

Volume 23, No. 10  
Editor: Stephen L. Seftenberg

### Wednesday, October 13, 2010 Assembly

Our speaker will be Eliot Kleinberg, staff writer on The Palm Beach Post, who will discuss Florida and the Civil War, which in his opinion had a tremendous impact on the future of Florida even down to the present. He will also discuss his new novel.

#### President's Message

I am very excited about the impact our new web-site will have on our membership drive! Kudos to Bob Schuldenfrei! You can do your part by bringing a friend to the next program.

### September 15, 2010 Program

#### Victorian Mourning

Palm Beach County CWRT Member and Civil War Reenactor Kathryn Clark, as the "Widow Clark" delivered an informative overview of mourning during and after the American Civil War, as influenced by Queen Victoria's obsessive mourning for her husband. Her topic was kept from being totally morbid by her sense of humor and the extreme lengths reached by American mourning customs in this period.

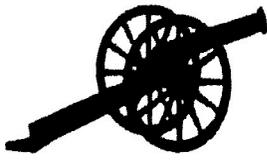


The Widow Clark in full regalia

Mourning customs and rituals of the 19th century were clearly defined and adhered to as much as finances and circumstances allowed, but in today's society of medical advances and wonder drugs it is, perhaps, difficult to understand the need for such practices. In order to understand them we must delve into the conditions of the 19th century, including disease, lack of sterile practices, diets which lacked essential vitamins and nutrients and medical treatments barely a step above witchcraft which made death much more prevalent than in the 21st century.

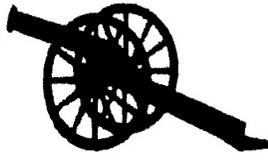
Doctors of the 19th century were not required to fulfill the educational requirements we associate with the practicing of medicine. Treatments used consisted of blistering, bleeding, and treatment with herbs and plants, many of which today are considered fatal in themselves. Germs were not known of and the need of a sterile condition was yet to be discovered. Medicines were usually what came out of the herb garden tended to by the lady of the house, or tonics peddled by traveling medicine shows. Antibiotics were yet to be discovered and people routinely died from something as simple as a cut finger.

Childbirth claimed the lives of countless women, enough so that many women made arrangements regarding the care of their infant, should they not survive the delivery. Infant formulas and sterile bottles did not exist, making the feeding and care of an infant a major task when the mother did not survive. Often the infant soon followed the mother to her grave. In tracing the genealogy of families, we see that it was common for men to have multiple wives during their lifetime, and death due to childbirth is quite often the cause of death for the wives.



## Assembly

Assembly sounds at 7 PM on the second Wednesday of each month at the American Polish Club, 4725 Lake Worth Road, Greenacres, Florida (just west of Military Trail)



Disease, accidents, poor nutrition and impure water claimed the lives of a large percentage of children in the 19th century. Couples had large families for several reasons. One, the large number of children would help out with the chores, either by working with the father or doing household chores. Second, and very important, was that with a large number of children, some of them would live to adulthood. Third, these adult children were then very important to the family ... as Social Security was not yet in existence! The adult children are where you will find the elderly parent when you trace your ancestry.

Contagious diseases such as typhoid, malaria, yellow fever, smallpox, diphtheria and whooping cough could easily take the lives of an entire family. Remedies included such bizarre practices as: burning gunpowder in the sickrooms, wearing bags of camphor around the neck, sprinkling houses with vinegar, placing an ax under the bed to stop bleeding, placing a knife under a pillow to cut pain, the use of leaches, or the intentional blistering of the skin which supposedly drew disease out of the body.

19th century American was forced to deal with death far more often than we do today. The War Between the States claimed lives from practically every family. Death was so prevalent that mourning customs and rituals were refined from several centuries of superstitions and beliefs as a way of showing proper respect for the deceased. These customs called for changes in clothing and in one's way of life that today are difficult to comprehend. In a time when families perhaps needed the support of family and friends more than at any other time, they were isolated from them. The widow was expected to shoulder the burden of the family's responsibilities and deal with the overwhelming grief alone.

In Colonial America, mourning had not taken on the significance it did in the later Victorian Era. There was no special clothing to be worn, no books outlining mourning customs, no elaborate wake or ceremony. At the death of a family member, the family buried them simply and without a lot of ceremony. The wearing of black, however, is a custom that has been put into practice for centuries. It dates back to a time when "Death" was feared by the living and the wearing of black was thought to make mourners as inconspicuous as possible so that "Death" would not claim them as its next victim.

Mourning in the mid to late 1800's was a real art form. An 1852 etiquette manual states that "the chief use of mourning attire is to express our grief and humiliation." Mourning dress was meant to be "an appropriate emblem of heartfelt grief." The act of mourning and mourning well, was an opportunity to demonstrate Christian piety, good character and respectability. A place in society could even be earned through the act of a decent respect for the deceased. The two most highly revered feelings in the human experience, bereavement and sympathy, were both necessary for proper mourning. It was felt that those who grieved unseen were the most sincere. This was the reason for the long black veil worn by widows. This weeping veil would allow the

widow to grieve in private even when others were around. True mourning was a private affair, and a lonely one for the widow. Mourning rituals in America were directly influenced by those in England and Europe. [Editorial insert: Mourning attire was also the perfect way to show the wealth and respectability of the widow. Some went so far as to dress their servants for mourning when the head of the household passed away. Middle and lower class women would go to great lengths to appear fashionable in times of mourning. Dying clothing black and then bleaching them out again was quite common. The industry of mourning became so vital to tailors that rumors were spread concerning the bad luck of recycling funeral attire. Hair art also developed in the Victorian era to allow family members to keep mementos of their departed loved ones. Mourning jewelry was the height of fashion and black was a stylish color. Made of jet, vulcanite, bog oak or pressed horn, each carried special meaning as a memento of a loved one. A brooch in the shape of a



Mourning dress, circa 1867  
Museum of Funeral Customs



Jade mourning  
pendant

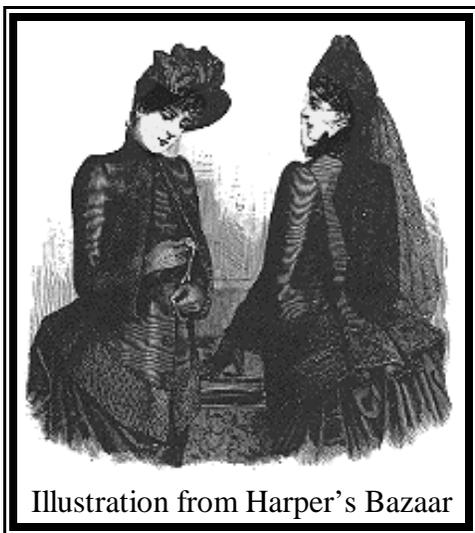
hand carrying a bouquet conveyed a message symbolized by the flowers. Photos might be housed inside lockets and watch fobs and portraits might be hand painted on pendants and earrings. While some black jewelry was meant to be worn during mourning, black jewelry was fashionable as well, and worn for its beauty and sentiment.]



Widows carried the heaviest burden of mourning. Their bereavement was the deepest and lasted the longest. The lives of women were always closely connected to their husbands. As soon as she married, everything that a woman owned and all that she might later inherit was turned over to her husband. All children born to the marriage were the sole possession of the husband and he could easily take them away from her. Even money which she might earn from her own labor was not legally hers. Regardless of the number of years they had been married, a husband could will his home and all of his property away from his wife. A woman's purpose in life was two fold: to marry and care for the physical and material needs of a man and to give birth to and properly raise his children. Without her husband, a woman's purpose was diminished and she became somewhat of a social outcast.

Within 24 hours of the death of her husband, a widow was expected to clothe herself in the dull black and crape (always spelt with an 'a' to indicate mourning crape) of deepest mourning and for the next two and one half years every aspect of her life would be governed by the complicated rules of mourning etiquette.

The mourning period for widows was divided into three periods: "heavy" or "deep" mourning (for one year and a day), "full" mourning (for a second year) and "half" mourning (for another six months). The standard mourning period for a parent was six months; for a child, three months, for an aunt or uncle, one month and for a cousin, three weeks. Magazines of the day, such as Godey's Ladies Book, Peterson's and Harper's Bazaar carried advice on the customs of mourning pertaining to both clothing and acceptable behavior during the mourning period.



For one year and one day she was almost completely isolated in her home, leaving it only to attend church or to visit her closest relatives and friends. At such times she would cut herself off from the world by covering her face with a dark veil, usually made of crape, called a "weeping veil." She was to keep her grief private. All invitations were declined. It would be in the worst possible taste to be seen in public places or occasions while in deep mourning. Only your closest friends and relatives were even permitted to visit. In the widow's home, there were mourning rituals that she was to follow. There would be black crape on the front door, over the windows, and over any mirrors in the home to let everyone know that she was in mourning.

Her night clothing would be trimmed in black, even though she would probably be the only person to see it. The stationery of a widow was also trimmed in black, around the sheets and envelopes. The underpinnings (the petticoats) were white and or black on the upper layers. Black was not worn directly against the skin, as the dyes were not the best and would often come off on the skin! To show that her mourning was sincere the layers closest to the body were trimmed in black. Should a widow find it necessary to lift her skirts from the mud, she must show her black underpinnings and stockings to indicate that her grief had penetrated to the innermost sanctuaries. At least one upper black petticoat was an absolutely necessary. This would limit white being easily seen by normal walking and movements. If she carried her parasol, it would also be black. It would be



deemed wrong even to shelter from the sun beneath anything less emotional than black. The widow's reticule (her purse) or miser's bag was to be black. Her handkerchief would be of white linen, with a one inch border of black. The black worn during the first year of deep mourning would be of dull black luster finish. This would indicate the lack of luster brought into her entire being by death.

In the second year of mourning, the widow was still confined to black, but she could widen her social circle slightly. This would mean that she could for example go to a church social .... but NOT to show enjoyment or smile. The long veil was now shorter, stopping at or just below the shoulders.

By the final six months her wardrobe would expand to include grey, white, purple or mauve. She could again be active in society. By adding color and being more active the widow was showing that she was about to come out of mourning.

However, there were many widows who chose to never completely come out of mourning and wore the black until they died. Queen Victoria was one who never came out of mourning. She wore black for her beloved Prince Albert for the last forty years of her life, until the day she died. Ironically when she was buried, she had a white funeral. She was buried in all white. White, with its absence of color, has long been used as a symbol of mourning. Because it is associated with virginity and innocence, it was frequently characterized for, and by, young women and children.

This time period of mourning was dictated not by grief but by the strict rules of the Victorian etiquette. What is more, if another relative should die during the mourning period or just after the end of the mourning period, she would be obligated to continue wearing black. Interestingly, both Varina (Mrs. Jefferson) Davis and Mary Todd (Mrs. Abraham) Lincoln wore mourning clothing and went through the mourning rituals for the many dead even while their husbands were still alive.



Reenactor in full mourning

The minimum socially acceptable length of time before a second marriage was two years. Many women did choose to remarry. This seems to have caused deep concern whether this was proper. The May 1864 issue of *English Women's Domestic Magazine* stated that, "Second marriages may be contracted; as to second love, that is debatable. The transfer of the heart's affection is, in our opinion, impossible. Those who have loved deeply, passionately, earnestly, can never love again with the same fervor, the same intensity". The Christian churches preached that second marriages were essentially adulterous, for how could a family be reunited in heaven if the wife had two husbands? The moral issue of a second marriage was that it was an open admission that a respectable woman would sleep with two men. To many Victorian ladies, legal or not, this went well beyond the

limits of decency.

A widow who chose to remarry was obligated to continue mourning for the dead spouse from the day after the second marriage. With this public display of continue respect and sorrow for her deceased spouse, her new marriage was made respectable. Of course, she could show no outward signs of joy until her period of bereavement was passed.

I am sure the some women did not follow this strict mourning ritual. But those who did not were talked about and shunned by those who believed in the mourning etiquette. It a woman wanted to be accepted by her peers, in her social circles, in her church and her community, she had to follow the mourning etiquette. The rules of mourning became more and more complicated. Social ostracism was the dread of the Victorian lady and could easily be brought about by the lack of conformity to proper dress and conduct.

During the period of the War Between the States, mourning was often postponed. There was so much death and the women had many responsibilities. The men were off fighting. Almost everyone had someone in their family killed during this time. The women were not allowed the privilege of a proper mourning at that time. After the war many women then took the time to go into mourning for the lost family members.

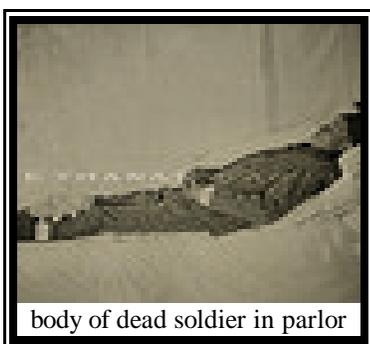
Children were also expected to participate in mourning customs. In the nineteenth century even very young children participated in funerals for friends and relatives and observed the practice of mourning dress. Even babies were not exempt from society's dictates concerning proper mourning attire. The white cot sheets of a baby in mourning might be embroidered with black thread, and the infant was dressed in white robes trimmed in black embroidery or ribbon.

Now, you know of the many mourning rituals that the woman had to go through. Would anyone like to guess about the mourning rituals for the men of the period? The men who became widowers really had it bad and we need to feel for them too! A husband had to mourn a decent period of time and wait a decent period of time before he remarried. Yes he was expected to remarry! <sup>1</sup> He probably had children who needed a mother, he had a business to work at or farm to maintain and he had a man's needs. So the poor widower had to mourn his wife, for a whole three months . . . . Yes, THREE MONTHS of wearing a black suit, a plain white linen shirt, a black arm band and a black hat. All other color was prohibited. Some men in the 1860's would wear a white crape sash across his left shoulder.



The widower was encouraged to remarry. If he did remarry while he was still in mourning for his first wife, he would set aside his mourning for the ceremony but resume it the next day. In addition, his new wife would also be expected to take up mourning for her husband's deceased wife. She would wear black or shades of half mourning in her memory. She would also be responsible for mourning for all of the first wife's family members. If anyone in the late wife's family died, the new wife would have to do the mourning for them. The men felt that the mourning rituals gave women ample opportunity to allow themselves to heal their grief as well as a means to show that they were coming out of mourning and their availability. They felt that they had no such opportunity to express a sense of bereavement in an elaborate way.

In the South, during the war years political leaders often urged women to forego the wearing of widow weeds. Their urging was done from a practicality standpoint, as mourning fabrics and garments were extremely difficult to obtain, and because death was so widespread at times it must have appeared that every woman in the South was dressed in mourning clothes, adding greatly to the dismay of the Southern people. During the war, Southern journalist recorded deaths of soldiers, civilians and children regularly and often mentioned steps to be taken to obtain mourning clothing as best they could with the scant supply of goods coming through the blockades. Northern newspapers carried ads for mourning fabrics and articles during the



war years, testifying to their being readily available in the Northern states. With the circumstance of the war, women of the South were not always able to adhere strictly to mourning rituals of the time and had to mourn in their hearts and not in their outward appearance. Early on, the deceased was placed in the "parlor" of the home. Commercial enterprises called themselves "undertakers" and their places of business "funeral parlors." Since the word "parlor" became associated with death, magazines led a successful campaign to rename this room the "living room!" Soldiers prepaid to have their bodies embalmed. When President Lincoln's funeral

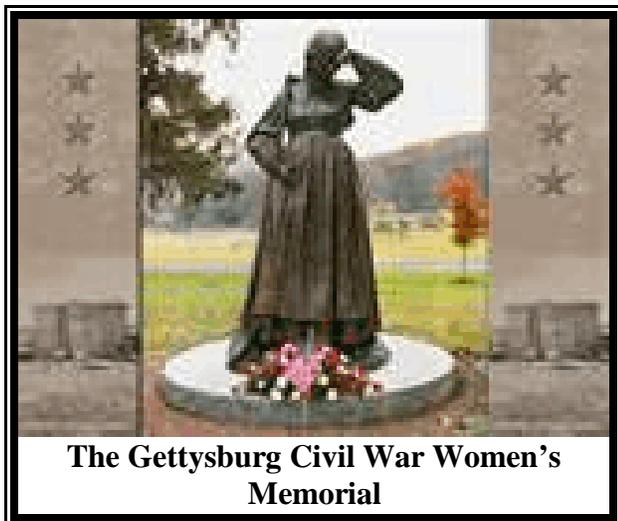
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<sup>1</sup> Editor's comment: Apparently, there was no problem with a man having two or more wives in Heaven!

train passed on its way from Washington, D. C. to Springfield, Illinois, many citizens along the way held out flowers, which led to another mourning custom (today highly commercialized)!

The War Between the States helped to instigate a profound change in America's rigid mourning rules out of necessity. The war lasted from 1861 to 1865, and approximately 618,000 soldiers died. Twice as many Southern soldiers died than Northern and practically the whole population of the South was in mourning. The depression that all the women in black caused added to an already grieving nation. At one point the Governor of Mississippi actually tried to pass a law banning Victorian mourning garb because of the low morale of the people.

After her presentation, the Widow Clark took numerous questions from the floor and the audience was invited to look "up close" at the many mourning objects (jewelry made from jade and hair, combs, bonnets).



On Saturday, November 16, 2002, a 7-foot bronze sculpture of Elizabeth Thorn (1832-1907) was dedicated in Gettysburg's Evergreen Cemetery, 50 feet southwest of the historic cemetery gatehouse. Titled "The Gettysburg Civil War Women's Memorial," the statue honors all the women who served in various capacities before, during, and following the Battle of Gettysburg.

Thorn was six months pregnant when she took on the backbreaking labor of burying the first 91 soldiers from the Battle of Gettysburg in the Evergreen Cemetery. The statue, which depicts her as very pregnant and very exhausted, marks sculptor Ron Tunison's fourth on the

Gettysburg Battlefield, which ties him for having the most monuments on the site.

Elizabeth Thorn and her husband Peter (1826-1907) are buried in adjoining lots in the historic section of the Evergreen Cemetery. To find their tombstones, enter through the Gatehouse and proceed along the main roadway about 100 yards. They are on the left side near the edge of the road, beyond the grave of Virginia Wade. The Thorns emigrated from Germany and were married on September 1, 1855. (Coincidentally the same day the cornerstone was laid for the Evergreen Cemetery Gatehouse.) For more information we recommend Brian Kennell's "Beyond the Gatehouse".

The caretaker of Evergreen Cemetery and organizer of the Gettysburg Civil War Women's Memorial, Brian Kennell, said it was important to have women's history experts speak at the dedication ceremony. "They have written about the topic and were interested long before the concept (of the monument) came along. (They offer) a more heartfelt and appreciative angle to this monument and to women's history," he said. Slated to speak were three experts in women's history: Eileen Conklin, Sally Thomas and Cindy Small. Juanita Leish also spoke. An expert on women's apparel, she helped Tunison with the details on Elizabeth Thorn's clothing.

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Palm Beach Civil War Roundtable  
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