

# *From the Farmhouse Parlor to the Pink Barn*

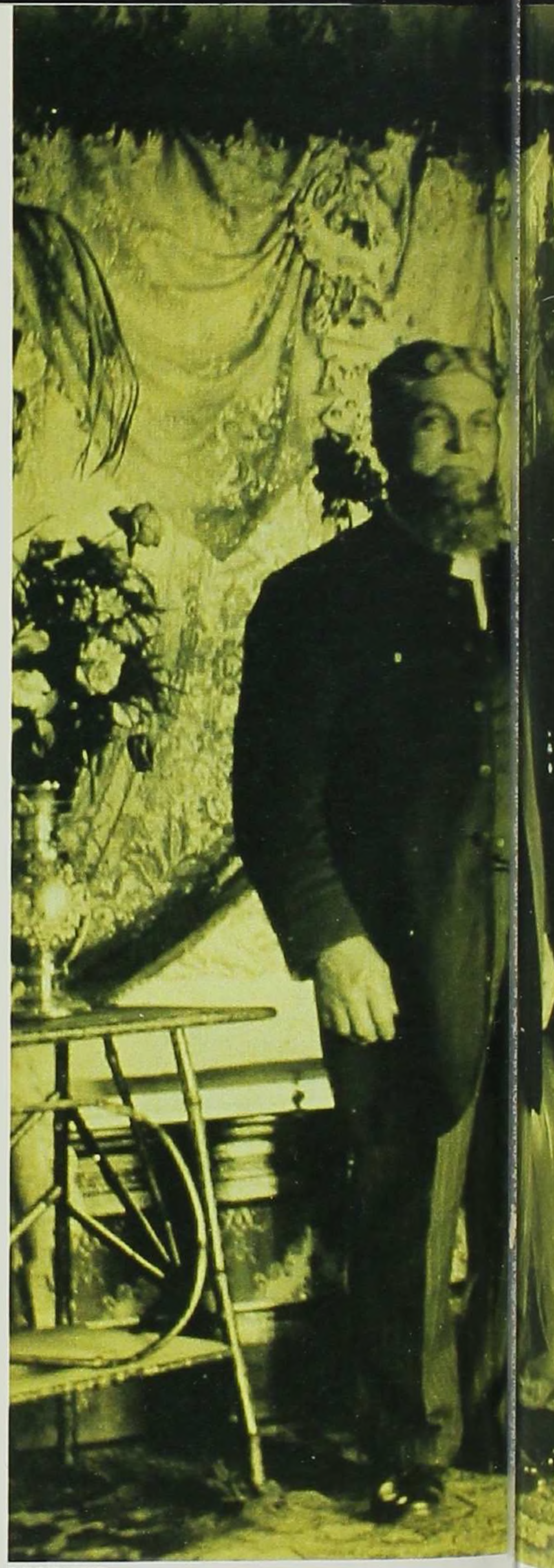
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## The Commercialization of Weddings in the Rural Midwest

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*by Katherine Jellison*

*Like* many other farms that grace the landscape of eastern Iowa, Diane and Mark Niebuhr's farmstead features a large dairy barn. Unlike the other barns in the area, however, this one is painted pale pink and houses not dairy cattle but hundreds of bridal gowns, bridesmaid dresses, and prom frocks. In addition to cultivating their 155 acres, the Niebuhrs own and operate Hope's Bridal Boutique, one of the top selling bridal shops in the Midwest. Their customers travel from within a two-hour radius to spend an average of \$550 on their bridal gowns—even during periodic downturns in the state's farm economy—and many of these young women confide to Diane Niebuhr that they have "always

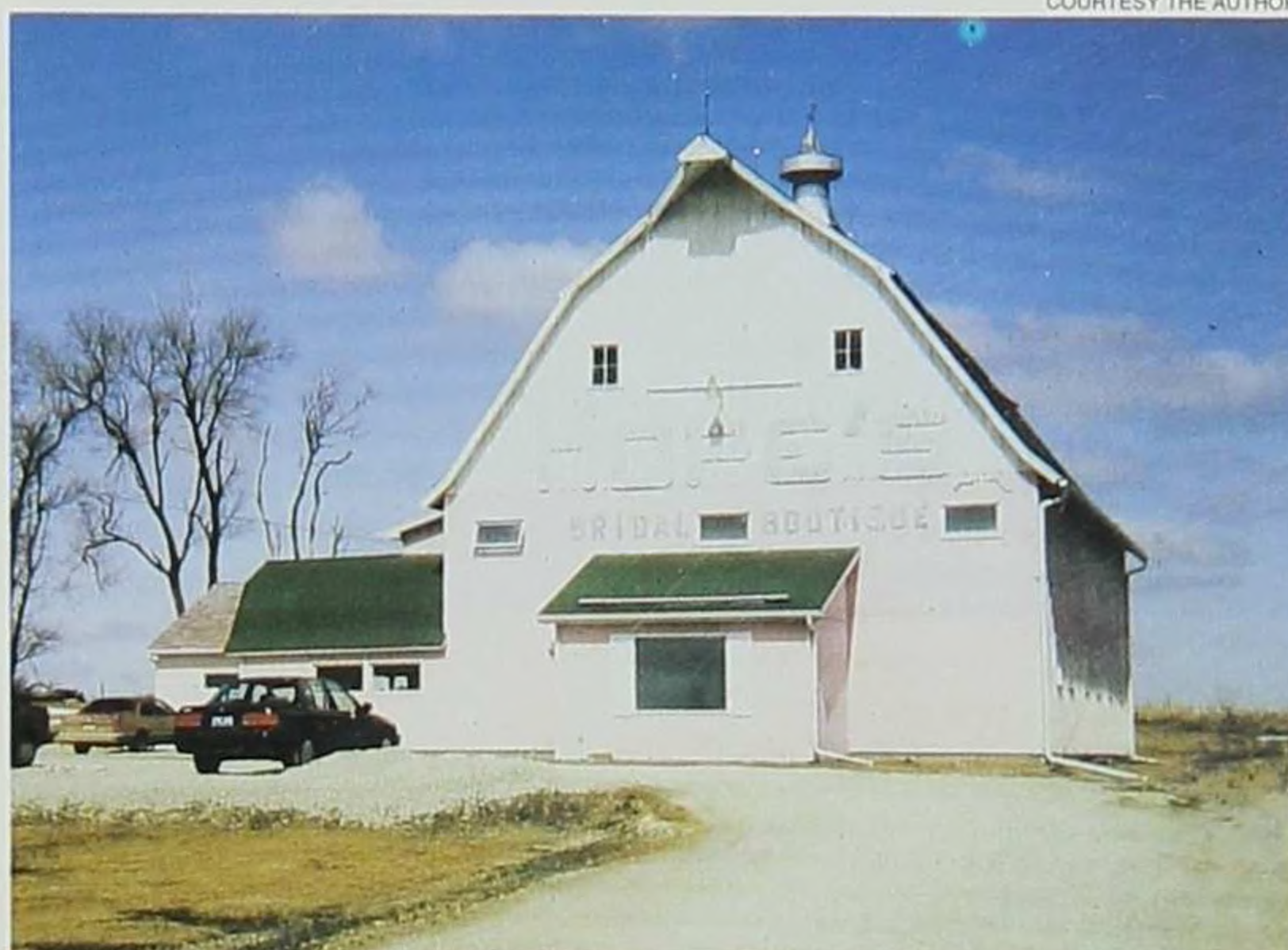


SHSI (DES MOINES)



**F**armhouse parlors, like the one above, were the typical setting for most weddings of rural midwesterners into the 20th century. Friends and family helped organize and host the ceremony and celebration. By mid-century, however, brides began to turn to professional wedding consultants, catering services, and bridal shops, such as Hope's Bridal Boutique, located in a converted Iowa barn painted pink (right).

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



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SHSI (DES MOINES)

**W**ith little fanfare, a bride and groom depart from a Boone, Iowa, general store, below a sign announcing “Marriages Solmized Here By Elder Samuel McBirnie.” Rural midwestern marriages were also solemnized in parlors and churches, but seldom in the elaborate “white” weddings staged by urban Americans.

dreamed” of purchasing their wedding dresses at the pink barn. One may reasonably ask how a business located in the middle of an Iowa cornfield could achieve such reputation and success. The answer lies in rural America’s acceptance of the commercialized wedding ideal.

In the United States, the concept of weddings as gala social events originated in the early 19th century with members of the northeastern elite. By mid-century, members of the white, native-born, urban middle class had joined the elite in their practice of such rituals, and all the elements of the modern “white wedding” were in place: the church setting, the bride dressed in white gown and veil, the best man and bridesmaids, the elaborately decorated wedding cake.

Brides in rural areas, however, continued to have relatively simple ceremonies long after their counterparts in cities had adopted all the elements of the formal white wedding. A typical 19th-century bride in America’s heartland married in the farmhouse parlor rather than a church and frequently wore her “Sunday best” rather than a “once-in-a-lifetime” wedding gown of white.

Although in the early 20th century, rural midwestern weddings increasingly took place within a church setting and featured a bride attired in white, they continued to be relatively simple affairs. Professional wedding consultants, catering services, and bridal boutiques such as the pink barn did not yet exist; family members continued to organize the wed-

ding ceremony themselves and provide the necessary accoutrements. Inclusion of other members of the rural neighborhood usually occurred only after the wedding ceremony, often at a wedding dance or dinner. Wedding dances, which were particularly popular in German and Czech farming settlements, typically featured home-brewed beer and music provided by neighbors and relatives. Community participation in a new marriage also occurred via the shivaree, an informal ceremony in which members of the rural neighborhood noisily surprised a young husband and wife in their new home and demanded cigars and sweets. Couples who did not provide the rural neighborhood with a dance or some other community celebration following their weddings could be sure that their shivarees would be particularly large and boisterous. In these ways, the small-scale, home-produced weddings of the early 20th century nevertheless became communal events.

Weddings were such popular community affairs in the early 20th century that many rural and small-town residents did not even bother to wait for the real thing and instead produced mock weddings for entertainment. These events frequently took place under the auspices of a local school or church and could revolve around any number of themes. For example, a group of young Iowa women played all the roles in a



**Above:** Newlyweds and their attendants pose before an outdoor arch supported by pillars. (One wonders how the attendant on the right supported her bouquet.) **Below left:** A loveseat and arch draped in white was the “wedding corner” for newlyweds identified only as “Ellen & Oscar” on the stereographs. Note the white paper wedding bells at the top of the photo. **Below right:** Another view through the tasseled doorway shows the “wedding table” at Oscar’s sister’s home. Small weddings and receptions in the home were typical.



ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

**“Womanless weddings”** were popular community events. This one took place in Traer, Iowa, probably in the 1920s. On the back of this photo are written the words: “Here is your girl.” As with many social customs, community-based forms of entertainment like womanless weddings eventually gave way to more commercial, mainstream forms.

mock wedding held during the “man shortage” period of World War I, with the faux groom attired in top hat, tails, and an artificial pot belly. Another motif was the “Tom Thumb” wedding, in which young children played the roles of bride, groom, best man, and bridesmaid.

The most popular theme for these pageants, however, was the “Womanless Wedding,” in which men

played all the men’s and women’s parts. Typical of these “Womanless Weddings” was one held in 1947 at the Washington Country School near Nortonville, Kansas, where local farmers masqueraded as bride, bridesmaids, and flower girl wearing their female relatives’ discarded clothing and jewelry. Like box suppers, cake walks, and authentic wedding celebrations, it was an opportunity for neighbors to get to-



gether for amusement and fellowship, and like most such occasions, this mock wedding took place during the slack period that followed the fall harvest. This particular mock wedding, however, was one of the last such entertainments held in the Nortonville area. By the late 1940s, a variety of rural community events—from threshing bees to box suppers and shivarees—were on the wane. Just as the cooperative neighborhood threshing bee gave way to the practice of each family hiring professional “custom cutters” or purchasing its own combine, the mock wedding ceremony gave way to more commercial entertain-

ments—such as viewing Hollywood movies or network television programs.

Along with such rural recreational practices, rural wedding celebrations underwent a transformation in the postwar era. Statistics on wedding receptions reported in newspapers that served residents of rural Minnesota demonstrate the changes that occurred in wedding celebrations during the course of the 20th century. In 1925/26, 95 percent of the wedding receptions mentioned in the daily *Albert Lea Times* took place in private homes, 5 percent in a rented hall or restaurant, and none in a church-related building. Only 20 years later, those trends had reversed, with the vast majority of wedding receptions in the area being held in public places rather than private homes. And finally, by 1975, only 9 percent of receptions in the Albert Lea area were held in homes, while 24 percent were held in halls or restaurants, and 67 percent in church-related buildings. Statistics gathered from the weekly Thief River Falls (Minnesota) *Tribune* demonstrate similar trends for the same 50-year period.



**W**omen played the roles of groom and best man in this 1917 mock wedding held in Clayton County, Iowa.



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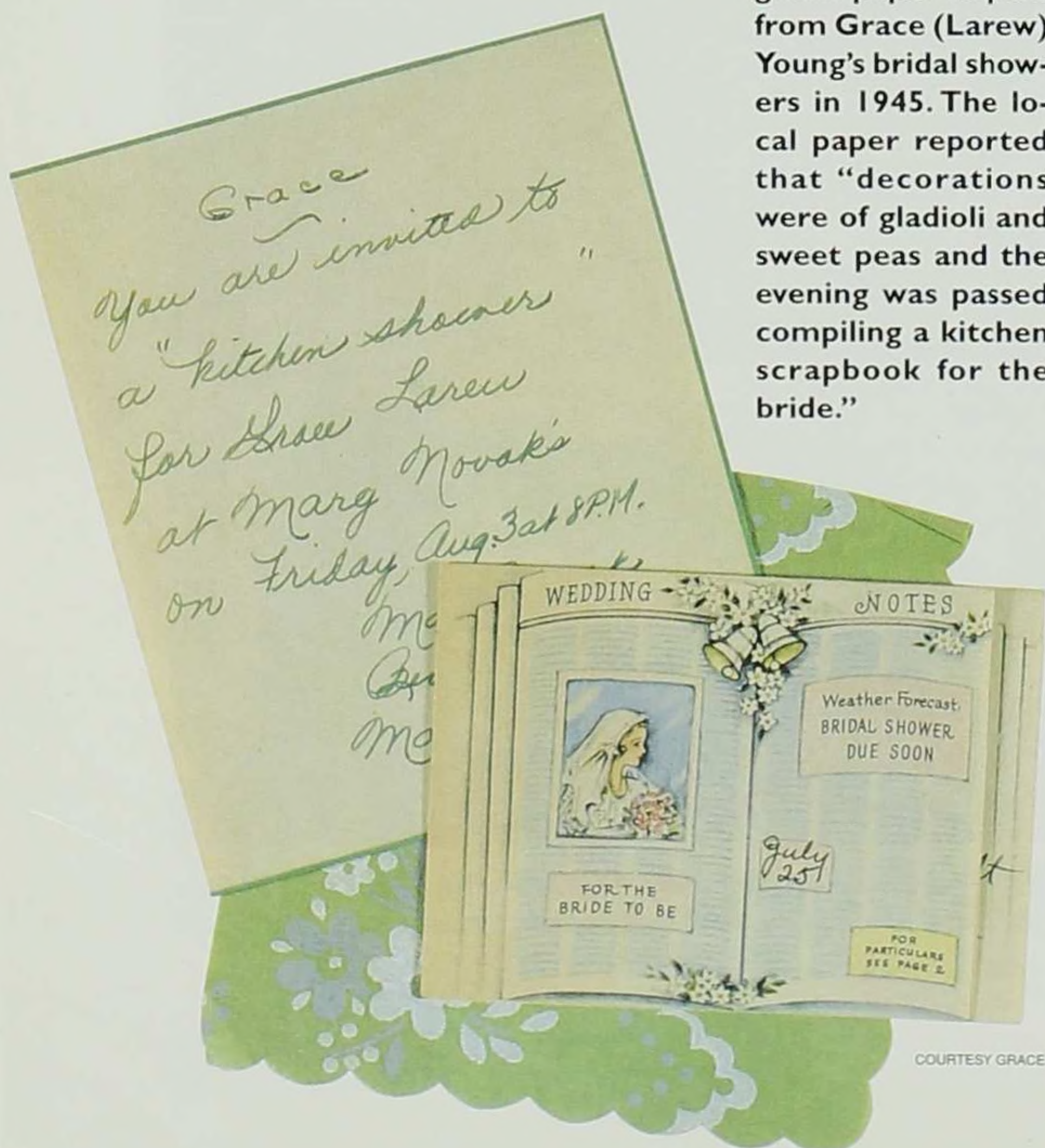


SHSI (DES MOINES)



**T**he Van Meter Junior Women's Club demonstrates how to have a bridal shower at its "School for Brides" in 1938. The school idea originated with the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs. In Van Meter, the *Des Moines Register* reported, "dozens of carefully marcelled girls" listened to a minister, doctor, and home demonstration agent advise on the sacredness of marriage, the importance of Wassermann tests, and the best choices for a hope chest. From left: Arlene Killam, Alice Smith, Alma Lily, Hariett Davis, and Ethel Strober.

**T**wo invitations and green paper napkin from Grace (Larew) Young's bridal showers in 1945. The local paper reported that "decorations were of gladioli and sweet peas and the evening was passed compiling a kitchen scrapbook for the bride."



COURTESY GRACE YOUNG

As these statistics indicate, rural wedding celebrations became increasingly formal, public, and commercial in character during the postwar era, owing to the rise of the American wedding industry. The prosperous postwar period saw the establishment of a vast network of clothiers, florists, caterers, bakers, engravers, photographers, and other business people who made their living in the wedding industry. And following two decades of depression and war, young Americans were eager to marry and purchase the services of this growing industry. It was an era that glorified domestic bliss. By 1950, one in every three American women was marrying by the age of 19. The experts who dispensed advice on wedding practices told these young postwar brides that they should freely purchase the goods and services of wedding professionals. For example, the *Emily Post* guide to wedding etiquette instructed brides on how best to plan and execute weddings that ranged in price from \$500 to \$4,000.

Popular magazines, movies, and television programs helped promote the commercialized wedding from coast to coast. *Bride's* magazine, which had begun publication in the 1930s as a wedding guide for East Coast society brides, expanded its circulation in the postwar era to take its fashion layouts and wedding industry advertisements to brides of all regions and social standing. Characters played by Joan Bennett and Elizabeth Taylor in the 1950 film *Father of the Bride* argued that an acceptable wedding could not be staged without a professional caterer, a \$400 wedding cake, and a "candid" camera man to record the "spontaneous" moments of the big day. *The Bride and Groom Television Show*, broadcast on NBC in the 1950s, offered winning couples the chance to be married on the air with all the appropriate professional services and accoutrements. The elaborate white wedding, which now increasingly included the goods and services of wedding professionals and commercial establishments, was thus urged upon Americans from all walks of life, including the nation's farm families.

Manufacturers, advertisers, journalists, and retailers also joined forces in the postwar era to encourage brides-to-be to acquire household products through bridal registries and prenuptial showers. In 1949, the Fostoria glassware company distributed a countertop Bridal Gift Display to retailers throughout the country, including the Hess Brothers' Department Store in Rockford, Illinois. The display featured the image of a 1940s pinup girl dressed in a Victorian-style wedding gown and urged consumers to purchase Fostoria products for the bride of "Today, Yesterday, & Every-

day." By 1950, *Good Housekeeping* magazine had joined the campaign to encourage the purchase of expensive wedding gifts by featuring a monthly advice column devoted to the selection of appropriate gifts for the bride-to-be. As a result of such marketing schemes, by 1953, the typical prospective bride could expect to attend from one to six showers in the months immediately prior to her wedding. Rural as well as urban brides now expected to receive elaborate household items as wedding or shower gifts, even if such presents often remained impractical for the farm home. For instance, in a survey conducted by *McCall's* magazine in the early 1950s, one newlywed who had received goblets, sherbet glasses, candlesticks, and a fruit bowl in her chosen crystal pattern admitted that she rarely entertained formally in her farm home but that she and her husband used her "good dishes and good silver" when they dined alone at Sunday dinner.

Rural Americans' embrace of the commercialized wedding resulted from a number of postwar factors. Their loss of rural schools and churches, increased reliance on store-purchased items, expanded employment in off-farm jobs, and extensive use of the automobile meant that rural dwellers now had greater regular contact with the residents, institutions, and cultural standards of urban America. One product of this increased contact was a change in rural marriage patterns. Working in an off-farm job, serving military duty in a faraway location, or attending a distant college on the GI Bill increased the likelihood that a young man would return to the family farm with a bride from a nonfarm background. At the same time, increased off-farm employment and educational opportunities for young farm women reduced the pool of potential farm-reared brides. According to one midwestern study, by 1955 one in every three women residing on a farm had grown up in a town or city, and these urban brides brought with them the standards and practices of urban life.

The greater mobility of postwar rural residents and the wider range of potential marriage partners also resulted in greater intermarriage between members of different ethnic groups, which in turn led to the breakdown of certain ethnic wedding customs and their replacement by practices associated with the commercialized wedding of "mainstream" America. Additionally, after two decades of agricultural depression, farm incomes had trebled during World War II and remained high afterwards. For the first time, many farm families were able to afford items and services that were already commonplace in middle-class urban households. Increased farm income, contact

with urban institutions, and marriage outside of one's own ethnic group all led to rural residents' greater participation in the American wedding industry.

As a result of these changes, mothers who had married in simple, home-produced wedding celebrations prior to World War II now saw their daughters patronize new commercial services. For instance, in 1930, when Ella Bischoff had married A.W. Winkelmann in rural Nebraska, the few purchased items included the bride's wedding gown, a bakery cake, some greenhouse flowers, and invitations printed at the local newspaper office. Only family members had attended the church ceremony, but the celebration had been extended to other members of the local German Lutheran community via the wedding dinner—held in the bride's family home and cooked by her mother and sister—and by way of the traditional shivaree. The practice of "showering" the bride with prenuptial gifts was unknown in the community at that time, but neighbors and relatives had presented the couple with a few simple gifts following the wedding.

In contrast, when the Winkelmanns' daughter Jean married farmer Bob Hardy in 1959, the "do-it-yourself" ethnic wedding celebration was not only considered unfashionable but it did not accurately reflect the social contacts of postwar youth. In the case of Jean Winkelmann and Bob Hardy, the bride had attended college far from home, and the groom had served in the military during the Korean War, so their social network extended well beyond the local German-American farming community. Wedding ex-



COURTESY GRACE YOUNG

**Iowan Grace Young recalls that commercial greeting cards, like these congratulating her on her engagement, began replacing handwritten notes about 1945. She also recalls the "five-pound parties" at which she and her fiancé announced their engagement to college dormitory friends over a five-pound box of candy.**



**G**race Larew and Dick Young's wedding on August 12, 1945, reflected the shift from home-based, small-scale weddings to more elaborate, commercialized weddings with professional catering and photography, gift registration, and a store-bought gown. Grace partially credits her friendships with college dormitory friends from all over Iowa as influencing her choices. Yet the war had an opposite effect: paper shortages made paper napkins difficult to find, and because of gas rationing, they chose an Iowa City church. Thus, Iowa City friends could more easily attend the wedding than if it had been in North Liberty.

penses for the couple included the services of a professional caterer, who served a dignified brunch in the reception area of the local Lutheran church. There, guests of diverse ethnicity presented the couple with a variety of gifts to add to those the bride had already received at her two wedding showers. By the time the Hardys' daughter Ann married farmer Steve Vrana in 1985, the commercialized wedding celebration had further expanded to include a total of four bridal showers and a honeymoon cruise to the Bahamas.

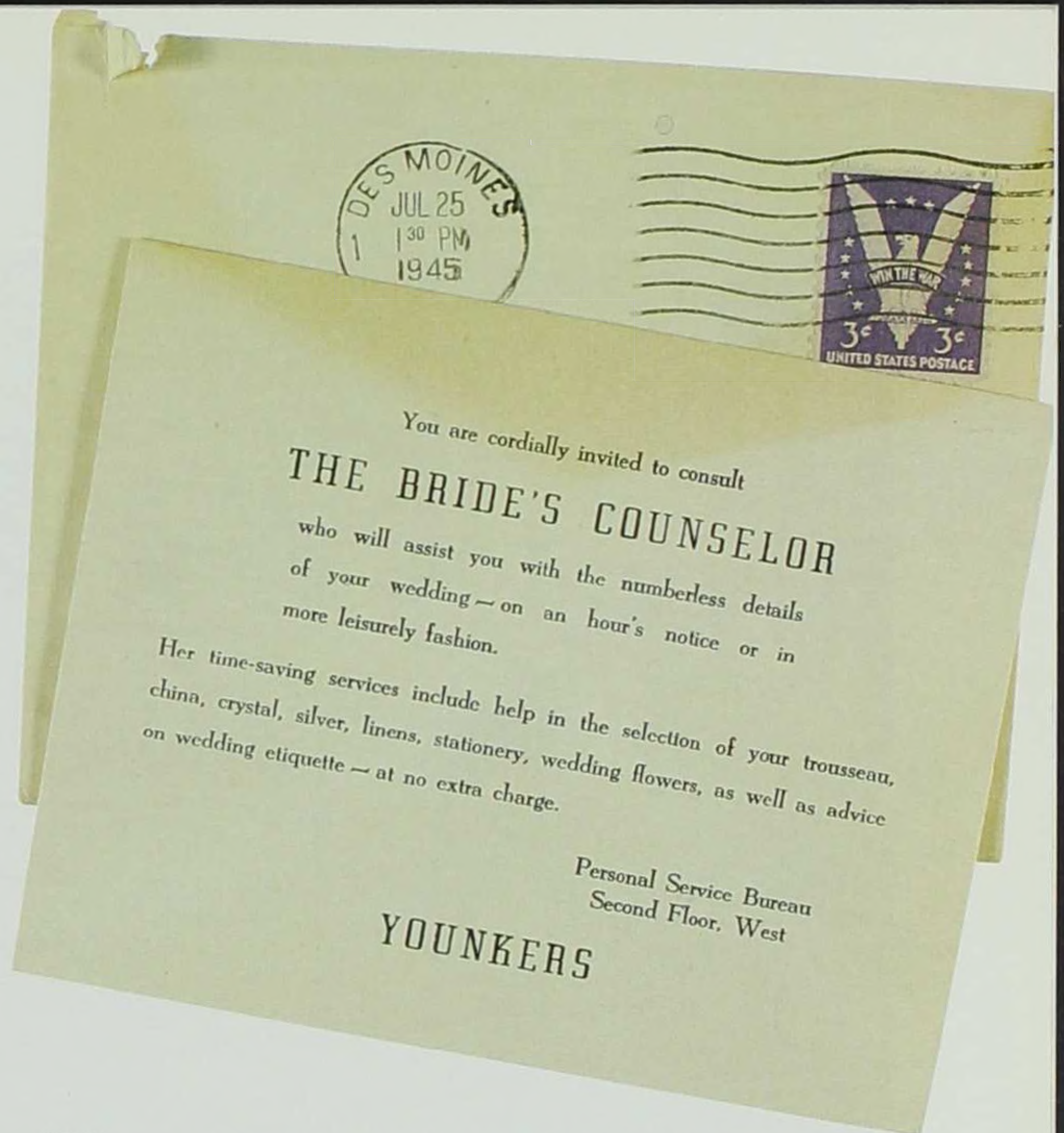
The experiences of this Nebraska family were typical of those of other rural residents in postwar America. Only those groups that resisted modernization and consumerism in general—such as the Old Or-

der Amish—continued to hold weddings in the farmhouse parlor, to maintain the celebration strictly within their own ethnic community, to rely on relatives and neighbors to prepare the wedding feast, and to provide the young couple with only a few practical gifts. Otherwise, rural Americans increasingly relied on commercial services for their wedding celebrations, responding to the efforts of the growing wedding industry to cultivate a market for their wares.

Brides-to-be in rural areas, however, sometimes found it difficult to achieve all aspects of the commercialized wedding ideal when they lived some distance away from a boutique, department store, or caterer. For many prospective brides and their families, fre-

quent shopping trips to a major commercial center remained impractical. The experiences of Elva Allen were typical of many postwar brides in the rural Midwest. A native of Seattle, Allen had never considered the possibility that she might marry a farmer and move half a continent away, but while serving in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, she had met a GI named Orville Heinz and by January 1946 was preparing to marry him and begin a new life as a Wisconsin farm woman. In her move to the rural Midwest, however, Allen had brought along her urban, middle-class standards, which included her desire for an elaborate church wedding. She and her future sister-in-law traveled to a Green Bay department store to buy an appropriate wedding gown but upon return to the farm realized that they had not purchased matching stockings. They could not travel all the way back to Green Bay, and stores in the surrounding small towns did not carry fancy white stockings, so the sister-in-law improvised by modifying a pair of her husband's white dress socks, which Allen proudly wore down the aisle of the local Presbyterian church.

In response to situations such as Allen's, some enterprising rural residents started their own businesses to take advantage of the desire for commercially produced weddings in the countryside. For example, Goldie Smith, who prepared the wedding brunch for Jean Winkelmann and Bob Hardy, was a Nebraska



**“You are cordially invited to consult THE BRIDE'S COUNSELOR who will assist you with the numberless details of your wedding—on an hour's notice or in more leisurely fashion,”** reads a card that bride-to-be Grace Larew received from Younkens in July 1945. These “time-saving services” included help in selecting crystal, stationery, and flowers, and “advice on wedding etiquette”—all reflections of the commercialized wedding. Below: More Larew-Young wedding scenes.

BOTH PAGES: COURTESY GRACE YOUNG



BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



**Not all postwar weddings were elaborate events, as seen in this wedding photo labeled “November 18, 1945. To Reverend Hanscom. Compliments of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Paukert, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.”**

farm woman who ran a catering business on the side. Hope Kolsto, who would eventually found Hope's Bridal Boutique in the early 1970s, also started out on a small scale, selling wedding cakes to her rural neighbors from her Iowa farmhouse. Because her farmstead was on an isolated gravel road, however, her customers often had difficulty finding her, so Kolsto gave the farm a distinctive appearance by painting all the buildings pink, including the barn that would later serve as a wedding boutique. For rural women like Hope Kolsto, the growing popularity of commercialized weddings provided a new way to help supplement their families' farm income.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of rural America's acceptance of the commercialized wedding was the 1954 appearance of a young farm couple on NBC's *Bride and Groom Television Show*, broadcast live from the network's Radio City Chapel every weekday from 11:00 to 11:15 a.m. Central Time. Each program featured the marriage of one couple, chosen from the dozens who sent letters to the producers each week outlining the stories of their meeting, romance, and

future plans. Based on these letters, and enclosed photographs, winners were chosen for their telegenic qualities and the uniqueness of their courtship saga. For couples who won the opportunity to appear on the show, the program provided rings, the clergyman's fee, flowers, photographs of the ceremony, and a honeymoon trip. Well-known household appliance, silverware, carpet, and cosmetics companies sponsored the show and presented their products to featured couples as wedding gifts.

At the time of their wedding—March 17, 1954—Earl Stiles was a 20-year-old farmer, and Claudine Smith was 19 and working for the Agricultural Extension Service in Lee County, Arkansas. Apparently the novelty of having a farm couple appear on the New York-based program was one factor in the producers' choice of Stiles and Smith as the couple who would marry on their St. Patrick's Day show. The bride had certainly emphasized the couple's rural roots in her letter of application to the program, stating, “Earl and I were both born and raised on the farm. He plans to continue to farm, and we live in the country where the

air is freer." Now on the set of the *Bride and Groom* show and far from rural Arkansas, the bride wore a wedding dress borrowed from a New York City store, and she and the groom repeated their vows in front of a Methodist minister, the show's master of ceremonies, its house vocalist and musicians, and the program's studio audience. Back in Lee County, Arkansas, their friends, parents, and other family members gathered around the area's few local sets to watch the televised ceremony.

The Stileses' televised nuptials illustrate a number of characteristics of the postwar rural wedding. Their wedding certainly represented the continuation of community involvement in the ritual, although now family and friends were strictly observers rather than participants. As people back in Lee County, Arkansas, gathered around television sets located in private homes and in the window of the local department store, they were able to witness this significant rite of passage in the lives of two of the community's young people. The fact that the wedding was televised nationally, however, certainly allowed persons beyond the local community to share in the event. Friends and relatives across the country who would not have otherwise been able to attend a ceremony at the Stileses' home church in Arkansas were now able to witness it—as were millions of total strangers. Similarly, the Stiles ceremony continued the tradition of weddings as entertainment. Now, however, it was commercialized entertainment—complete with sponsors' advertising—rather than a community-orchestrated mock wedding ceremony.

The Stiles wedding also further served to educate rural Americans in the appropriate way to wed in the postwar era. In its dignified staging of the ceremony, the *Bride and Groom* program instructed its audience that a simple ceremony incorporating professional musicians was preferable to a boisterous ethnic celebration. And although producers of the *Bride and Groom* show informed couples that they could have their wedding performed by the clergyman of their choice, the fact that an interview with the couple and the wedding ceremony were both to be completed within 15 minutes meant that the program lent itself more to a simple Protestant ceremony than to traditional Catholic or Jewish rites. Non-Protestant couples who married on the show obviously had to modify their rituals somewhat to accommodate the limited time frame, making their ceremonies more closely resemble those performed within Protestant denominations. The program also relayed the message that expensive household wares were superior gifts to home-



*It's just a little message  
But most sincerely sent  
To say how much  
your charming gift  
And thoughtfulness have meant*



**Here, Connie and Walt Koehn of Clinton contemplate their six-tiered wedding cake on thank-you cards sent to their wedding guests. Custom photography and printed invitations and thank-you cards characterized the commercialized wedding.**

made quilts and linens. In fact, advertisers for the show would have been happy to know that when the Stileses returned to Arkansas from their New York adventure, their neighbors were most interested in hearing about the "prizes" the couple had "won" from the show's sponsors.

Although the Stiles wedding illustrates postwar trends in exaggerated form, the central message it sent to viewers of the time was one they were increasingly coming to understand and accept: an American wedding celebration was a public event, not something produced and witnessed by family and neighbors alone. As such, it now required the services of a variety of professionals and commercial institutions: florists, photographers, musicians, jewelers, travel agents, and manufacturers of household wares. Back in Iowa—where 54.9 percent of farm households owned television sets by 1954—many rural homemakers may well have watched the Stileses tie the knot on late morning TV, and these viewers no doubt had ab-



SHS (IOWA CITY); JOAN LIFRINGZUG COLLECTION



sorbed the program's message. Their daughters too should marry in this fashion and procure the services of wedding professionals.

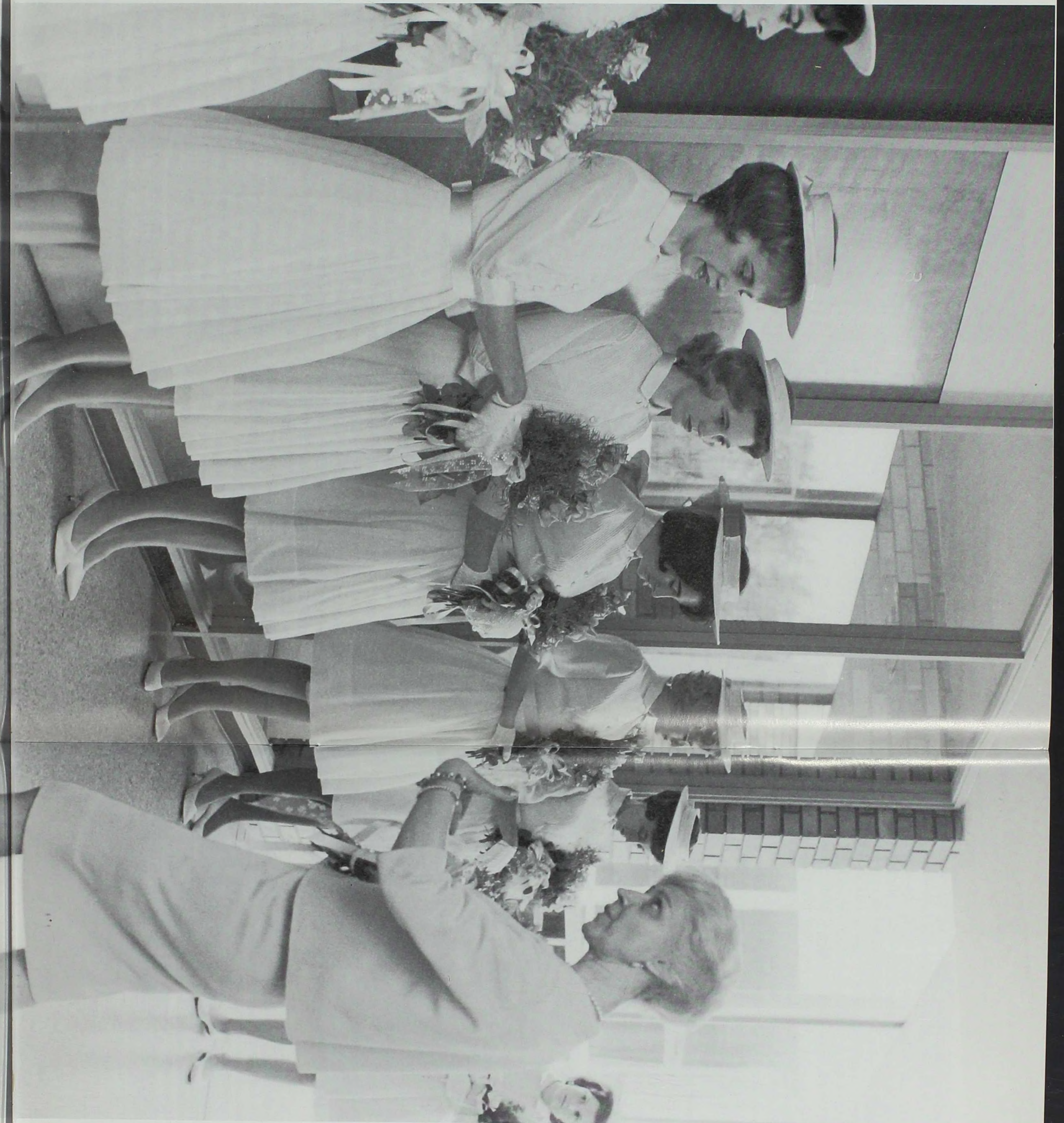
It was within this atmosphere of acceptance that Hope Kolsto began her wedding cake business. Taking advantage of her contacts in the local rural community, Kolsto sold her cakes to willing friends and neighbors. Eventually, capitalizing on the concepts of homemade quality and rural thrift, she was able to extend her business to sell cakes to nearby urban residents looking for attractive cakes at reasonable prices. When she expanded her business to include wedding dresses, "quality at low prices" remained the motto. And what could serve as a better symbol of Kolsto's commitment to those principles than to sell her merchandise from a sturdy barn that she herself had painted, carpeted, wired, and transformed into a bridal boutique?

In fact, Kolsto's location became a distinct advantage by the 1980s, as the youngest members of the baby boom generation reached marrying age and the postwar wedding industry reached its peak. By 1984, a record two and a half million American brides were seeking the services of wedding professionals, and as a result, many more retailers entered the trade. In an increasingly competitive market, where the nation's bridal boutiques all carried virtually the same gowns and its caterers displayed identical cakes, the wedding retailer had to sell the best quality product at the lowest possible price. Located in the family barn and hiring local farm women as her saleswomen and seamstresses, Kolsto kept her overhead and labor costs down and was thus often able to sell a dress to a customer for a significantly lower price than the prospective bride would have paid for an identical item at a shopping mall in Cedar Rapids or Des Moines. Rural brides, who typically chose to spend less on their gowns than their urban counterparts, certainly benefited from this situation, but many urban brides also began to seek out places like Hope's Bridal Boutique or the Cameo Bridal Shoppe—located in a barn in upstate New York—where brides-to-be pursued the mystique of rural thrift and "homemade" quality and in the process frequently found some real bargains.

One might thus argue that Hope's Bridal Boutique not only represents rural midwesterners' acceptance of the professionally produced wedding but also

**Iowa** photographer Joan Liffing-Zug captured numerous aspects of the commercialized wedding ideal, including this candid moment in which a wedding planner instructs bridesmaids at All Saints Church in Cedar Rapids in 1963.





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SHS (IOWA CITY); JOAN LIFFRING-ZUG COLLECTION

**A** young bridesmaid shields her eyes from hairspray as an identically clad teen stands her ground. Such candid wedding photos by Joan Liffing-Zug testify to the level of detail and preparation behind the elaborate “white wedding,” which became the American ideal in this century.

serves as an excellent symbol of the contemporary wedding industry as a whole. In an era when half of the nation’s marriages will end in divorce, the average American bride currently spends \$16,000 on her wedding, even in the uncertain economy of the mid-1990s. On the surface, these statistics simply do not seem to “add up.” Young women and their families continue to spend scarce resources on what one might argue is a “fifty-fifty proposition.” Obviously, the resiliency of the postwar wedding ideal is evident. The groundwork that wedding professionals laid in a more prosperous era has had real staying power. As their grandmothers and mothers did in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, today’s brides, whether living in rural or urban areas, continue to believe in the professionally produced wedding. And in the highly competitive wedding market, where since the mid-1980s the number of retailers has increased and the number of brides has decreased, wedding professionals have to keep their prices down but continue to present a quality product.

At Hope’s Bridal Boutique, most of the employees continue to be local farm women who schedule their hours in the boutique around their farm chores, just as Hope Kolsto did over 20 years ago when she turned the family dairy barn into a bridal shop. Since that time, Kolsto has retired to Arizona and sold the farm

and bridal boutique to Diane and Mark Niebuhr. A major highway now passes the farmstead, making it easier for customers to find, but the barn, farmhouse, and outbuildings retain their coating of pink paint. On any given day, a steady stream of young women and their mothers, sisters, friends—and an occasional father or fiancé—may be seen coming and going from the pink barn. Here at Hope’s Bridal Boutique, a woman can purchase the wedding gown of her dreams. As Diane Niebuhr is fond of saying, the pink barn offers “big city selection and big city service” but in a rural environment. The wedding practices of the “big city” have indeed come to the midwestern countryside.

As the history of rural weddings over the past 50 years indicates, many of the changes that characterized postwar farming practices also distinguished rural cultural rituals. Decreased dependence on cooperative family and neighborhood arrangements, and increased reliance on cash expenditures and professional services affected both agricultural production and rural cultural traditions such as weddings. As with postwar innovations in agricultural production, postwar changes in rural wedding celebrations had their origins in the interwar period, when, as historians have noted, access to automobiles, radios, and motion pictures exposed rural residents to the standards and institutions of urban middle-class life and sometimes contributed to the breakdown of certain ethnic customs and patterns of interaction. These trends accelerated in the immediate postwar era, when high farm incomes allowed rural residents to become full-scale members of the American consumer culture. They, too, could now afford the status symbols and leisure pursuits of the urban middle class—including the commercialized wedding. The commercialized wedding was thus on its way toward becoming a fixture of rural midwestern family life. ❖

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# Three Weddings and a Shower

From parlors to paper plates, the diaries of Iowan Mary Eleanor Armstrong Peet trace subtle changes in weddings. These entries, from the diaries at the State Historical Society of Iowa, have been edited slightly. —*The editor*

"Wed. 14 Feb. 1900. . . . Rose early. Swept sitting room, cleaned celery, made potatoe salad and a big pan of escalloped oysters. Dote came up this morning and put chiffon in neck of my tan dress. . . . Had a fire in parlor all day. Tried to heat the upstairs. Arranged things in parlor. . . . We set the table and about 4 oclock I commenced to get my trousseau ready to don. Dote waved my back hair and fixed me up in general. Lydia and I just went downstairs to warm when Claude came. Others commenced to come so I sneaked upstairs and Claude soon followed. I was pretty nervous. Could hear the people arriving. . . . [To] 'General Tom Thumb's Grand Wedding March' . . . Mrs. Soper, Claude and I marched downstairs and took our places in the bay window and the ceremony proceeded. It was a short ceremony followed by congratulations from all. Even from Lorene, she came right behind

Lora. . . . The supper was nice. The guests invited all came except (three) . . . making a total of 35. The presents were uncommonly nice it seems to me. Mr. Soper gave us a beautiful wedding album with certificate and Etc. inside. All the guests wrote their autograph in it. . . . The last ones went home between twelve and one oclock."

"Wed. Nov. 25, 1908. Claude took Merle & I to Ma's. Took our clothes for tonight. 2 jardinieres, smilax & vines. 2 roses, chrysanthemums, some dishes & the chickens & dressing. Went over to Cora Garetson's. Beat the eggs for 2 angel foods. Cora baked 3 of them for Eve. Helped Eve decorate parlor & dining room. Made escalloped oysters. . . . About 7 oclock the invited guests arrived & Mae played a wedding march & Mr. Post, Charles & Eve came downstairs & stood before the decorated corner & were married. Congratulations followed & supper was served. . . . Jen & I served assisted by Claude in the kitchen. As soon as it was dark the house seemed to be surrounded by men, women & kids trying to see in. Could hear them scuffling on the porch & whispering during the ceremony & as soon

as congratulations were over they let loose.

. . . . On Monday night the girls & women gave her a 'shower' at Jake Newman's. Gave her a lot of little presents with an appropriate verse on it."

"Sat. Oct. 4, 1952. Jack's wedding day. . . . at Kenwood Park M. E. church at 2:30 P.M. It was a simple, pretty wedding. A bride's maid and best man. Marjorie played the organ. The father, Mr. Merrifield, gave the bride away. She looked very pretty and nice & Jack looked manly. There seemed to be more of Jack's relatives and friends than her side of the house. After the ceremony the bridal party lined up in the vestibule & received congratulations. Some pictures were taken & and as the bride & groom came out to go to their car rice greeted them from every side. . . . We went to S.W. Cedar Rapids to the home of the Merrifields' where after a long wait (they went back in the church for more pictures) the bridal group arrived. The bride & groom cut the first slice of a 4 tiered cake & . . . [then] opened their presents & . . . expressed their thanks to all. Then refreshments [on?] paper plates was passed. . . . Finally bride appeared in going away costume & [they] started on their tour." ❖

## NOTE ON SOURCES FOR "FROM THE FARMHOUSE PARLOR TO THE PINK BARN"

The author thanks the Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission and the State Historical Society of Iowa for a Sesquicentennial grant that helped fund research. Much of the information here is from the author's interviews with rural married couples and wedding industry professionals. On the general history of courtship and marriage practices, see: John Modell, *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States, 1920-1975* (1989); Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (1984); Regina Lee Blaszczyk, "It's a Cinderella Story': The Home Furnishings Trade, Brides-to-Be, and the Construction of Domesticity, 1945-1960," in *Gender, Consumption, and Technology*, ed. Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun (forthcoming); Simon Charsley, *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History* (1992); Ann Monsarrat, *And the Bride Wore . . . : The Story of the White Wedding* (1973); and Marcia Seligson, *The Eternal Bliss Machine: America's Way of Wedding* (1973). On Amish weddings, see Stephen Scott, *The Amish Wedding and Other Special Occasions of the Old Order Communities* (1988). For more on weddings in the Winkelmann-Hardy family, see Katherine Jellison, "Getting Married in the Heartland: The Commercialization of Weddings in the Rural Midwest," *Ohio University College of Arts and Sciences Forum* 12 (Fall 1995), 46-50. On the history of rural midwestern family life, see Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (1986); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (1993); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (1995); and Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (1992). The major work consulted on post-World War II family life is Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988). For those wishing further information on the sources employed, an annotated version of the manuscript is in this magazine's production files.