

Setting The Table

by Lynne Belluscio

As we go into the holiday season, folks gather around the dining room table for family meals and entertaining. For some people that means bringing out the good china, the silver and cloth napkins.

As a kid, my mother expected me to set the table - the knife and spoon on the right and the salad fork and dinner fork on the left. The butter knife was placed on the salad plate to the left and the water glass above the knife on the right. The cup and saucer was to the right. I never had to worry about a soup spoon because my mother never served soup before dinner. Sometimes we'd use the little cocktail forks for shrimp. And after dinner, I had to collect all the salad forks and wash them because we needed them for dessert. When I was married, I used Green Stamps to acquire my set of silver-plate flatware - a set of twelve. In the 1960s it was a necessary part of setting up housekeeping.

One hundred years earlier, the Victorians needed a lot more silverware to set the holiday table. It seems that they were obsessed with forks and spoons. They also had fish forks and knives, cold meat forks, asparagus forks, dessert spoons, salt spoons, marrow scoops, and knife rests.

In 1851, Mary Raymond, a student at Ingham University wrote to her mother that Madam Staunton celebrated her wedding anniversary and the students took up a collection and bought her a "splendid silver cake basket, and a pair of beautiful pickle forks." Her husband gave her a very nice set of dessert spoons.

Although the wealthy could afford sterling silver table settings, average families weren't able to set silver on the table until the 1840s when silver plate was invented. The silver was plated over Britannia ware, which is a type of pewter. Early silver plate was usually only one layer, but later, for more money you could buy double or triple plate silver. This included table settings as well as "hollowware" - tea sets, trays, water pitchers, bread baskets, card holders, napkin



rings, and castor sets.

The castor set was the centerpiece of the Victorian table. It held several glass bottles. One pair was for salt and pepper. Usually there was a pair with glass stoppers for oil and vinegar. One bottle had a hinged lid with a slot for a spoon. This was for mustard. (Today there would be a bottle for ketchup.) Other bottles could hold soy sauce, spices or "castor" sugar which was a pounded sugar - not powdered sugar and not granulated sugar. This could be made by pounding loaf sugar with a mortar and pestle.

This past week we accessioned a castor set that had been donated

it was a Christmas present. The set that we accessioned, has six bottles with etched designs. One pair of bottles is pretty, obviously for salt and pepper. Another pair has larger slits in the top - perhaps for spices and sugar. And there is a mustard jar but the spoon has long been missing. And there is only one stoppered bottle, which might mean that the oil and vinegar were in one bottle. This castor set also turns like a lazy Susan. Some castor sets have a small bell - to call the butler.

My grandmother gave me the family castor set but her family was so poor that they couldn't afford silver plate. Instead, the castor stand is made of soft pewter and unfortunately one leg has broken. Obviously it has no bell. (No butler.) But the castor set was such an important part of the table setting, that no matter how humble, a family would have a castor set in the middle of the table.

The castor set became old fashioned in the early 1900s and it was relegated to the cupboard and eventually to the shelves at the antique shop. Often the silver plate has worn off in places and some of the bottles are missing. Unfortunately, the old bottles are replaced with reproductions, so a castor set with the original bottles that can be documented is exceedingly rare and the Historical Society is pleased to preserve an important part of Victorian tradition.

by Don Woodward's daughter. It is engraved "Mother from Abbie December 25, 1876." Perhaps

An advertisement for a digital publication. The background is a photograph of a white lamb standing in a field of tall grass. Overlaid on the image is the text "WE ARE THERE WHEREVER YOU MAY GO" in large, white, serif capital letters. At the bottom left, there is a small icon of a tablet displaying the publication's cover. At the bottom right, a dark banner contains the text "AP NOW AVAILABLE ON ITUNES" in white, sans-serif capital letters.