

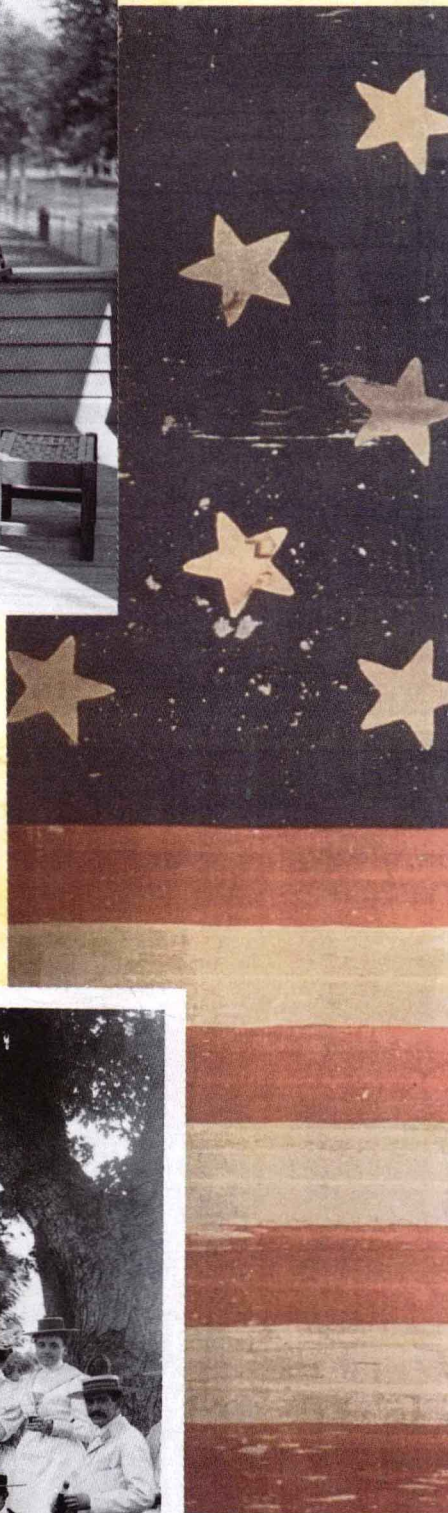
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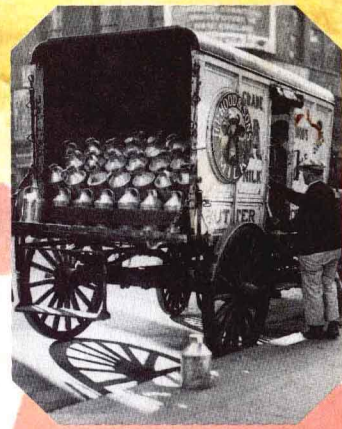
DISCOVERING AMERICA'S PAST



CUSTOMS, LEGENDS, HISTORY & LORE OF OUR GREAT NATION

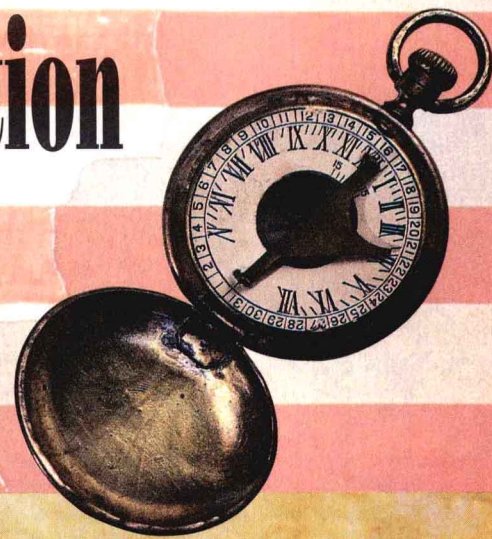
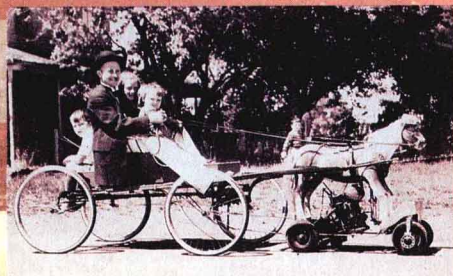
DISCOVERING
AMERICA'S
PAST





DISCOVERING AMERICA'S PAST

**CUSTOMS, LEGENDS,
HISTORY & LORE
Of Our Great Nation**



Reader's
Digest



THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION, INC., PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK / MONTREAL

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Discovering America's past: customs, legends, history & lore of our
great nation

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-89577-520-4

1. United States—History—Anecdotes. 2. United States—Social
life and customs—Anecdotes. 3. United States—Biography—
Anecdotes. I. Reader's Digest Association.

E178.6.D57 1993

973—dc20

93-3508

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Printed in the United States of America

Front cover: *Hats* Enid Kotschnig; *mansion* SuperStock; *Southern costume* Virginia Division of Tourism; *ship* New York Public Library, Rare Book Division; *Join or Die* Library of Congress; *covered wagon* Charles Henry Carter; *Amazing Stories* private collection; *McClure's* Culver Pictures; *Cord automobile* Picturama Publications/Henry Rasmussen; *lingerie model* New York Public Library Picture Collection; *frontiersmen* Edward Vebell; *campaign buttons* Culver Pictures. Back cover, counterclockwise from upper left: New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, N.Y.; The Bettmann Archive; Culver Pictures; Culver Pictures; UPI/Bettmann; UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos; Levi Strauss.



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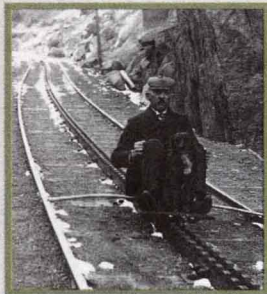
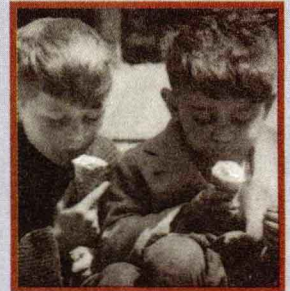
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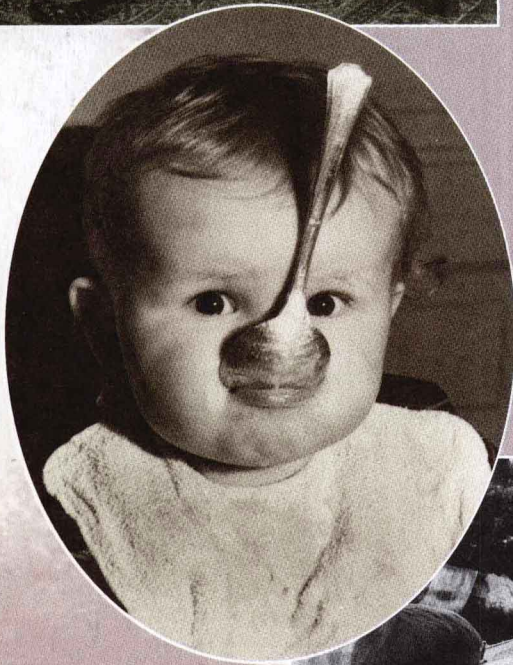
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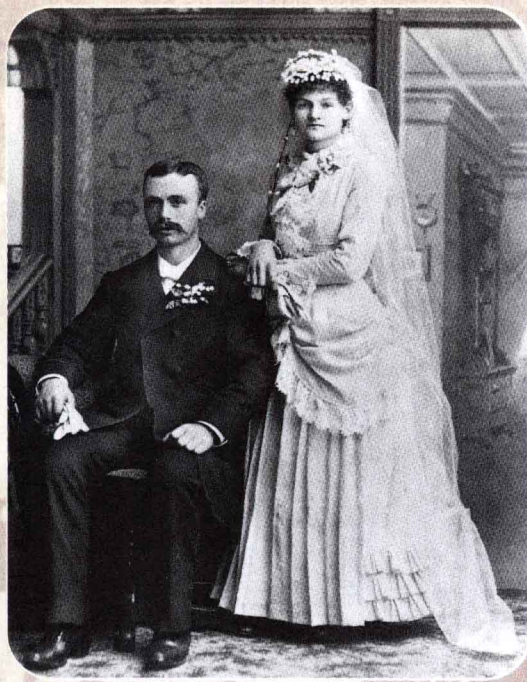
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A FAMILY ALBUM



Leonard Dakin photographed his extended family at a summer reunion in 1886.

American Views

While still in his twenties in the 1880's, Leonard Dakin polished his skills as an amateur photographer — using his family as models — during leisurely summers in Cherry Valley, New York. Their relaxed self-confidence as they romped for the camera typifies, for many, what the American family looked like in the Victorian era. As part of a new and flourishing middle class, they could afford to live comfortably. Among other things, that meant indulging in new-fangled hobbies like photography, and leaving the city each summer for vacations in the country.

But many “typical” family situations existed in the 1880's. By the end of the decade, a third of the country's population was urban. Both recent immigrants — nearly 800,000 in 1882 alone — and the rural poor flocked to the cities, where factory work promised a living, if not much of a life. Whole families labored for long hours and even then could afford nothing better to live in than crowded tenements. For them, lawn tennis and lakeside picnics were unthinkable luxuries.

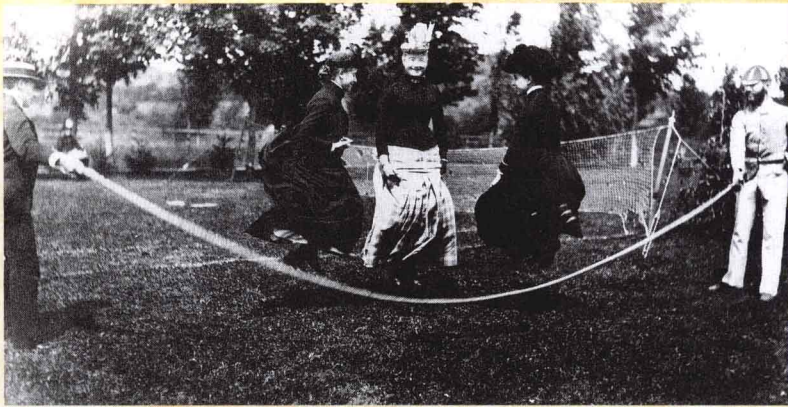
At the same time, other families lived the way Americans did a century earlier. Much of the West remained sparsely populated, and settlers

Amateur photographers were few in 1888, and informal shots like this — stopping action in midair and exposing a few ankles — were rare indeed.

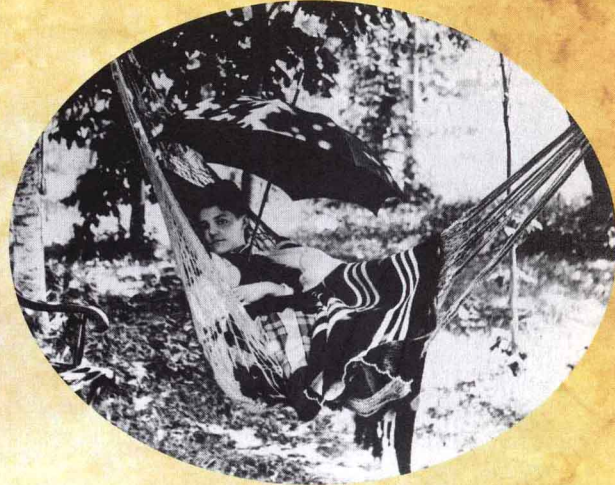


The photographer posed solemnly in a studio at age seven in 1865 (left), but 25 years later he recorded a more relaxed view of his young cousins (above).

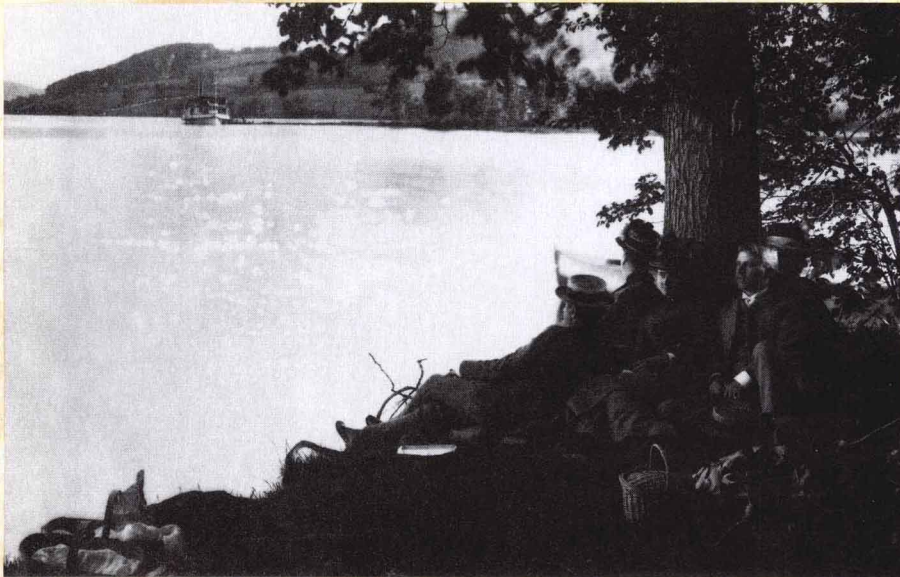




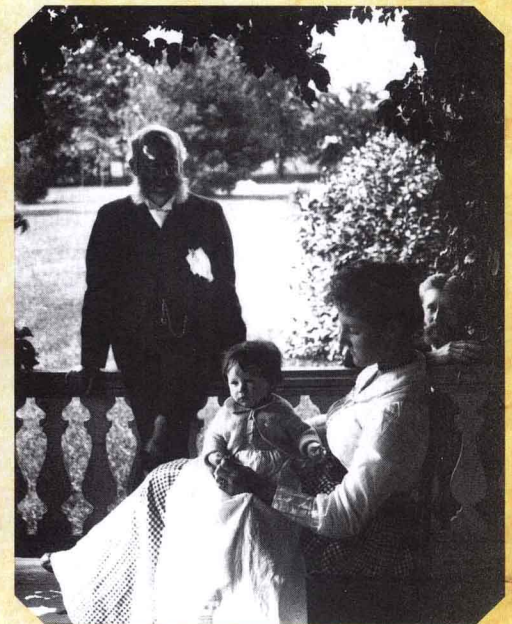
Dakin's female cousins were obviously more athletic than most, but even so, women of their class wore their bustles, petticoats, hats, and veils even while they played.



By the end of the 1880's Dakin was focusing his camera on his fiancée as much as he was on his family.



As members of a flourishing middle class, the Dakin family could enjoy leisurely vacations and spend sultry summer afternoons picnicking in the shade.



In 1890 Dakin portrayed three generations of his family — father, brother, wife, and son.

who could not reach their western destinations by rail in the 1880's still transported their household goods by wagon train. Making do in log cabins or sod houses, many such pioneering families had to wait a long time before experiencing any civilized comforts, a neighbor, or a school near enough for their children to attend.

At the other extreme from the struggling poor were families living in unimaginable ease. Until a federal income tax was instituted in 1913, those who established America's major new industries, such as railroads and steel, enjoyed boundless wealth. They lived in mansions, entertained lavishly, and married their daughters off to European nobility. If not exactly "typical," they were a breed of family unique to the era.



The trailblazing amateur pursued his hobby long enough to catch his children growing up. This delightful shot of his second son was his favorite.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE



Marriages, particularly second marriages in the late 18th century, often had more to do with money than with romance. Prenuptial agreements read like mergers between businesses, and dowries were as sumptuous as families could afford. This painting by J. L. G. Ferris depicts Sarah Richardson, a bride literally worth her weight in gold, stepping on the scales to measure out her dowry in 1771.

Judge Sewall Woos the Widows

Shortly after his wife died in 1717, Judge Samuel Sewall of Boston, Massachusetts, confided to his diary that he was “Wandering in my mind whether to live a Single or a Married Life.” And well he might: since Puritan America frowned on the unmarried, a widow or widower usually hastened to recommit to a suitable companion. A proposal, in fact, might be offered within weeks, or even days, of a spouse’s death.

In Sewall’s case, thanks to his voluminous, minutely detailed diaries, we have an unusually complete record of one widower’s return to wedlock. Following a brief but unsuccessful overture to Widow Winthrop, Sewall entered serious negotiations with Widow Denison. On the day of Mr. Denison’s funeral Sewall had impulsively confided to his diary that he hoped “to keep house” with the widow. Their courtship was affectionate, but the pension of 250 pounds a year that he offered her, should he die, was no match for the estate left by the late Mr. Denison — a portion of which she

would forfeit if she remarried. With regret on both sides, their dalliance ended in the winter of 1718.

Success came at last to Sewall on Thanksgiving Day in 1719, when he married Widow Tilley. His bride, however, fell ill and died the following May. Single once again, the judge’s attention returned to Widow Winthrop. But she, having once “done very generously . . . in giving up her Dower” and stung, perhaps, by the judge’s earlier abandonment, was anything but encouraging. After months of persistent pursuit on his part and an unrelenting cold shoulder on hers, Sewall gave up the chase.

Following a flurry of interest in three more prospective mates, Sewall eventually proposed to Widow Gibbs. “Aged, feeble, and exhausted as I am,” he wrote to his intended, “your favourable Answer . . . will much oblige.” Her reply, though favorable, was followed by some sharp prenuptial bargaining; but on April 1, 1722, the indefatigable suitor Sewall at last “sat with my wife in her pew.”

Singular Problems

Marriage may be an honorable state, but throughout our history it took the law or public censure to persuade many Americans to indulge.

Be married, or be fined. So said the city council of Fort Dodge, Iowa, when, in 1907, it passed a law requiring everyone between the ages of 25 and 45 to wed — or else.

As extreme as the measure seemed at that late date, however, it would have been entirely normal in Colonial America, where public censure ensured that unmarried adults remained a rarity. In 17th-century New England, “antient maids” of 25 were labeled a “dismal spectacle.” And in North Carolina, one newspaper declared them “never-to-be-pleased, good for nothing creatures.” Single women usually had no choice but to live with relatives, where they might spend their lives spinning flax and wool for the family; hence the name *spinster*. The epithets *thornback*, *stale Maid*, and *antique virgin* also were commonly applied.

Bachelors fared every bit as badly. Viewed as suspect or even criminal, they were spied upon by the local constabulary and penalized to make sure they would enjoy less freedom as bachelors than they would if married. Unattached men were taxed in Maryland and Connecticut. And in 1695 the (evidently) bird-infested burg of Eastham, Massachusetts, required that “every unmarried man in the township shall kill six blackbirds or three crows while he remains single.” On the other hand, town fathers in New England sometimes sweetened the deal for bachelors, offering them free home sites if they succumbed to wedlock.

The Wait for a Mate

A young man of the Amana sect who went courting in the late 19th century faced as many trials as a knight on a quest. Unlike other utopian sects, the Society of the True Inspirationists, as this group called themselves, did not forbid courtship and marriage; they just made getting there so difficult that only the most determined would succeed.

Children were warned that the opposite sex possessed a “magical fire.” Young people who were drawn to one another despite this warning could apply to the community’s Great Council for permission to marry. If the young man was 24 years old and the woman 20, the minimum ages required for marriage, they were examined for “spiritual, mental, or physical” suitability and advised that marrying would lower their spiritual standing in the community. If deemed suitable, the man spent a year in another of the Amana vil-

lages that dotted a six-mile stretch along the Iowa River. Finally, if the couple’s affection withstood this separation, the man returned to his home, a wedding date was set — sometimes for as much as a year in the future — and permission was granted for Sunday courtship calls.

Despite these trials — or maybe because of them — marriage flourished and Amana thrived.

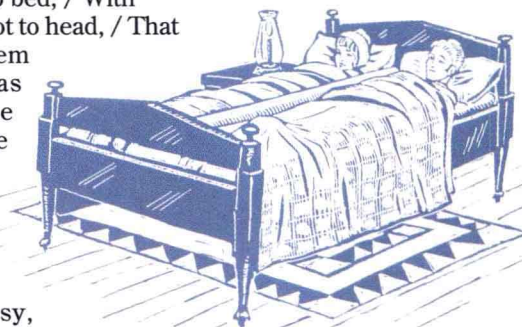
Under-cover Courtship

A bundling couple went to bed, / With all their clothes from foot to head, / That the defence might seem complete, / Each one was wrapped in a sheet.” Thus one 18th-century song bandied the pros and cons of bundling — a curious custom that allowed a clothed couple to carry on their courting in bed.

Although the practice created a hailstorm of controversy, many upright and God-fearing colonists defended bundling on purely practical grounds. In rural areas especially, where a suitor might have to travel many miles to visit his sweetheart, an overnight stay made perfect sense. Besides, it was felt, allowing the young pair to whisper in the dark saved valuable candles and fuel after everyone else had gone to bed. In large households, moreover, the young woman’s bed might, in fact, be the only place that a couple could find a little privacy. And it was surely the coziest place to visit on a winter night.

Since all was done openly, with family members sometimes helping the young woman by knotting her securely in her clothes, it was assumed that such courtships would remain chaste. The problem was, however, that young couples often could not resist temptation. As the numbers of premarital pregnancies rose in the 18th century, some people maintained that bundling was at least partially to blame, and railed against it: “Down deep in hell there let them dwell, / And bundle on that bed; / There burn and roll without control, / Till all their lusts are fed.” Accordingly, it was only a matter of time before bundling was scorned as lower class. “Tis a method of proceeding, / As much abhor’d, by those of breeding,” sniffed yet another ditty.

Between such admonitions, and the fact that homes were gradually being equipped with improved lighting, parlor stoves, and comfortable furniture, bundling faded from practice. By the early 1800’s only couples in the most remote rural areas were still courting beneath an eiderdown.



“Bed and board” had a different meaning for couples who courted in New England in the 1700’s. Swathed in individual linens and separated by a board or bolster, sweethearts pitched their woo while snug in bed.

Dear Dorothy

For more than half a century, a demure Southern matron was the world's friend and confidante, the oracle that some 60 million people turned to for advice.

It came to me that everything in the world had been written about women and for women, except the truth," Dorothy Dix recalled when asked how she hit upon the unique style of her newspaper advice column. "They had been celebrated as angels. They had been pitied as martyrs. . . . It was time . . . to come down to hardpan and be sensible, useful people."

Dorothy Dix was the pen name of Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer. Born in 1870 to a genteel but impoverished Tennessee family, she married George Gilmer when she was 18. It soon became evident, however, that her husband was mentally unstable, and while coping with his illness, Dix herself suffered a breakdown. As a recuperative exercise, she began writing stories.

A New Orleans neighbor, who happened to own *The Daily Picayune*, read some of Dix's tales and was charmed by her refreshingly direct, unadorned style. In 1896 she hired the young woman to write "Sunday Salad," an advice column for "womankind" full of "crisp, fresh ideas . . . a dressing mixed of oil of kindness, vinegar of satire,

salt of wit." Gilmer chose a new name — "Dorothy" because she liked its dignity, and "Dix" to honor a former slave who had helped the family during the Civil War — and set to work dispensing the compassionate, realistic advice that would be her trademark for the next half-century.

Her column, renamed "Dorothy Dix Talks," caught the attention of publisher William Randolph Hearst, and in 1901 he lured Dix to his *New York Journal*. There, in addition to her three-times-a-week advice column, she covered some of the most sensational murder trials of the era. But Dix wearied of working the crime beat; helping people with their own private fears and joys was what she did best, and in that she proved indefatigable.

Dix prized a good sense of humor and advised against marrying any man who lacked one. Her own sense of humor shone through in her writing. When a young woman asked if she should tell her beau that she had false teeth, Dix replied, "No, marry him and keep your mouth shut." In answer to a new bride who wanted to know what it meant when her husband criticized her cooking, she replied: "It means you have married a man instead of an archangel."

But Dix also scolded women for being vain,



Queen of Hearts

Esther Howland was a valentine visionary. Inspired by some fancy lace-covered English valentines that her father sold in his stationery store, the 19-year-old graduate of Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary's class of 1847 decided to make some of her own.

Using what she knew of the family's stationery business — and her own considerable artistic ability — she went to work with paste, paper, and paint and created an array of sample valentines. One of her brothers was skilled in penmanship, and she persuaded him to inscribe sentiments in the cards. Another brother was a salesman for the family business, and he agreed to try to get some orders for next season's trade.

When her brother returned with an astonishing \$5,000 in orders, Howland promptly set up shop in her parents' house. She hired four friends to help her and adopted a revolutionary assembly-line approach. Seated at a long table, one worker cut out small colored lithographs of sentimental subjects, the next laid them on brilliantly glazed paper backgrounds, a third assembled the layers of lace paper that framed the central design, and the fourth pasted down a printed sentiment, typically inside the card or under a flap where only the recipient could see it.

self-pitying, nagging, or profligate. With practical compassion she urged that women not be too quick to abandon husbands guilty of occasional infidelities. Idealistic young men were advised to “find out what was inside of a girl’s head . . . instead of being content just to admire the outside scenery,” and they were bluntly told that anyone who was taken in by a gold digger “deserved all he got.” She also coached them on the best time to propose marriage — not when the intended was feeling “on top of the world,” but rather when she needed a lift after a fight with her boss.

Her hard-headed, big-hearted philosophy was often attributed to the difficulties of her own marriage. But as Dix once commented, “I never once thought of divorce. I could not say to others ‘Be strong’ if I did not myself have strength to endure.”

Dorothy Dix did more than endure. Her life spanned America’s past from the Civil War to World War II. And her career reflected the changes in courtship concerns from “Should I help a gentleman on with his coat?” to “Is it all right for me to spend a week end in Atlantic City with a boy friend?” When Dix died in 1951 at the age of 81, her advice column had appeared in a total of 273 newspapers and influenced millions of readers around the world.

Flirting With Flowers

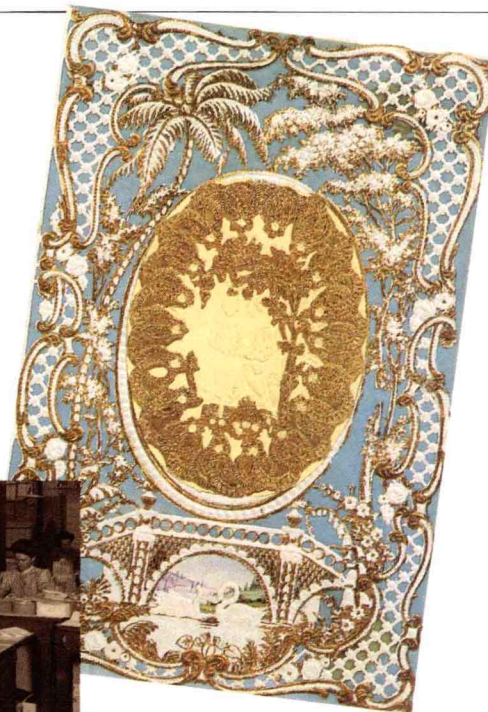
To those versed in the rules of 19th-century flirtation, flowers were “the alphabet of angels.” Each blossom had its symbolic meaning, and a carefully selected bouquet could speak “the softest impressions . . . without offence.”

Did the sender wish to initiate a friendship? An iris says “My compliments.” A bolder appeal — “Will you return my affection?” — was offered by a jonquil. Whole sentences were composed by tying individual blooms in a silk cord then rolling them into a bouquet. When unscrolled, the message appeared. A floral phrase composed of ivy, blue convolvulus, and straw pleaded “Let the bonds of marriage unite us.” After consulting her lexicon, the recipient might send welcome peach blossoms (“My heart is thine”), a coy sprig of apple (“Temptation”), or a disheartening snapdragon (“No”). Senders were cautioned “Tie your bouquets more accurately!” to avoid lapses in communication.

How-to manuals listed the flowers, their meanings, and rules for their presentation. A rosebud presented upright indicated “I hope, but I fear.” If returned stripped of its leaves, the bud meant “There is everything to fear,” but stripped of its thorns, it promised “There is everything to hope.”

At a time when Americans who wanted to send someone a love token had to make one by hand or buy one of the few rather witless and plain commercial offerings available, Howland’s sentimental creations were a tremendous innovation. Despite their high cost — many of the cards sold for \$5 to \$10 each, and some truly extravagant ones, bedecked with ribbons, satin, and silk, cost up to \$30 — the business boomed.

Howland sold her business to a former employee in 1880 and retired to take care of her aging father. Although she herself never married, she gave wings to the romantic fancies of countless other Americans.



As many as seven layers of paper and lace were assembled to create the exquisite mis-sives (opposite and above) that earned Esther Howland her fortune. Her success sparked an industry (left) and inspired many imitators.

Tokens of Affection

As even the most tongue-tied suitors have learned, eloquence comes easier when sentiments are expressed with love tokens. No one can know how many hearts have been won with such courtship gifts, but from Colonial times, Americans have been among those willing to give the technique a try.

Their choices have ranged from the sentimental to the witty and the wildly original. One pragmatic 18th-century gent presented only useful gifts such as shoe buckles, raisins and almonds, and even writing paper and sealing wax (in hope, perhaps, of a letter in return). But other sorts of tokens became customary offerings, much the way that red roses are today.

One of the most enduring gestures was to exchange miniature portraits that could be worn around the neck or kept in a pocket. Often a lock of hair was hidden on the back, though by the mid-1800's women wore brooches that featured their intended's hair plaited into an elaborate love knot.

Less costly, though no less valued were the hand-painted love knots, inscribed with verses, that appeared on notes and valentines. Other suitors folded and cut paper, snowflake style, into lacy pictures and decorated them with hearts and flowers. And school children, particularly, were fond of making "puzzle purses" — pieces of paper that were decorated on both sides and then

folded to form a sort of envelope. If the folds were undone in the correct sequence, the successive lines of a verse were revealed and a little picture found in the center.

But it was homesick sailors who created some of the most personal love tokens. Those with a talent for carving made scrimshaw trinkets from whalebone and ivory, then engraved them with symbols of love. But those who could not carve might still bring home a gift: they needed only to stop at Barbados and buy one of the handmade seashell mosaics that came to be known as sailor's valentines.

The puzzle purse (below) was given as a valentine in the 1790's. On its reverse, parts of a verse were written along the diagonal lines, then the whole was neatly folded into a puzzle square. The Pennsylvania-German cutwork love letter (right) was made by Christian Strengé around 1800. Decorating it with watercolors, he included 16 heart-felt messages.

Sailors were fond of making scrimshaw busks to stiffen the corsets of their lady friends back home. Few, however, were as pretty as this whalebone example. Its hearts, flowers, whaling ship, and circled stars were far too charming to hide under layers of clothes.



Elisha Buchanan (above) sat for his miniature likeness in 1840. At that date hair jewelry also was in vogue; often the hair of several loved ones was combined in a single ornament (above right).

