

## At an Imaginary Tea as Nannie Jordan Explains Old Local Social Customs

*Nannie Jordan, born in Lexington in 1856, was a much-loved teacher and “a woman of happy and pleasant personality and strong character, deeply religious,” as the Lexington Gazette said when she died in 1942. Along the way, she wrote a delicious memoir she called “Smiles and Tears of Other Years,” consisting of stories, sometimes amusing and always vividly told, that shine a fascinating light on our wondrous place and its people. From time to time we’ll be publishing the best of “Smiles and Tears,” wishing that we had been there to hear her tell these tales herself.*

### COURTING

**T**HE SOCIAL LIFE of the “little town of Lexington” in these early days was beautiful and unsophisticated. The girls watched with beating hearts for the beginning of the College sessions to make new friendships and renew old ones. Formal introductions were absolutely required and “parlor” visits for this purpose announced by notes at the hands of messengers – no telephone calls for “dates” or accidental street meetings. The V. M. I. boys had half holiday on Saturday and on those days the W. & L. students respected their limited privileges and “stayed away.” . . . Love grew to the music of the minuet – not born to the rhythm of the round dance which came in with Irene and Vernon Castle and Isadora Duncan. The girls

kept “engagement books.” There were no Theatres or picture shows – only church, and an occasional “hop.”

One young man would have the first Sunday night in every month all through till June – another the second Sunday, etc. Odd Sundays were graciously assigned to odd applicants, or they got the Sunday mornings. There were Serenades and subsequent refreshments. There were “Calathumps” with fancy costumes and masks, tin horns and other musical instruments – but before entering for the never-failing refreshments, the masks and orchestra equipments were left outside.

Mr. Calvin McCorkle once gave us a dance, serving ginger cakes and cider – and whistling the only music. This was bad for his throat, and he was almost without a voice next morning. The McCorkles had refused from Lynchburg to Lexington.

### MARY DAVIDSON’S BUGGY

**T**HERE WERE VERY FEW vehicles to be hired for our “hops” and parties, and many times our pretty slippers had to be changed at the end of a long walk,



*Nannie Jordan, 1876.  
Photograph by Michael Miley.*

but those students and cadets who were popular with Miss Mary Davidson could always borrow her buggy, and I have often been taken to a hop at V. M. I. with another girl sitting on my lap, or vice versa.

### MAKING SOAP

**I**N THE DAYS of my Grandmother there was a big cistern in the back yard of our home to catch the rain-water from the kitchen roof. Near it was a large “ash-topper”

made of wooden boards and shaped like a brick-layer's "mortar-bod." All the wood ashes (and there were no others) were put into the hopper and, when full, hot water was poured over them — this and the rain made constant drippings of "lye" which was caught in a big vessel, and used for making soap — soft soap for laundry, hard soap for kitchen use — and, during the war, for bathing. A near neighbor. Mrs. Harvey, would come across the alley with a dipper of that golden brown soft soap for my Grandmother to "taste" it. There seemed no other way to test its strength.

### NEW YEAR'S DAY

**N**EW YEAR'S DAY was open house day in the '70s and '80s. Everybody called on everybody else — not only the W. & L. and V. M. I. boys — there were refreshments in every drawing-room and "all went merry as a marriage bell." Those who chose to make the rounds began at Gen. Smith's house on the V. M. I. parade grounds — then the Moores, Blairs, Andersons, Letchers, Harrises, Nelsons, Campbells, Kirkpatrick, Jordans, Lees, Paxtons, Pendletons, Prestons and many others. This custom has "gone with the wind" as have many others of the "old South."

### THE UGLY CLUB

**W**ASHINGTON AND LEE University had a Club called "The Ugly Club."

Its annual celebration furnished a touch of humor to the otherwise serious Academic affairs. It was held in open air on the Campus. The speakers were elected by reverses — the handsomest man was the ugliest, the homeliest was the handsomest and the largest, the baby — and vice versa. On one of these occasions, Gen. Joe Lane Sterne, being the most popular man in College, was elected "The Booby."

The "baby" of the Ugly Club was Mr. Campbell of West Virginia — a very large man. He was my escort that night and though I was only a child, we were applauded when we entered. His trophy was a stick of Mint candy weighing ten lbs. Of

course I was presented with a generous piece of it.

The V. M. I. had a similar celebration called "Jacktown" with lovely bright invitations and songs and laughter and the atmosphere of both [colleges'] Finals was lightened by those two innovations that might seem out of place today.

### MAY PARTIES



**M**UR BEAUTIFUL May Parties took precedence over all other amusements. There were of course, no picture shows or theatres, and when our May parties were due they were very important and looked for with a great deal of interest by young and old, white and



Seated from left to right: Hill Carter, Critic; S. Z. Ammen, Lazy Man; Frank Page, Ugly Man; R. Wickliffe Preston, Little Man. Standing from left to right: J. Shepherd Clark,\* Ladies' Man; Gabriel Santini, Vain Man; Edmund Berkeley, Jr., Pretty Man; John Barlow, The Blow.

*The Ugly Club, 1869. Nannie Jordan participated in the club's annual ritual the year before (of which, alas, no photograph is known to exist.) This photo and caption are reproduced from the Washington and Lee alumni magazine of November 1940.*

black. Sometimes they were held in our home on Main Street, sometimes on Uncle Fuller’s beautiful lawn [at Blandome], going up from our house where we met and formed in line, in our simple costumes, and flowers and flowers and in full view of the audience, ascending the stage, for the performance, never realizing that we were not “Hollywood Stars.” Once we had it in Mrs. Guy’s yard (this is now the home of Sally and John Preston). Those who took part were Ira Jordan, Mary Jordan, Annie White, Mary Estill, Isabel and Mary Patrick, Loulie Bumpus, Kitty Estill, Clare Bowyer, Aggie Harris, Cassie Harris, Gertie Tucker and Lucie Cameron. Our last May party was arranged entirely by Mrs. Margaret J. Preston, our “Southern Poetess.” It was a really beautiful affair. She arranged the pageant and composed our speeches. Wherever possible she wove our names into these speeches, for instance: Ida Napp was Spirit of the woods; her speech began with, “Rap; Rap, Rap, don’t you hear the woodpecker’s tap boring the maple for its sap?” Bessie Nelson was our Queen, and my coronation address began:

“[In] Lexington traditions have remained unchanged, and everybody knows what everybody else knows. You may go to a tea and hear all about your own innermost secrets that you had thought you had left at home in your closet—only friendly interest, you know, never any bitterness, but you do like to have some little things to yourself.”

Nannie Jordan

*“Queen Bess of England  
Would have given  
Her Kingdom for a bow  
By one as fair as this on which I  
place  
This royal symbol now.”*

I regret that my memory goes no further and that the original manuscript is, like so many other things, “Gone with the wind.” Mrs. Preston was blind and could not come to see and hear the beauty of her work, but she realized the perfect happiness she had given us when we went in our simple costumes to her home and rehearsed it in her library. The performance was on a platform in front of the big front porch on the Ann Smith Academy lawn. Miss Mary Davidson arranged some simple little dances for us on the stage, “lancers,” “quadrilles,” and “Old Virginia Reel.” Our pastor sent a messenger to say, “stop dancing” – he had only a short time before this taken fourteen of us into [membership in] the church. And so we did not “go on with the dance” but joy was not confined, and that was our last happy May Party.

## TRAIN TO HEAVEN



WHEN I WAS seventeen the B & O railroad built a terminus to Lexington and a station. Three of the boys, who were my friends, made a proposal to take Annie White and me to Goshen that we might see a train before the first one came up the cut, back of College. . . . They said we had never seen one – and we had not – and they feared the effect on our hearts. Oh! Those good old girlhood days when we had never seen a train!

We’ve seen them since – we have come and gone, we have met, and parted – we have had our “smiles and tears” – and our memories are very sweet of “the other years,” since we have turned our faces to the sunset and

The music is fled  
The garlands dead  
And all our friends departed.<sup>1</sup>

I HAVE ENJOYED living again in my “Smiles and tears of other years” and when the “Sunset Gun” is fired I am ready to answer “here” to the roll call.

1 Lines from “Oft in the Stilly Night” (after 1807) by the Irish poet Thomas Moore.