1886. William Hunter was a store owner and one of the organizers of the Citizens Bank in 1904. In 1910, Nina Hunter, age forty-three, lived with her husband and three daughters in their own home on North First Street. (Unlike many homes of this vintage close to the business district, the Hunter house still stands and has been renovated for offices.) Their oldest daughter Carrie L., age twenty-two, lived at home and listed her occupation as music teacher.<sup>20</sup>

Emma Scott Alexander (1873-1952) married James Franklin Alex-



ander in 1902. James Alexander was a bookkeeper in a dry goods store, and later was in partnership with Joseph W. Byrd for a short time before joining the Seneca Bank. In 1910, Emma Alexander, age thirty-six, lived in a rented home with her husband and their three small children. James F. Alexander was the younger brother of Lida Alexander Thompson, so Emma Alexander was the sister-in-law of the hostess.<sup>21</sup>

Personne Magee (or McGee) Byrd (1868-1918) was the wife of Joseph Wilson Byrd, who was a partner in a dry goods store and who served, at various times, as a town warden, a commissioner for the Light and Water Plant, and Treasurer of the Chamber of Commerce. Married in 1888, "Sonnie" and Joseph Byrd were living in Seneca in 1910, with their two sons. Clara L. Hunt, a twenty-five-year-old public schoolteacher, boarded with the family.<sup>22</sup>

Clara Verner McCarey (1868-1952) was the widow of James F. McCarey (or McCary) who was appointed Seneca postmaster in 1895 and died in 1901, at age thirty-four. In 1910, Clara McCarey, age forty-four, was living with her two children, James F., Jr., seventeen, and Clara Verner, Jr., ten. The accepted convention for formal address for a widow was to use her own initials rather than those of her late husband.<sup>23</sup>

Maude Verner Stribling (1879-1918) married Thomas Sligh Stribling in 1899. T. S. Stribling worked as a salesman in a hardware store. In 1910, Maude, age thirty, and her husband lived with their four young children. Their oldest daughter Mary Ida, or "Poppy," was later described as "a dedicated member" of the local D.A.R. chapter.<sup>24</sup>

Martha "Mattie" Verner Stribling (1861-1945) married Thomas Edward Stribling in 1889. Maude Verner, Clara Verner, and Mattie Verner were apparently not sisters, but they were no doubt part of the large and influential Verner family of Oconee County. Thomas S. Stribling and Thomas E. Stribling were second cousins. In 1910, Thomas E. Stribling owned a grocery store. In 1910, Mattie, age forty-seven, lived with her husband and their four children ranging in age from twelve to nineteen.<sup>25</sup> Mattie Verner Stribling served as the Seneca correspondent for the *Keowee Courier* for a number of years and is "M. V. S.," the author of the narrative of Mrs. Thompson's quilting and other local Seneca items.





Of these eight women, six were in their forties. The two younger women were Maude Verner Stribling, twenty-nine, and Emma Scott Alexander, thirty-six. The eight women had a total of twenty-six living children, whose ages in 1910 ranged from two to twenty-two, and at least two more who had died. Although at least one, Sonnie Byrd, had taught school before her marriage, none of the women were employed outside the home.

One of the eight employed a live-in cook; the others almost certainly employed daily service workers. The intersection of North First and Oak streets, near which all the women lived, is only three blocks from the location, then and now, of the African-American neighborhood in which the Seneca Institute for Negroes was established in 1899. As this was the only school of its type in the area, many black families moved into Seneca so that their children could attend the Institute. Graduates of the school recalled that their parents did laundry and other work for white families living nearby. While nationally the twentieth century saw a decline in the employment of household service workers, Mattie Stribling noted in her column, "The servant question is not the problem with Seneca housewives that it once was. . . . It is a fact that the supply exceeds the demand in Seneca."<sup>26</sup> These women were in good position, financially and logistically, to employ household or child-care workers.

All eight of the women had connections with the Seneca Presbyterian Church. Annie Fant Cary did not join the Church, though her husband had served as a deacon and as secretary/treasurer of the Sunday School. Lida Thompson and her parents were members of the Church, but her husband and son were not. Maude and Mattie Stribling, along with their children, were members, but not their husbands. The other four women, their husbands, and their children were all members. Sonnie Byrd taught Sunday School, and Mattie Stribling served on the music committee and took part in regional church meetings to merge the Ladies Aid and the Missionary Society. Clara McCarey presented the Church with a mahogany table in memory of her late husband, while Nina Hunter later donated a stained glass window in honor of her husband, who died in 1918. Unlike established rural churches of this era, the Seneca Presbyterian Church did not own land for a cem-





etery. All eight of the women, their husbands, and many of their children are buried in the nondenominational Mountain View Cemetery, a few blocks north of their homes in Seneca.<sup>27</sup>

The husbands of all eight women were engaged in local commercial ventures. The men were successful merchants, cotton brokers, and bankers, and they took an active part in local government. Established in 1872, Seneca was one of the numerous small towns spawned by new railroad connections built during the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. The town's population had expanded rapidly from 382 in 1880, to 1,313 in 1910. Seneca's commercial district grew in response to increased demand for goods and services.<sup>28</sup>

As a new town, Seneca society was a mixture of the descendants of old, respected early Oconee County families, such as the Alexanders, Doyles, Striblings, and Verners, and more recent arrivals attracted by business prospects. It is not clear how much rivalry or snobbery there might have been between the commercially based Seneca residents and the older agriculturally based families in Walhalla and surrounding rural communities. Certainly, some of Seneca's business leaders—and their wives—were from older families.

#### *Local Women's Clubs*

Additional research turned up evidence of the participation of these eight women in local organizations. In 1896, twelve Seneca women met to form the Once-A-Week Club, "in order to furnish a stimulus for the study of general literature and for the purpose of social enjoyment and mutual improvement." This club is significant because two years later its members hosted the state-wide organizational meeting that resulted in the formation of the South Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. The Once-A-Week Club also headed an effort to establish a local library in 1896, and supported activities to improve local schools.<sup>29</sup>

Members of the Once-A-Week Club included Mesdames Byrd, Cary, Hunter, McCarey, and T. E. Stribling. Between 1898 and 1901, however, all five of these women had either resigned from the Club or ceased attending meetings, although there is no indication of the reasons for their departures.<sup>30</sup>



### *The Blossom Girls*

According to Holleman in information accompanying the photograph, however, these eight women had formed their own club, the Blossom Girls, a group “interested in self-expression through projects which they promoted. To finance these projects they presented plays in the local Opera House, which was located in the Citizens Bank Building. The name of the club was derived from the title of one of their early productions.”<sup>31</sup>

Additional research, however, offers a somewhat different account. The names of these eight women appear frequently in social pages in the *Keowee Courier* in various combinations and along with the names of other women. On February 17, 1909, following the account of an elaborate Valentine party hosted for the Once-A-Week Club, there appears the announcement of the formation of a new group:

Another organization which promises to be replete with genuine pleasure is the Every Tuesday Social Circle, which was organized last week at the home of Mrs. C. V. McCarey. The object is purely social, as the name indicates, and will meet every Tuesday, as is also indicated by the name. There is [sic] no officers, and Shattuck’s manual is an unknown quantity with them. We are told that the deliberations are sub rosa—so much in refutation of the impression afloat that it is to be in effect the ‘Senior Gossipers.’”<sup>32</sup>

The list of attendees includes five of the women in question, along with two additional names. At the second meeting, Mrs. J. W. Byrd joined the group. Only the two younger women were not listed as members. (Carrie Hunter, the twenty-one-year-old daughter of Mrs. W. S. Hunter, was a member of the Gossipers, a group of young unmarried women.) There is further evidence that the “Blossom Girls” were not actually a club but an outgrowth of a church fundraising event. Mattie Stribling reported in her column in October 1909:

Yesterday afternoon the Ladies’ Aid Society of the Presbyterian church met with Mrs. W. S. Hunter. It was a full meeting, and the members were in a working mood, judging by the following account of the business attended to: It was decided that the society support an orphan at the Thornwell Orphanage; that the society start a church fund, for the purpose of assisting



in building a new church; that the 'Blossom Show' be repeated during the Christmas holidays. This play will be remembered by many of our citizens, and on account of its popularity the members of the society have decided to accede to repeated requests to repeat it.<sup>33</sup>

In November, Mattie Stribling provided an update on the progress of the entertainment:

We called attention two weeks ago to the fact that the Ladies' Aid Society of the Presbyterian church would repeat the Blossom Show in the near future. The time has been set for the first week in December. It will be seen that new talent has been added, and there are also many new and attractive features. The show was recognized as being one of the best ever given here, and repeated and continuous requests for its repetition induced the society to comply, and it is useless to say that with superior local talent the show will be a marked improvement over the first presentation.<sup>34</sup>

Six of the women in question were named as participating in this performance, along with Nina Hunter's musical daughter and Sonnie Byrd's boarding schoolteacher. Neither Emma Alexander nor Clara Verner McCarey was listed in the cast, although the latter was described in the same week's column as "suffering an attack of grippe [influenza]" and might have been indisposed.<sup>35</sup> A week before the performance, Mattie Stribling presented this enticement:

The "Musical Bouquet," or, more familiarly speaking, the "Blossom Show," will be presented in the opera house Tuesday evening, December 7th by local talent. Great pains have been taken to make the show a success, and it goes without saying that it will be the best amateur performance ever given in Seneca. The cast is a full one and composed of our best talent. Mrs. J. W. Byrd, as Ma Blossom, is exactly what would be expected from her by those who know her capabilities in this line, and Mrs. W. S. Hunter, as Grandma, exceeds the expectations of the most sanguine, the role being a decided departure from anything done by her hitherto. The gals, seven in number, including the twins, the "bashful gals," etc., are all good, and a rare treat is in store for the public.<sup>36</sup>

The Citizens Bank building was constructed in 1905, on the corner of Main and Fair Play streets. According to Holleman, "On the second floor was a spacious hall known, first, as The Opera House; later, as a Social Hall, where the dances were held." W. S. Hunter and F. M. Cary



were among the first directors of the Citizens Bank. Thus the Blossom Girls had access to the use of the second floor hall through the involvement in the Citizens Bank of two of their spouses.<sup>37</sup> Following the December 7th performance, Mattie Stribling offered this review:

The appearance of the "Blossom Family" at the opera house last Tuesday night has been the talk of the town ever since, and it is not putting it extravagantly to say it was a "howling success." Everything contributed to make it a success—the audience, which was large and representative, the weather which was fair after a big rain—and the sympathy of the audience was assured immediately as the curtain rose. One round of applause followed another, and it is not exaggerating the truth to say that it was the biggest hit ever seen here. Our readers are familiar with the cast, and all the parts were splendidly sustained. As has been frequently said, every part was exactly suited to the cast, and a number of our best citizens have expressed a wish that it be repeated. One of our public officials said he would give a dollar to see Miss Doolittle again, the character so admirably interpreted by Mrs. F. M. Cary. Mrs. W. S. Hunter, as Grandma, was "real acting," and her most intimate friends did not recognize her, so perfect was her make-up. Mrs. J. W. Byrd, as Ma Blossom, fully met the expectations of her friends and sustained her reputation as leading lady. Miss Doolittle, who is visiting her sister, Mrs. Hardscratch, in the neighborhood, calls to 'get one of the gals to take her picture,' which she desires for her beau, Elder Snifkin. Her make-up, and the poses she effects while sitting for the picture are something indescribable. Grandma begs Miss Doolittle to 'set a spell,' and they discuss the love affairs of herself and the elder. The local hits were fierce, and were given in inimitable style by Mrs. J. H. Thompson, who also, with Miss Maud Hopkins, represents the timid gals. Space forbids our giving further details of the play, but suffice it to say that should the company be induced to appear again, a packed house will greet them, and standing room will go at a premium.<sup>38</sup>

The Blossom Show was indeed repeated on December 31 with, according to Stribling, "a new music program and new local hits. It may be well to add here that those who suffered from local hits before may be comforted with the fact that they will not be hit again." There were changes in the cast, including the addition of Clara Verner McCarey as "one of the twins." Stribling's report indicates "There have been several inquiries from neighboring towns, . . . which shows how the reputation of the Blossom family as entertainers has spread abroad."<sup>39</sup>

Following the second performance, a review appeared in the Sen-



eca weekly newspaper, *Farm and Factory*, which up to this point had not reported local social events to the extent of the Walhalla paper's coverage. The unidentified reporter described the second performance of the "famous play" in this way:

The attendance was large, which showed the appreciation of the acting of the ladies forming the "Blossom Family." The music and singing were exceptionally good. There was several changes in the make-up of the play, but all the ladies were equal to the occasion. . . . Quite a neat sum was realized from the door receipts.<sup>40</sup>

This reporter confirmed Mattie Stribling's report of the success of the event, including a report of the financial rewards that Stribling had not mentioned.

The glowing report in *Farm and Factory* contrasts with that of Mattie Stribling, who briefly noted that "a splendid house greeted the Blossom Family last Friday night." In the same column, however, she included several other notices of social events, including a dinner party at which Mrs. J. W. Byrd "entertained a large number of her friends," a spend-the-day party given by Mrs. W. S. Hunter to which "a number of her lady friends were invited" to share "an elegant course dinner," and finally, an announcement that "today Mrs. James Thompson will entertain at an old-fashioned quilting, and her friends are anticipating the event with inexpressible pleasure." Stribling also noted that Al Thompson, the son of James and Lida Thompson, had spent the holidays with his "homefolks" before returning to a private school in Charlotte, and that Mrs. J. W. Byrd and sons and Miss Clara Hunt spent the weekend in Townville, a community some ten miles south of Seneca.<sup>41</sup> It appears to have been a busy week for these women.

### *Changing Roles for Women*

Mattie Stribling's assessment that Mrs. Thompson's quilting "proved a happy climax to the many delightful social affairs of the holidays" takes on additional meaning when one sees it not only in the context of other such holiday gatherings but also as a follow-up to the heady



public acclaim given the Blossom Show. Both the show and the quilting were opportunities for these women to perform in a public arena, the former directly, the latter vicariously through the newspaper narrative. The actions of these women during this period demonstrate the gradual transition for many women from the home-centered values, the “cult of domesticity,” of the nineteenth century, to an extension of the women’s sphere into areas of politics, social justice, mission work, and civic improvement in the early twentieth. Through participation in civic and religious organizations, women began “to redefine ‘woman’s place’ by giving the concept a public dimension.”<sup>42</sup> Participation in clubs and group activities during this period “gave an opportunity for middle-class women to find a new confidence, a voice (both literally and figuratively), and a vehicle for both personal and social development.”<sup>43</sup>

#### *Significance of an “Old-Fashioned Quilting”*

The transformation and expansion of women’s roles into a more public sphere during the early twentieth century was accompanied by friction. And the newspaper account of Mrs. Thompson’s old-fashioned quilting provoked a particular response that provides an illustration of this tension. Mattie Stribling reported that, in setting the table in the manner of “ye day when quiltings were ‘all the go,’” the hostess made use of a number of objects of family significance. These are described as “a nice fresh oil table cloth, . . . an heirloom of a hundred years,” and as a centerpiece (what we would today call a table runner), “a square from a woven marseilles spread, . . . made by a relative of the family befo’ de war,” and “a tiny pitcher that was imported from across the water by a friend of the family, and dated back a hundred years.” Stribling indicates that “these interesting facts” regarding the significance of the objects to the family were related by the hostess.

A week after this report, the *Keowee Courier* published the following item from another local correspondent:

While in Seneca at the [Sunday School] convention we saw the Irish linen table cloth, referred to by your Seneca correspondent last week as having been used by Mrs. J. H. Thompson at her old-time quilting. The cloth is an



heirloom, having been used by Mrs. Thompson's grandmother, Mrs. James A. Doyle, long before the Civil War, and is now well preserved, being used only on state occasions. The home double-woven piece was woven by "Dilsey," a slave, who belonged to Mrs. James Doyle. These relics have been sacredly kept by Mrs. H. F. Alexander, who possesses high appreciation of relics of antiquity. The old spoon-holder used at this quilting was purchased in 1870. A china fruit bowl also used has been in the Alexander family 75 years, and the pitcher was presented to Mrs. Alexander by Mrs. Tidemann, of Charleston, in honor of her mother, who brought it from Germany. It is perhaps one hundred years old. . . . E. M. D.

The writer was Ella Dendy Doyle, the regular correspondent from the nearby Bountyland community. Her corrections to Mattie Stribling's descriptions of the objects convey a sense of indignation that the significance of such "sacred relics" had been misinterpreted or devalued. Not only did Stribling's report incorrectly identify the materials and construction of the two textile pieces and ignore two additional objects, but it lacked the proper reverential attitude toward the heirlooms. In her response, Ella Dendy Doyle demonstrated a nineteenth-century tendency to imbue objects with symbolic associations. According to Grier, "In Victorian culture, ordinary people used objects to create dense webs of connections to their culture and society."<sup>44</sup> Such objects make statements to others "that we actually are what our possessions claim us to be. They do this by being tied to chains of associative thought, both highly personal and conventional."<sup>45</sup>

For such families as the Dendys, Doyles, and Alexanders, the "chain of association" connected to these material objects was highly symbolic. Among the earliest settlers in what became Oconee County, these families defined their existence through their kinship networks, extensive rural land holdings, substantial homes, and inheritance, both tangible and intangible. For families who had lived through the tumult of the Civil War and Reconstruction, family heirlooms connected them with the perceived stability and gentility of the antebellum period. The invocation of the "holy city" of Charleston, the symbolic seat of South Carolina's antebellum heritage, caps Doyle's assertion of the exalted legacy of the Alexander family heirlooms.

In contrast, Lida Thompson inverted the meaning of the same hallowed objects by using them in association with a meager repast. In





order to create a contrast with the social conventions of her own era—sumptuous refreshment and abundance—she ignored the conventional “chain of association” of the pre-war era with gentility, hospitality, and abundance. Instead, she evoked a past characterized as austere, rustic, and unrefined. By interpreting these objects in a different way than her parents and grandparents, Lida Alexander demonstrated a growing trend of the era. Some scholars have suggested that during the twentieth century, objects “were sometimes seen as one medium for articulating personality [rather] than formal cultural identity,” as was more prevalent during the Victorian era, and that, “by the 1920s, cultural memory was not believed to reside in household possessions.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, one interpretation of Mrs. Thompson’s “old-fashioned quilting” is that, along with the performance of “the Blossom Girls,” the elaborate in-home entertainments of these women were part of an exploration of individual identity and participation with a peer group, and a move away from the collective identity provided by ancestry and objects of the past. From the newspaper accounts, Mrs. Thompson seems to have given a higher priority to enhancing her own reputation as a successful hostess than to honoring the values of her mother’s family.

The contrast set up by Lida Thompson between the perceived rustic values of the past and the lavish gentility of her own day might also reflect the growing class divide among the white population resulting from the explosive growth of the textile industry in the upper South in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Poor white families left their tenant farms and flocked to textile mill villages in search of higher, more stable income. Townspeople carried ambivalent attitudes toward the mill workers. The success of commercial centers such as Seneca depended largely upon the textile trade; at the same time, the mill workers were both feared for their perceived lawlessness and derided for their uncultured behavior.<sup>47</sup> According to a study based on oral history interviews with mill workers, “As townsfolk created and refined their own standards of decorum, domesticity, and accumulation, they found themselves surrounded by workers whose way of life seemed increasingly alien.”<sup>48</sup>

A number of newspaper items show how townspeople created par-





odies of stereotypical “poor white trash.” On April 28, 1909, Mattie Stribling’s column included an announcement for an upcoming “Harde Times Soshul”:

You air axed to a doins us folks air a goin to hav at the hum of Mr. and Mrs. J. T. Simpson. . . . Every woman who kums must ware a kaliker dress and apern, or somethin ekaly appropriate, and leve their poughdle dorg to hum. . . . Gents must ware there old close and saft shirts. No gent with a biled shirt and dude koller will be aloud to kum onless he pays a fine of 5c. . . . A vote of thanks will be given to the man or woman hevin the worst lookin rig in the rume. Extry good eatins will be et from twilight to midnite. . . . Better kum—lots uv fun.<sup>49</sup>

The event was afterward reported by Mattie Stribling as “a big success, not the least of which is attributable to the efforts of the host and hostess to make it so. The lower floor of the house, including the parlor, hall, dining room and spacious piazzas, was literally turned over to the guests, and every thing was free and easy.”<sup>50</sup> The judges for the costumes included J. H. Thompson, Lida’s husband. The contrast between the hosts’ large, elegant home and the rustic costume required of the guests mirrors the theme Mrs. Thompson created for her own guests some months later.

Newspaper writers frequently used representations of dialect to identify and stereotype groups by race or class. During the early twentieth century, the *Keowee Courier* frequently circulated jokes representing the stereotypic speech patterns of African Americans, Irish Americans, and poor whites. On September 15, 1909, the paper printed a long narrative about an actual social event, but which was framed as a fictional dialogue between two women regarding “Squire Crisp’s Gal’s Party.” The dialogue was written in exaggerated Southern country dialect:

“Good mornin’, Sister Green. How be ye?”

“Good mornin’, Sister Turnipseed. I ain’t feelin’ much. I’ve got sich a mis’ry in me knee. ‘Pears like it’s goin’ to be stiff, so I’m afeard it mought be this new distress—peg-leg-ry. What’s the news with ye?”

“La, bless ye! The weather’s been so dry, there hain’t no news, only the party down to ‘Squire Crisp’s t’other Wednesday night. . . . I wa’nt there, but I hearn all about it. . . .”<sup>51</sup>



Pellagra, a debilitating disease resulting from a protein and vitamin deficiency, was a chronic problem in mill villages during the early twentieth century, especially for women and children. The disease is characterized by rough red blotches on the skin and general lethargy.<sup>52</sup> Both the reference to a disease affecting mill workers and the imitation of “poor white” speech patterns—demonstrate an attempt to define the social distance between Miss Annie Crisp’s party-goers and the two fictional characters who were not invited.

Besides printing written representations of the dialects of lower-class groups for comic effect, newspaper writers also employed alternate spelling to indicate an event as “old-fashioned.” An “old fashioned concert” in Walhalla was organized in 1909 to benefit the Women’s Civic Improvement Association. The program included “a big syng of ye old fashioned songes by all ye menne and womenne folkes with musick by ye old fiddle and guitar.” While the invitation to this event does not use language to make associations with poverty in the same manner as the “hard times soshul,” the orthography is intended to refer to an earlier time period when, it is supposed, people gathered in the town hall to sing old favorites such as “Old Folks at Home,” “Flow Gently, Sweet Afton,” and “Tenting on the Old Camp Ground.”<sup>53</sup> Whether or not Lida Thompson used dialect in the performance of her “old-fashioned quilting,” Mattie Stribling referred in her narrative to “ye day when quiltings were ‘all the go’” and to the heirlooms which had been used by the family “befo’ de war.” The use of dialect is, again, intended to show the distance between the past and the present.

Mrs. Thompson’s “old-fashioned quilting” did not occur as an isolated event. The hostess drew inspiration for her novel entertainment from other events taking place in the vicinity during the preceding months. She probably did not intend to offend her mother’s friends by making sport with the family heirlooms, or to define the class distinctions between the gentility of her own social circle and the countrified ways of the men and women working in the local textile mills; however, the theme of her entertainment reflects the changing and conflicting values of the era.

Mrs. Thompson’s quilting was not only the climax to the social affairs of the holidays, but also seems to have been the end of the



published record of interactions among this particular group of eight women. During the next six months, there were no reports of meetings of the Every Tuesday Social Circle, no references to the Blossom Family, and no record of events at which more than one or two of the women were identified by name. Mrs. T. S. Stribling entertained the Ladies' Aid Society of the Presbyterian church, while Mrs. F. M. Cary hosted the Ladies' Missionary Society of the Baptist church. Mrs. T. E. Stribling rejoined the Once-A-Week Club. Mrs. J. W. Byrd and Mrs. J. H. Thompson traveled to Townville to assist with the wedding preparations for Miss Clara Hunt. Mrs. C. V. McCarey and Mrs. W. S. Hunter were involved in birthday parties and outings for their teenage children. On June 28, 1910, James H. Thompson's father, A. W. Thompson, died, and three months later the family moved to Atlanta. The "Local Matters About Seneca" columns during 1910 contain shorter accounts of social events and seem to lack the personality and inventiveness of earlier years. After June 15, 1910, the column no longer carried the familiar "M.V.S." signature, suggesting that some other, unidentified correspondent had taken over the Seneca beat.<sup>54</sup>

The newspaper item of Mrs. Thompson's quilting, along with the photograph taken by Nora Carver, document that on one particular day, eight women experienced a very enjoyable social event that included sitting around a quilt frame. The item does not suggest that this was a frequent activity for these participants; on the contrary, the implication is that quilting was part of an evocation of the past, designed to demonstrate that the hostess and her guests were women of a new, progressive, refined era in contrast to an "old-fashioned" agrarian kinship network.

The early decades of the twentieth century represent an important transitional era, during which there were great transformations in women's roles, local and regional economic structures, and mass communications. Yet there have been surprisingly few studies of quilting practices between the crazy-quilt era of the late-nineteenth century and the growing influence of the urban-centered Colonial Revival during the twentieth.

This study of the significance of a single quilting event suggests that there are many possible levels of involvement and many possible motivations—some of them personal, some of them social—for partici-



pating in quiltmaking activity. The context for a single event can be very complex. Quilt researchers tend to focus attention on groups and individuals for whom quilts are an important part of their identities. As this study suggests, there is also much to be learned about individuals who are not active quiltmakers but who use quilts casually to achieve personal or social goals.

### Notes and References

1. "Local Matters About Seneca," *Keowee Courier*, hereinafter cited as *KC*, 12 January 1910. Subsequent quotations from this item appear in italics to distinguish them from other quotations.

2. This item was one of a number of published narratives located during a search for references to quilts, quiltmakers, or quilting events. Although there were other mentions of quiltmaking activity, the item describing Mrs. Thompson's quilting was the most intriguing.

3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1910 Federal Census, Supplement for South Carolina*.

4. For more information on women's organizations, see Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs, 1860-1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

5. Scott, 80.

6. Beverly Gordon, "Victorian Fancywork in the American Home: Fantasy and Accommodation," in Marilyn Ferris Motz and Pat Browne, eds., *Making the American Home: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1940* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), 48.

7. "Local and Personal," *KC*, 31 March 1909.

8. Martin, 118-19.

9. The Sunshine Society was founded in New York City in 1896 by Cynthia Westover Alden. The Society's mission was "to incite its members to the performance of kind and helpful deeds, and to thus bring the sunshine of happiness into the greatest possible number of hearts and homes." In 1909, nine local Sunshine Societies were reported in Oconee County, with a membership of 268 men and women. Frederic Haskin, "International Sunshine," *KC*, 18 August 1909; Julia D. Shanklin, "The Sunshine Work," *KC*, 28 July 1909.

10. *KC*, various issues, 1909-1910.

11. For comparative information on quilting events reported in newspapers, see Kari Ronning, "Quilting in Webster County, Nebraska, 1880-1920, in *Unccoverings 1992*, ed. Laurel Horton (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1993), 169-91.

12. Katherine C. Grier, "The Decline of the Memory Palace: The Parlor after 1890," in Jessica H. Foy and Thomas Schlereth, eds., *American Home Life, 1880-*



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1930: *A Social History of Spaces and Services* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 53–54.

13. "Local Matters About Seneca," hereinafter cited as "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 24 March 1909.

14. Other social events during this time were also described as "old-fashioned," including charity quiltings in Fair Play community (*KC*, 15 December 1909) and Richland community (*KC*, 26 October 1910), and an "old-fashioned concert" [sic] sponsored by the Women's Civic Improvement Association of Walhalla (*KC*, 7 July 1909).

15. Frances Holleman, *The City of Seneca, South Carolina, The City of Opportunity: Its Centennial, 1873–1973* (Greenville, SC: Creative Printers, 1973), 133.

16. Virginia Gunn to author, correspondence, 30 January 1998.

17. Holleman, 52.

18. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1910 Federal Census, State of South Carolina, Oconee County*; hereinafter cited as *1910 Census*; Holleman, 31, 71, 133, 163; *KC*, 6 April 1910. On September 24, 1910, the Thompson family left Seneca "to make their future home" in Atlanta. "Seneca Items," *Spartanburg Herald*, 25 September, 1910.

19. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 14, 62, 74, 133, 150, 168.

20. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 51, 62, 70, 133, 150, 195.

21. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 133, 163.

22. Sonnie Magee herself apparently had worked as a schoolteacher before her marriage, as there is evidence of a tuition receipt dated 1897 with her signature. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 31, 40, 49, 50, 60, 61, 86, 133, 150.

23. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 48, 86, 133.

24. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 71, 133, 159.

25. *1910 Census*; Holleman, 133, 171; 190; Bruce Hodgson Stribling, *Striblings of Walnut Hill and Related Families* (Greenville, SC: Keys Printing Co., 1979), 37–46; "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 6 April 1910.

26. "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 27 October 1909.

27. Seneca Presbyterian Church Membership Roll; *Oconee County, South Carolina, Cemetery Survey*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1983).

28. David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880–1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 22–23.

29. Holleman, 126.

30. There is no record that Mrs. J. H. Thompson, Mrs. T. S. Stribling, or Mrs. J. F. Alexander ever were members of the Once-A-Week Club. The latter two women, ages fifteen and twenty-two respectively, were unmarried in 1896. Once-A-Week Club, *Minutes*, Books One and Two (1896–1915), Special Collections, Clemson University Library.

31. Holleman, 133.

32. "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 17 February 1909, 1.

33. *Ibid.*, 20 October 1909. Additional references to an earlier production of the "Blossom Show" have not been located.

34. *Ibid.*, 17 November 1909, 1.

35. *Ibid.*



36. Ibid., 1 December 1909, 1.
37. Holleman, 62.
38. "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 15 December 1909, 1.
39. Ibid., 29 December 1909.
40. "Local News," *Farm and Factory*, 4 January 1910. Befitting Seneca's role as a new commercial center, this newspaper published more items of concern to business and trade than the *Keowee Courier*.
41. "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 5 January 1910.
42. Scott, 2.
43. Karen J. Blair, *The Torchbearers: Women and their Amateur Arts Association in America, 1890–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 31.
44. Grier, 56.
45. Ibid., 54–56.
46. Ibid., 68–69.
47. Carlton, 145–50.
48. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 132.
49. "Seneca Matters," *KC*, 28 April 1909.
50. Ibid., 5 May 1909.
51. "Squire Crisp's Gal's Party," *KC*, 15 September 1909.
52. Hall, 132.
53. "Old Fashioned Concerte," *KC*, 7 July 1909.
54. *KC*, 23 February, 13 April, 2 March, 22 June, 13 July, and 16 March 1910.