The American Wedding

Courtship & Marriage Rituals, 1889-1929

A Whole-House Exhibit at the Trail End State Historic Site, August 1996 - December 1996

Whether she was a politician's daughter who fell in love with a dashing Army officer or the upstairs maid who found her beau through the classifieds, all turn-of-the-century brides had two things in common: customs and etiquette.

"Finally comes the bride on her father's arm; her long white satin train covered with lace-edged tulle spread spotless as a field of lilies in bloom"

Frances Parkinson Keyes describing Rosa-Maye Kendrick's wedding, 1927

From the middle of the nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth, most aspects of life in America were controlled by the peculiarities of Victorian Society – a society based on the practice of extreme politeness combined with a rigid Puritanesque morality that found threatening overtones in everything from bare ankles to spicy food.

Marriage was no exception. From the courtship to the proposal, the wedding to the reception, the honeymoon to the new home – there was a "proper" way to do everything. If the rules weren't followed, social disgrace could be the result.

MARITAL EXPECTATIONS

As important as it is to us today, many couples in years past married for reasons other than love. Social status, political connections, money, companionship or security were considered much more important. Instead of being madly in love, most brides went into marriage hoping that love would "come later."

Finding the Ideal Partner

For the bride who was not of the privileged classes, marriage often meant something other than white lace and promises. Just finding a husband in the first place could be difficult, particularly after the Civil War when thousands of young men died in battle and thousands more moved West to make new lives for themselves.

To make ends meet, many American women (and men for that matter) went into domestic service or nursing at an early age and were unable to take part in the courtship rituals allowed middle and upper class Americans. Ingenuity and perseverance were needed to find a worthy mate if the most enticing qualifications – money and social standing – were not in abundance.

Many single women lived in Eastern cities while thousands of single men lived in the West. The problem was getting the two groups together. *The Matrimonial News*, a San Francisco matchmaking newspaper of the late 1800s, desired to "promote honorable matrimonial engagements and true conjugal felicities" for "amiable" men and women through the publication of personal advertisements:

- *A bachelor of 40, good appearance and substantial means, wants a wife. She must be under 30, amiable and musical.*
- *A lady, 23, tall, fair and good looking, without means, would like to hear from a gentleman of position wanting a wife. She is well educated, accomplished, amiable, and affectionate.*
- *Aged 27, height 5 feet 9 inches, dark hair and eyes, considered handsome by all, his friends unite in saying he is amiable and will make a model husband. The lady must be one in the most extended acceptation of the word since the advertiser moves in the most polished and refined society. It is also desirable that she should have considerable money.*

- *I am 33 years of age, and as regards looks can average with most men. I am looking for a lady to make her my wife, as I am heartily tired of bachelor life. I desire a lady not over 28 or 30 years of age, not ugly, well-educated and musical. Nationality makes no difference, only I prefer not to have a lady of Irish birth. She must have at least $20,000.*
- *Young lady of good family and education, considered handsome, would like to correspond with some gentleman of means, one who would be willing to take her without a dollar, as she has nothing to offer but herself.*

Although much more direct concerning finances, these ads are remarkably similar to those found in today's singles columns. Such advertising wasn't cheap, however: rates were $1.50 per word and, if a wedding occurred, both parties agreed to pay the magazine an additional fee within one month.

That such ads paid off is not in question. In her acclaimed book *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, a widow who came West seeking a better life for herself and her young daughter, described a couple she encountered on the road one day in 1914:

> *In a wobbly old buckboard sat a young couple completely engrossed by each other. That he was a Westerner we knew by his cowboy hat and boots; that she was an Easterner, by her not knowing how to dress for the ride across the desert. … It came out that our young couple were bride and groom. They had never seen each other until the night before, having met through a matrimonial paper. They had met in Green River and were married that morning …*

Stewart was herself involved in a matrimonial venture. She moved to Burnt Fork, Wyoming, in 1909 to take a job as housekeeper to a Scottish farmer whom she later married. They had known each other only a short time, but as she later noted, "The trend of events and ranch work seemed to require that we be married first and do our 'sparking' afterward. … Although I married in haste, I have no cause to repent."

Foreign Affairs

In farming, ranching and mining communities, where many men were recent immigrants from Europe and Asia, contracting for brides from "the old country" was not unusual. While part of this had to do with language and custom, some immigrants felt that young American women were too modern and outspoken. The American system of courtship was also thought to be a bit too undignified. As noted in 1914 by Hu Shi, future ambassador to the United States from Nationalist China,

Our women do not need to offer themselves in social intercourse for the sake of marriage; nor need they labor to find a spouse for themselves. This gives weight to the dignity of women. But in the West it is not like this. As soon as an [American] *woman grows up she devotes herself to looking for a spouse. … Those who are plain and dull or who do not want to lower themselves to charm men end up as old spinsters. Thus, lowering women's dignity and making them offer themselves as bait for men is the flaw in Western freedom of marriage.*

Rather than take a chance on American women, many an Irish wheat farmer, Czech coal miner and Chinese merchant wrote home requesting "maidens of good moral character" willing to travel across the ocean for the purpose of marriage. Basque sheep ranchers in Johnson County, for example, had brides sent over from their home villages in the Pyrenees, while Japanese miners had their brides sent sight unseen across the Pacific.

COURTSHIP RITUALS

If they were willing to take the time and make the effort, American society during the late Victorian period provided young men and women with many opportunities to meet. One method was the system of calling. A proper call, or visit, lasted no more than ten or fifteen minutes. If the young lady called upon was absent or unavailable, the gentleman caller left a personal calling card. The lady responded with a return call or card if she desired to continue the social relationship. If she didn't, the polite gentleman went looking elsewhere.

According to etiquette, men were expected to "retain gloves upon the hand during the call" in honor of the fifteen-minute time limit. Also, a well-bred man would never put his hat down on a chair, but would hold it in his hands at all times. This was an indication of control and responsibility. After all, if a man could not tend to his own hat for fifteen minutes, how would he ever manage a wife for an entire lifetime?

Once a lady chose to receive a young man (and she could receive more than one at a time), he could present her with a gift of flowers, candy or a book. Anything more expensive or of a more personal nature was deemed inappropriate and could be rejected – along with the suitor. A proper young woman could not offer a man a gift until he had given one to her. She could, however, send birthday or holiday greetings in the form of written correspondence, commercial greeting card or postal card. A photographic portrait was also a popular memento for one sweetheart to give another.

Physical contact was considered the height of Victorian intimacy, therefore closely monitored by society. A young lady, for example, was never to take a gentleman's arm unless he offered; and, unless they were engaged, it was improper for a gentleman to offer a lady his arm during daylight hours. Many courting couples, however, found ways to get around this: roller skating and ice skating gave young couples the chance to hold hands in public. Piano duets were also popular because the couple could not only share the piano bench, but could occasionally touch hands while reaching for the keys.

Dance Etiquette

One of the most popular forms of contact among courting couples in all economic classes was dancing. This was in spite of complaints by those who thought that such amusements would distract young women from meeting their family responsibilities. Critics who worried about the "fleeting and unsubstantial pleasures of the ballroom" did not find a sympathetic audience with young men and women who wanted the physical closeness and private conversation which dancing so easily allowed. But, in the early years of this century, dancing was as controlled by etiquette as every other activity, and certain traditions had to be followed.

When she arrived at a dance, for example, each young woman received a dance card on which young men signed up for the various dances. Some of these might include the two-step, the one-step or the waltz. The successful social strategist filled her dance card at the start of the evening with the names of men she liked. An unanticipated opening on her program was considered embarrassing, especially for a popular young lady. Sometimes even the most fastidious girl danced with fellows she didn't favor, just to avoid being thought a "wallflower."

Cutting – refusing to dance with someone once his name was on the program – was not considered proper unless the man had behaved badly or had paid too much attention to another woman during the evening. To avoid being the object of such gossip, a proper young lady never danced more than two dances with any one man unless they were seriously courting.

Long after many Victorian customs disappeared, the use of dance cards remained. While this system was not perfect, it at least allowed young ladies to have private time with the men they favored and to politely limit the unwanted attentions of men for whom they did not care.

ENGAGEMENTS

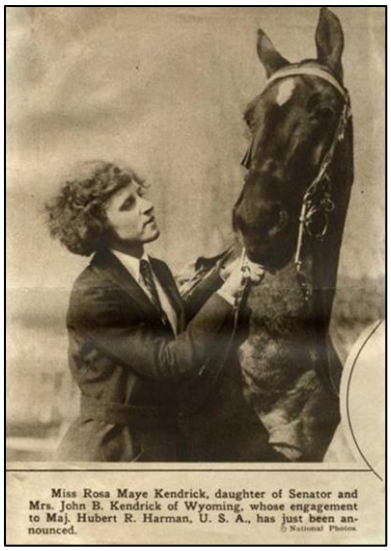
While women had the pleasure of receiving callers and deciding which ones they might marry, men had the responsibility of actually proposing marriage. This could be a daunting task, one with no guaranteed results.

The most proper way to propose was in person, but a proposal by letter was also acceptable. If the right man proposed marriage, a lady was to state her response immediately and not keep the gentleman in suspense. If she turned him down, each was to return all of the other's letters and gifts, and speak of the rejection only to their parents.

If the young lady accepted his proposal, the prospective groom was then to speak to his fiancée's father and request consent to marry. If permission was not granted, the unhappy couple had but two choices: separation or elopement. The first resulted in broken hearts; the second often resulted in disinheritance. A young lady's father might reject a potential suitor for any number of reasons: poor health, legal entanglements, unpromising financial condition, poor social standing, suspected alcoholism, prior marriages or other "unfortunate liaisons."

Announcing the Liaison

The engagements of prominent people were usually announced in the local newspapers. Sometimes engagements came as a surprise, despite the knowledge that the young lady and gentleman in question had been known to keep company. When Rosa-Maye Kendrick became engaged to Hubert Harmon in 1926, for example, the newspaper gossip columnists indicated surprise even though the couple had been courting for nearly five years:



Miss Rosa Maye Kendrick, daughter of Senator and Mrs. John B. Kendrick of Wyoming, whose engagement to Maj. Hubert R. Harman, U. S. A., has just been announced. © National Photos

> *The engagement of Miss Rosa-Maye Kendrick, only daughter of U. S. Senator and Mrs. John B. Kendrick of Wyoming, to Major Hubert Harmon of Washington, D.C., was announced today … Word of the engagement came as a surprise to Washington society, where Miss Kendrick is a great favorite … Miss Kendrick and Major Harmon had been friends for years and for the past three years the major has been a summer guest of the Kendricks, but rumors of an engagement have been denied.*

After an engagement was formally announced, a young lady's social circumstances were drastically reduced, and her young man's responsibilities were greatly increased. She could no

longer receive evening visits or private correspondence from her former admirers and she had to spend considerable time preparing for the upcoming wedding. The groom, meanwhile, was expected to pay her a social call every evening, if he lived in the same town.

Traditionally, a young man presented his intended bride with an engagement gift, usually a ring made of gold set with a diamond, sapphire or other precious stone. She wore the ring as a visible symbol that she was "spoken for" and no longer in the market for a husband. Men rarely wore either engagement rings or wedding rings.

Throughout the engagement and on the day of the wedding, the bride was the center of attention. The groom's main responsibility was to show up and say his vows. He was also responsible for obtaining a worthy gift for his bride, one that represented the value he placed on her. John B. Kendrick's gift to Eula Wulfjen, a very expensive pair of diamond earrings from Chicago, showed everyone that she was worth a great deal to him.

THE WEDDING DAY

Even the smallest wedding took time to organize. For larger weddings, preparations could take months. There were church banns to be posted, reservations to be made, invitations to be sent out, announcements to be engraved, bridesmaids to be picked, dresses to be sewn, musicians to be hired, etc., etc., etc.

Settling On a Time & Place

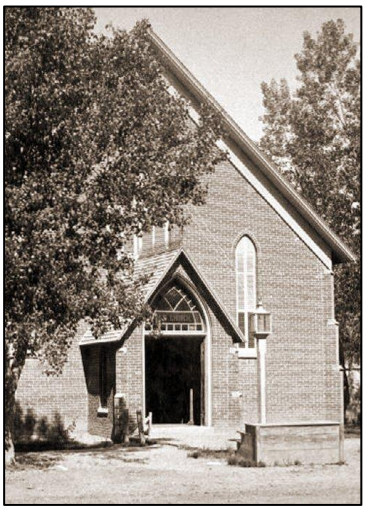
The first thing that had to be done was to pick a date for the event. At one time, most couples chose to get married on a weekday or a Sunday rather than a Saturday. According to one bit of Victorian verse, the seventh day of the week was considered an unlucky choice for a wedding day:

- *Monday for Wealth,*
- *Tuesday for Health,*
- *Wednesday the Best Day of All;*
- *Thursday for Losses,*
- *Friday for Crosses,*
- *And Saturday No Luck at All*

Regardless of the day, weddings could be held either in a church or at the home of the bride's parents. The manner in which the home was decorated emphasized the special nature of the day: out of the ordinary and special. Familiar household furnishings were dressed up with

flowers and greenery. Ferns and palms were popular, as were all manner of flowers, from daisies and poppies to roses and lilies. A bit of ivy was almost always in evidence as a symbol of the lasting bond of matrimony. When John Kendrick and Eula Wulfjen were married in 1891, their church was decorated with another symbol of longevity, evergreens:

> *An arch of evergreens and flowers* [was] *illuminated with colored electric lights. In the center hung a large bell of evergreens and flowers with an electric light suspended from the center. The alter was a scene of artistically arranged flowers, paintings and banners.*

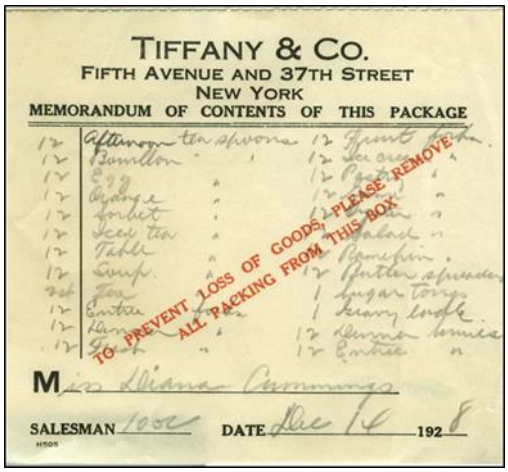


John and Eula were married at the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Greeley, Colorado. Rosa-Maye Kendrick and Hubert Harmon were married in 1927 at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. When Manville Kendrick married Diana Cumming two years later, they chose a slightly larger venue: The National Cathedral's Bethlehem Chapel.

Wedding Gifts

The giving of expensive wedding gifts such as silver or crystal by anyone other than close family members – or those who could truly afford them – was once met with harsh disapproval. Even so, the practice of displaying the gifts at the wedding reception prompted many people to give beyond their means in order to "keep up." Expensive didn't mean best, however. Brides and grooms throughout the ages have enjoyed homemade gifts such as paintings, quilts and needlework pieces. The offer of a family heirloom was a symbol of trust and provided a sense of continuity from one generation to another.

John and Eula Kendrick's wedding gifts included china, silver, linens, books, paintings, pillows and a carpet sweeper. Thirty-six years later, Rosa-Maye Kendrick and her husband Hubert Harmon received nearly 400 gifts from friends, relatives, and her father's political acquaintances. These gifts ranged from a pair of antique Bristol glass sweetmeat jars and assorted silver bonbon dishes to a fancy feather duster and sets of monogrammed linens. They even received what is arguably the twentieth century's most popular wedding gift: an electric toaster.


TIFFANY & CO.
FIFTH AVENUE AND 37TH STREET
NEW YORK
MEMORANDUM OF CONTENTS OF THIS PACKAGE
TO PREVENT LOSS OF GOODS, PLEASE REMOVE ALL PACKING FROM THIS BOX
SALESMAN
DATE

One of the more unusual gifts received by Manville Kendrick and Diana Cumming on the occasion of their 1929 wedding was a pail of honey from Cecilia Hennel Hendricks of Honeyhill Farm in Powell, Wyoming. Though she had never met the bridal pair, Hendricks nevertheless wished them well:

> *Under separate cover we are sending you a pail of honey to express our good wishes for you at this time. The honey, made by our Wyoming bees, contains the sweetness, the fragrance, the warmth of Wyoming, and will prove, we hope, a little foretaste of the joy that will be yours as you come to make Wyoming your home.*

Wedding Food

Like births, deaths and other major life events, weddings were opportunities for people to gather together and eat good food. For weeks prior to the event, the home cook (or the professional chef if the meal was to be catered) spent hours preparing special foods and delicacies for the wedding feast. In the days before refrigeration, many of these foods had to be preserved in some way. Smoked ham or turkey, corned beef, pickled vegetables, plus dried fruits and grains were all popular foods, along with soups, fish, lamb, chicken, aspics, cakes and pies.

At a formal wedding banquet, many courses were prepared, offering – quite literally – everything from soup to nuts. If the food itself wasn't particularly fancy, the names of the dishes were sometimes changed to make them appear more special. It was particularly popular to give a simple food a French name: *celery en branche*, for example, was just a fancified name for plain old celery sticks.

In order to celebrate such a special event as a wedding, a special dessert was offered: the wedding cake. Until after the Civil War, when finely-ground white flour, baking soda and baking powder were more readily available, the white wedding cake was not common outside the upper classes. Instead, coarse stone-ground wheat flour, oat flour and even cornmeal were used, along with plenty of butter, eggs, dried fruit and spirits. In fact, early wedding cakes more closely resembled the fruitcake we make today at Christmas. After the 1860s, when the white Lady's Cake became the standard for brides, this heavier cake became known as the Groom's Cake. One 1880s groom's cake recipe called for:

- Nine cups of butter
- Five pints of sugar
- Four quarts of flour
- Five dozen eggs
- Seven pounds of currants
- Three and a half pounds of citron
- Four pounds of shelled almonds
- Seven pounds of raisins
- One and a half pints of brandy
- Two ounces of mace

The cook was advised to mix all the ingredients and "bake in a moderate oven for two hours or more. This will make eight loaves, which will keep for years."

Not all wedding dinners offered elaborate feasts, toothsome desserts or fancy decorations. Jessie Hill Rowland, who witnessed several weddings as the daughter of a justice of the peace, described a home wedding in a dugout on the Kansas prairie:

> *Soon after* [the ceremony] *we all sat down to the wedding supper. The sheet that hung across the corner of the room was taken down and spread over the table for a cloth. Mrs. Brown's efforts at the coffee mill had turned out some delicious coffee, made of dried carrots, seven different kinds of sauce, all made out of wild plums put up in seven different ways. The rest of the menu was quite simple and consisted of plain bread and butter, and fried pork.*

WEDDING DRESSES

White, symbolizing youth and purity, has become the accepted color for the American wedding dress. This trend began around the mid-1800s, but even as late as the turn of the twentieth century, many women still chose colored dresses in which to be married. It seemed, however, to be a matter of personal choice: Sheridan resident Annie Loucks, who wed Cameron Garbutt in 1889, was married in a rust brown silk suit with matching hat and purse; Ida Stevens, who married Sheridan county rancher George Nottingham in 1911, followed the popular fashion and was married in white; five years later, young Ethel Snively of Sheridan was married in a pale blue silk dress with a white shawl and cameo.

Eula Kendrick's Bridal Costume

When she married thirty-four-year-old John Benjamin Kendrick in Greeley, Colorado, in early January 1891, eighteen-year-old Eula Wulfjen wore a warm winter suit that later served as a traveling outfit on her honeymoon. The Greeley Tribune described the dress as follows: "The bride's costume was of mauve Henrietta, combined with velvet, trimmings of silver otter fur, hat and gloves to match, diamond ornaments."

Henrietta, by the way, was a fine yet sturdy woolen fabric often used to make women's dresses and gowns - particularly winter wedding gowns - in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With its parallel diagonal ribbing, faint luster and extremely soft finish, Henrietta was rather expensive, making it a good choice for the bride who wished to make a subtle showing of her family's wealth.

The Next Generation

When the Kendrick children got married, their nuptials were well-covered by the press in both Washington and Sheridan. At her 1927 wedding to Hubert Reilly Harmon, Rosa-Maye's dress was described in great detail:

The bride wore a gown of white bride's satin, simply made and draped at the front, where the drapery was held with a rhinestone ornament, and the ends of the drapery falling below the bottom of the skirt, lined with pale flesh color. A deep V in the front of the bodice, reaching to the waist, was filled in with Venetian rose point lace over pale flesh [netting], *making a round neckline. A coronet of rose point lace was held at either side with orange blossoms. The lace, falling down each side from the coronet to the waist, was set into a tulle veil, which fell over the court train, and was finished at the bottom with a deep flounce of the same lace.*

Two years later, when Clara Diana Cumming married Manville Kendrick, her dress was described in the papers as well:

The bride is wearing just the type of dress that is most becoming to her slender figure. It is ivory satin made with a fitted bodice and a straight, full skirt that is long on the sides. The V-neck has an ornament of seed pearls worn by Mrs. Cumming at her wedding. There is a court train of the satin and Brussels point-lace. And over this falls a veil of tulle arranged in soft folds about the head.

A court train such as those worn by Rosa-Maye and Diana extended about three feet behind the gown itself. Today, a gown's train is a part of the dress itself. A court train of the 1920s was a separate piece - attached at either the shoulder or the waist - descending down the back of the gown, underneath the veil.

Recycling the Satin

Unlike today, when most wedding dresses are packed away in the attic never to be worn again, brides used to wear their dresses over and over again for special – or even everyday – occasions. Eula Wulfjen Kendrick and Annie Loucks Garbutt, for example, were able to wear their dark-colored traveling suits on future train trips. Another bride, Big Horn Basin resident Cecilia Hennel Hendricks, wore her 1914 wedding dress to dinner on each of her wedding anniversaries – and congratulated herself every year that it still fit.

Rosa-Maye Kendrick was able to reuse her ivory satin wedding gown when she was presented to the King and Queen of England in a 1927 ceremony for "Embassy Ladies." In her book Intimate Letters From London, she described the reworking of the dress:

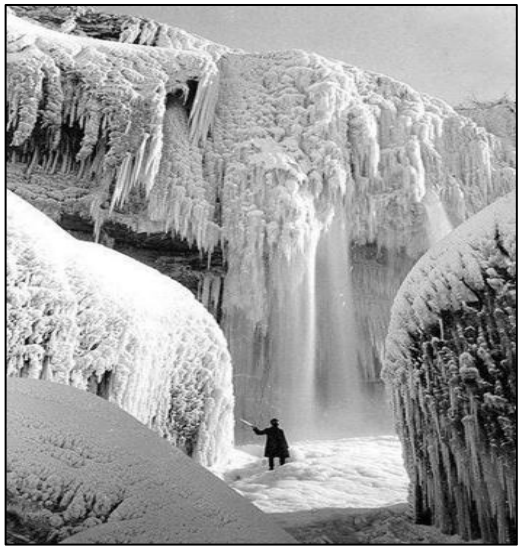
I took the court train of my wedding gown to a dressmaker, patronized by the American ladies of the Embassy, to have it shortened … then with dress, feathers and veil to the cleaners, I was ready. When my bouquet arrived, a gorgeous creation ... composed of deep lavender orchids, delicate blue Iris, long sprays of green fern tied with a flowing bow of white satin ribbon, I felt quite the bride again with the plain white satin dress, white feathers and wisp of veil.

Preparatory to the presentation, titled English ladies gave lessons in court etiquette "as a means of earning pin money." They charged their American customers six to twelve pounds for two or three lessons.

HONEYMOON TRIPS

For upper-middle class newlyweds, the wedding trip or honeymoon was an opportunity to get to know one another without the pressures of family and friends. Catering to these lucky newlywed couples were honeymoon resorts. Most were associated with famous natural features such as geysers, mountains or waterfalls. Hotels at Niagara Falls, the California Coast and Yellowstone National Park were extremely popular among honeymooners both before and after the turn of the century.

Just an hour or two after their Greeley, Colorado, wedding in January 1891, the newly joined Mr. and Mrs. John B. Kendrick left on their two-month wedding trip, one which included a stop at the famous falls - which may very well have been frozen at the time:



> *We stopped 1st at Brown Palace Hotel, Denver, Colorado, then Paxton Hotel (the old one of that name), Omaha, Neb., then to the famous old Cattleman's hotel in Chicago, the Palmer House (bought furniture for ranch home in Chicago), then to Niagara Falls, then to Albany, N. Y., and down to New York City by boat, then to Philadelphia, then to Washington, D.C., and back to Greeley.*

At nearly all these stops, Eula and John had certain social obligations. They had letters of introduction to friends of their friends, business contacts and merchants. Eula, as a newly-married Victorian society matron, had to pack for every social occasion that might present itself during her wedding trip: morning dresses in which to make morning calls, luncheon dresses for lunch, afternoon dresses for afternoon calls, tea dresses for tea, dinner dresses for dinner, ball gowns for dancing, and nightgowns for sleeping – if she had any time left over! She also needed hats, coats, boots, slippers, gloves, parasols, purses, muffs, jewelry, collars, cuffs, cosmetics and perfumes, plus a wide variety of feminine articles such as stockings, garters, chemises, camisoles, petticoats, bustles, corsets, and in the winter, a wool union suit for warmth.

A Victorian bride was advised to camouflage her newlywed status while on her honeymoon. When one couple arrived at their hotel in Niagara Falls, fresh from the wedding reception, they very carefully spread newspapers over the floor of their room before changing from their

traveling clothes. The paper served to catch any stray grains of rice which might have betrayed their newly married status to the hotel staff.

While rail trips were common, cruises were also popular, especially after the turn of the century. After they were married in 1929, Manville and Diana Kendrick took a honeymoon cruise from Baltimore to San Francisco via the Panama Canal, then back East by rail. Two years earlier, Rosa-Maye Kendrick and Hubert Harmon had combined a temporary move with their honeymoon: they took a cruise to London, England, where Hubert had a new job.

HOMESICK BLUES

Sometimes a girl married the boy next door and stayed close within the circle of family and friends she'd known all her life. Other times, however, a bride's new home was far away from familiar surroundings. Homesickness was not unusual and many a bride longed for the familiar comforts of her childhood home. Comfort had to be taken where it was found, however, as Rosa-Maye Kendrick Harmon discovered when she moved to London right after her wedding:

> *Speaking of the meadowlark, I thought I heard one the other day and a wave of longing for home engulfed me. I couldn't get rid of it, or the imagined smell of sage, and finally resorting to* [driving] *out into the country aimlessly. … England isn't Wyoming, but I found that the countryside, the world over, steals into the senses with a "mild and healing sympathy."*

Such separation was hard on the families as well. When Eula Wulfjen married John Kendrick in 1891, she moved from the bright lights of Greeley, Colorado, to the blue skies of southern Montana – a move her father found particularly difficult to accept. Although they knew she was happy in her marriage, Charles and Ida Peeler Wulfjen truly missed their daughter, as expressed by Ida in 1891:

> *I hope you will stay east as long as John feels he can spare the time, on account of the change. I know you need it. You have been a good little girl to write so often. Pop says tell you he misses you awfully. His throat fills up when we speak of his little snooks.*

Author and family friend Frances Parkinson Keyes brought the tale of Kendrick brides full circle when John and Eula's son Manville married and moved his bride from Washington to Wyoming:

[The bouquets] *are as fresh and as fragrant as spring – the spring which this bride will find blooming about her when, her wedding trip to Panama and the West Indies over, she and her husband, Manville Kendrick, reach the ranch in Wyoming where years ago his father … also took his bride.*

For more information, visit www.trailend.org