Byrdie Kraft and Her Furniture

Lila J. Goff

A NEW EXHIBIT in the MHS museum, "Minnesota Collects," opens on October 25, 1983. It explores how collecting at the society has changed over the years and suggests the remarkable diversity of the institution's collections. Among the recent acquisitions featured will be Byrdie Kraft's furniture, described below.

THE MUSEUM collections of the Minnesota Historical Society were recently enriched when Byrdie Kraft, the last surviving member of her family, bequeathed the Henry Kraft furniture in 1982. This year the society acquired from her estate additional furniture, photographs, a German immigrant trunk from the 1860s, a small selection of 1930s clothing, some early 20th-century trade items, and a large collection of hand-blown glass Christmas tree ornaments. Unfortunately, no extensive collection of letters or diaries survived with these objects to tell more of the story of the Krafts. But the artifacts do tell something about the family and about Byrdie, the high-school girl who wanted to make furniture.

The Kraft collection is a valuable addition to the society's holdings because it includes examples of two distinctly different popular middle-class styles of furniture — Renaissance Revival, produced in the late 1800s, and Mission Oak, handmade several decades later. All of the furniture is in excellent condition even though some pieces are nearly a century old.

In the last decades of the 19th century, Americans were furnishing their homes in a variety of fashions. It was an age of pluralism, an eclectic period when there was no one correct style. The revival furniture of this era, such as the Krafts' Renaissance Revival pieces, shows traces of many other influences: Gothic, Grecian, Oriental, to name only a few. And these were not authentic reproductions of earlier styles but creative revivals reflecting a variety of motifs. Furniture manufacturers responded to this eclectic taste by producing hybrid styles, appealing to the desire of Americans to be individual but at the same time in step with what they thought to be proper decor. Victorians tended to individualize their homes even further with personalized clutter and the display of family mementos.1

THE KRAFT family Renaissance Revival parlor table (right) in natural, unstained walnut and with an elaborately curved base is in sharp contrast to Byrdie's writing desk, a classic Mission Oak style with minimal decoration, rectangular lines, and round drawer pulls.


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After the Civil War productivity increased across the industrializing nation, and the resulting affluence gave many Americans a buying power unknown in earlier generations. With a greater ability to purchase and with the new availability of stylish, machine-produced furniture, people of ordinary means could fill their homes with material goods — luxuries as well as necessities. Often furniture was not purchased for its fine workmanship — the hallmark of quality of the preceding decades — but for its style. Pieces became expendable, to be used and replaced with the newest fashion. Typically, such furniture was not passed down from one generation to the next; thus, the Kraft collection — a major grouping of furniture from this period — is both an unusual and valuable acquisition.

HENRY KRAFT was born in Hesse-Nassau, Germany, in 1860. As a young man he migrated to America and settled in north Minneapolis, which was just becoming an urban area. (The population of Minneapolis in 1880 was 49,639; ten years earlier it had been a mere 14,250; by 1890 it multiplied to 164,738.) The son of a wholesale meat dealer, Kraft worked as a butcher, and by 1888 when he married Mary Korn he owned his own shop on West Broadway (then called 20th Avenue North) in Minneapolis. Mary Korn, the daughter of German immigrants, was born in 1862 in the Wright County community of Rockford, where her father ran a boardinghouse and saloon. The family moved to Meeker County in the late 1860s and then to north Minneapolis in the 1870s.2

By 1900 the Kraft household, in an apartment above the West Broadway butcher shop, included their five children: Louise (age 10), Dorothy (age 8), Henry (age 5), Byrdie (age 4), and Marie (age 7 months); grandmother Christina Korn (age 60); and a 25-year-old servant, Emma Bocker. The furniture Byrdie Kraft willed to the MHS was probably a part of this household. As a rising middle-class couple, the Krafts could afford good quality mass-produced furniture.

The Krafts moved into their new home at 2131 Dupont Avenue North in 1905. Henry was then a successful neighborhood merchant who by 1919 would be president of the Commercial State Bank, as well as owner of two meat markets. The large brick house on the corner of Dupont and 22nd Avenue North contained a front entry hall, a formal parlor, dining room, a large kitchen, and two other first-floor rooms that today we might call living and family rooms. There were six bedrooms and a bath on the second floor and a full-story attic. Mr. and Mrs. Kraft and three of the girls — Byrdie, Louise, and Marie — lived in this house the remainder of their lives. The younger Henry and sister Dorothy left home when they married but continued to live in Minneapolis.

The furniture that Byrdie bequeathed to the MHS was undoubtedly a part of the formal parlor. An upholstered settee and matching chairs (two side chairs, an armchair, and a platform rocker), another armchair, two more rockers, a parlor table, and a footstool illustrate a variety of Renaissance Revival influences. In typical late 19th-century fashion, the upholstery fabric on the settee and matching pieces is patterned cut velvet, an imitation of more expensive brocade cloth. While the pattern is the same on five of the pieces, the colors are different. The settee and one side chair are a greenish-blue pile on a tan background; the platform rocker and armchair are a reddish-brown; a side chair is a red pile on tan. Perhaps these are pieces from three different furniture groupings; perhaps some were reupholstered over the years in the only available matching design; or perhaps in keeping with the eclectic look, the Krafts intentionally furnished their parlor or sitting rooms in a variety of color schemes.

AN ORNATE chair served as a prop in this photograph of the Kraft children, taken about 1902. Standing around their seated, two-year-old sister Marie are Henry, Louise, Dorothy, and Byrdie.

2Information on the Kraft and Korn families is from state and federal censuses; the Minneapolis city directories; Franklin Curtiss-Wedge, History of Wright County, Minnesota, 2:797 (Chicago, 1915); American Historical Society, American Biography: A New Cyclopedia, 159–161 (New York, 1929).
THE MASSIVE feeling, the carved wood, and the busy patterns of these pieces from the Kraft parlor suite are typical of the Renaissance Revival style. Both armchair and platform rocker are upholstered in patterned cut velvet.

THE BIRD MOTIF on the back of the walnut settee and the bamboo look of the maple rocker added the oriental touches to furniture popular in the late 1880s. Both pieces, finished with mahogany-colored varnish, display the same patterned cut velvet, although in different colors.

MACHINE-WOVEN needlepoint on the walnut rocker contrasts with the handmade needlepoint cushion on the oak chair, which has a pressed-wood design popular in the early years of the 20th century.
THIS CHINA cabinet, made by Byrdie in her 1915 high school shop class, is typical of Mission-style furniture, with its undecorated natural quartersawn oak; the beveled and leaded glass add a touch of elegance to its simple lines.

A THREE-MIRRORED dressing table, six months in the making, moves away from the massive feeling of earlier classic Mission pieces; note the touch of nonstructural decoration in the slightly turned and delicate legs.

STANDARD MISSION fare is the plant stand Byrdie made; the four-poster bed boasts carefully hand-sawn head and foot boards and nicely turned legs.
These late-Victorian pieces offer an interesting contrast with the furniture Byrdie made some 25 years later. It is curious that, as she prepared her will in the final years of her life, Byrdie chose to leave these pieces of her family's furniture to the MHS for preservation. Her own handmade furniture was left to the estate to sell with all of the other household items.

BYRDIE'S furniture was the best made in Minneapolis' North High School shop class, according to T. W. Breckheimer, the manual training teacher, in a story carried in 1915 in the Minneapolis Journal and picked up by the New York World. And indeed, although structurally simple and not the work of a skilled craftsman, they are visually fine pieces, extremely well executed for an amateur woodworker. Surviving pieces include the china cabinet Byrdie made for her mother and her bedroom suite. She had built other pieces, too, including another china cabinet, but they were lost in the dramatic 1913 North High fire. This devastating blaze, which began in or near the manual training rooms, took the lives of two firemen and destroyed the school (except the new fireproof addition). The Minneapolis Tribune for June 20, 1913, could not resist adding a note of pathos to its report: "While the high school was burning several pupils stood nearby furtively wiping tears away. They were members of the manual training class which had spent five months working on pieces of furniture. These were completed the day before the fire, and, after they had been photographed, the pupils intended to take them home. The fire destroyed the roomful of furniture. Desks, library tables, Morris chairs and phonograph cabinets went up in smoke and the term's work of a class of 75 pupils was all undone. It is estimated there was a carload of furniture in one room there and that its value was more than $1,000."²

The furniture that Byrdie made is Mission, or Mission Oak, an American style in vogue during the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is simple and rectangular with heavy but "honest" lines. Possibly named after the simple, heavy lines of the Spanish-style mission furnishings in the American Southwest, this kind of furniture was the antithesis of the Victorian-era designs also popular in the late 19th century. It stressed function over decoration.³

³For this and following information on Byrdie's furniture and experiences in shop class, see Minneapolis Journal, June 13, 1915, city section, p. 1.


A mortise-and-tenon joint

Byrdie's furniture occasionally deviated from the totally functional lines of pure or classical Mission styles. The china cabinet, probably designed to display her mother's collection of glassware, is a compromise of styles with its decorative beveled and leaded glass sides and door. It is not known if Byrdie created the specific designs for her furniture, if she copied parts of other styles, or if she merely selected available patterns. Her bedroom suite consisted of four pieces: a four-post bed with a curved design in the oak headboard and footboard, a three-mirrored dressing table, a writing desk, and a plant stand. It must have been quite an accomplishment for a young high-school student to furnish her room with such contemporary pieces, typical of what appeared in the catalogs and daily newspaper advertisements.

training was designed to educate young men for careers in the trades, since women were not much of a factor in the industrial work force before World War I, there was little reason for girls to learn a trade. Mr. Hobbs wanted Byrdie to take the domestic science courses, but she refused, saying, "I want to do something that permits you to see the results of your work. In domestic science you eat the results of your work." Byrdie graduated from North High in January of 1915 and continued postgraduate work there until June of that year, completing the furniture she was making.

Although newspaper accounts stated that Byrdie planned "to take mechanical engineering at the university, even though her father objects," no evidence can be found that she enrolled at the University of Minnesota. The Minneapolis city directories list Byrdie as a stenographer for various city firms throughout the late teens and early 1920s.

Byrdie's mother died in January of 1926 and her father in August of the same year. Her brother Henry, who inherited the family meat markets, worked as a meat cutter until his retirement. Her sister Louise worked as a bookkeeper for various firms in the city and in 1922 became a clerk for the city engineer, a job she held until her retirement in the late 1950s. Marie, the youngest daughter, stayed at home and was the housekeeper of 2131 Dupont for her two sisters.

It is interesting to speculate on what happened to the talents of the high-school girl who insisted on taking manual arts courses rather than sewing and cooking. "I would die staying at home," she said in 1915. "I might go to a girls' industrial school and study to become a manual training teacher, but I would like to have practical experience before beginning to teach." According to the Minneapolis Journal interview, she would rather draw the plans and supervise engineering work on the canal between Cedar and Brownie lakes than be president of the National Federation of Women's Clubs.

Byrdie moved to Birmingham, Michigan, for a few years in the late 1920s and worked there as a secretary. She returned to the family home in Minneapolis in 1933 and got a job with the state highway department as a clerk and later as an executive secretary and remained with that department until her retirement in 1966. A friend of Byrdie in her later years described her as a "real firecracker" who was interested in many things, enjoyed traveling, and who took charge of the financial affairs of the family. But she always remained a very private person. There is no evidence that the Kraft home was used for entertaining or that Byrdie or her sisters were involved in community or church affairs. Nor is there any evidence that Byrdie was an active feminist, despite her youthful insistence that she be permitted to develop her talents and pursue her unusual goals.5

Byrdie Kraft's furniture and that of her family will remain preserved in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society to illustrate the tastes of the late-Victorian period, to document the work of a determined 1915 high-school student, and to teach us about the material culture that was part of the lives of the ordinary people who make up Minnesota's history.

5 Interview with Glenn Erickson, administrator of the Byrdie Kraft estate, May 6, 1983, notes in author's possession.

ALL the illustrations shown in this article are in the MHS audio-visual library.