Florence Nelson Kennedy
FASHION ILLUSTRATOR

Pat Kennedy Crump

Florence Nelson Kennedy often called herself a "stubborn Swede." Determined would have been a better description. She started to draw at an early age and loved doing it; she acknowledged that she was an artist and determined to pursue a career in fashion illustration. At first, she may not have known that this ambition had great potential in her time. In the early decades of the twentieth century, opportunities were plentiful for commercial artists of all types, as advertising and publishing depended heavily on illustration, rather than photography.

One means of preparing for such a career, especially for students who lived far from metropolitan areas, was instruction by mail. Universities had proven that home study was an excellent method of training, but it was a new idea in the field of commercial art. The Federal School of Commercial Designing, established in Minneapolis in 1914, was adapted from a thorough course employed by the Bureau of Engraving, a Minneapolis printing and engraving firm. Early school advertisements drew immediate responses, and the firm's success grew. The school started thousands of artists on successful careers, and Florence Nelson Kennedy was one of them.¹

¹Colgate Buckbee, "How An Idea Grew Into the World's Largest Home Study Art School," The Illustrator (Minneapolis), Winter-Spring 1964, p. 4-5; Joseph C. Almars (son of Joseph Almars, one of the Federal Schools' founders), telephone interview with the author, Feb. 11, 1992; Minneapolis Star, Jan. 2, 1964, p. 6D. Research for this article was supported, in part, by a grant from the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). The author would like to thank Alice Tweton for her invaluable contributions to this work.

Pat Kennedy Crump is an artist who lives and works in the Twin Cities. She is the daughter of Florence Nelson Kennedy.
She was a Minnesota woman, the seventh of nine children born to Swedish immigrants Carl Johan and Amanda Christina Nelson. They had emigrated to America in about 1890 and were living in the Barry-Graceville area of Big Stone County when Florence Otelia was born in 1902. In 1906 the family moved to nearby Clinton, which became their permanent home. They rented a farm west of town, and Carl Johan supplemented their income by working on a railroad section crew. In 1909 he was killed: "Loading rails onto a flat car, he fell backward off the car, and the rail which the men were handling, slipped and got away from them, falling on Mr. Nelson's head." Florence was not quite seven years old. Her sister Nellie, who was about fifteen at the time, worked in a restaurant in town and remembered it as a blustery first of May. She heard a commotion and went out to see a group of men carrying the body of her father down the street.2

The older children either already had jobs or found work to contribute to the household income. Amanda Nelson used part of the few hundred dollars she received as a settlement to buy a second-hand floor loom for weaving rugs. Area residents brought boxes of their worn clothing and fabric to her, and she tore the material into strips to prepare the weft, or filling. Weaving provided a steady source of income to Amanda until her death in 1935.

Little is known about Florence's father, but her mother was industrious, devout, and especially nurturing. She insisted that English—not Swedish—be spoken in their home. Most of the family members worked with their hands in carpentry, meatcutting, weaving, crocheting, sewing, knitting—and drawing.

Florence attended school in Clinton and was the first of the siblings to complete twelve grades. By the time she was thirteen, her artistic talents were evident in drawings of animals, children, and fancifully costumed figures. She decorated the inside covers and fly-leafes of her high-school textbooks with faces, fashions, and World War I characters.3

Florence was a bit shy but always a good sport, and she played on the girls' basketball team. She was a good student and earned high marks. Apparently the school's curriculum included little art education, but Florence compensated by drawing on her own, inspired by the fashion art in a syndicated column in the Clinton Advocate and in women's magazines such as the Delineator and Ladies Home Journal. By the time she was in high school, she had set her career goal. But she knew that it would take time and money to become a fashion illustrator.4

THE FEDERAL SCHOOL of Commercial Designing advertised on matchbook covers and in major national magazines. Florence may have noticed the November 1918 Ladies Home Journal ad headlined “Big Incomes for Women!” which offered a book, Your Future, describing “the Federal Method of home-study.” The young school energetically promoted its offerings: "The fundamental principles of commercial illustrating, plus the practical instruction and knowledge so vital to the success of the commercial illustrator ... fashion, commodity illustration, ornamental design, retouching, booklet and catalogue designing, magazine advertising illustration, etc., etc.” Twelve divisions comprised the course, each with an instruction book and a series of exercises to be mailed in for expert commentary. Many of the faculty members had career experience in specialized areas of commercial art, and all were required to have at least one art degree. Noted artists—Frank Schoonover, Norman Rockwell, and Minnesotan Edward V. Brewer—designed lessons for the textbooks or served on the advisory council.5

In December of 1918, when she was a sixteen-year-old high-school junior, Florence sent in her three-dollar enrollment fee. The total price of the course was ninety-five dollars, with the balance payable in four-dollar installments. Art supplies, available by mail from the school, were an additional expense. To earn money Florence painted small watercolor landscapes and sold them to friends. She applied her dexterity to crocheting and sold yards of pillowcase edging. The Big Stone County Fair was held in Clinton, and she may have entered her art and handiwork in the competitions for cash awards. Her older siblings contributed extra money whenever they could spare it.

Florence started on the exercises, sending them in for evaluation. Each student's work was checked for "defects" by specialists who noted corrections on a transparent sheet laid over the drawing. These were supplemented by a detailed, typed explanation, providing a written critique for future reference and "individ-


4Nelson interview; drawings and books, in collection of the author. Unless otherwise noted, all Florence Nelson Kennedy materials are in this collection.

5Clinton High School report cards of Florence Nelson, 1918–20; McClure Newspaper Syndicate fashion column, Clinton Advocate, April 11, 1918, p. 7, for example.

6Ladies Home Journal, Nov. 1918, p. 61; Federal Schools, Inc., Your Future (Minneapolis, [1935?]), 6; Don L. Jardine, Art Instruction Schools, telephone conversation with author, Feb. 18, 1992. The school became especially well known for the advertising campaign it started in 1933, featuring the "Draw Me" girl. After World War II the company name was changed to Art Instruction Schools, Inc.

ual coaching to workmanlike standard . . . [to] encourage you to higher possibilities.”

A student newsletter, the Commercial Illustrator (later the Federal Illustrator), offered pages of practical career advice, success stories, and testimonials: “Customer was so well pleased that he paid $75.00 for the [label] design”; “producing fashion drawings . . . doing better than $80.00 a week”; and “[student] accepted a position . . . commencing with a salary of $15.00 a week.” The publication specifically emphasized art careers for women: “Illustrating of women specialties . . . in department store advertising is naturally women’s work.”

Florence had completed the first two divisions by the end of her junior year and continued to work on the lessons while finishing high school. As a senior she served as class president, was active in the school’s Minerva Literary Society, and coedited several “High School Notes” columns in the weekly Clinton Advocate. On May 28, 1920, in the town’s opera house, Florence graduated from Clinton High School, one of a class of five. She was salutatorian, the first speaker on the program, and her address, “Launched, but Rowing,” began, “As the masterpiece is at first only an idea in the mind of the artist. . . .”

Two weeks later she left for Moorhead State Normal School, enrolled in a six-week teacher-training session. Her motive for this decision is unclear, but teachers were in demand, and she may have realized that she could gain quick employment. Tuition to Moorhead was $30.00 per year, but the summer program cost only $7.50. Furthermore, it was free “if students pledged to teach at least two years following their graduation.” Most likely, Florence saw this opportunity as a temporary but necessary diversion from her goal. Teaching would provide the income to continue the Federal School coursework and a chance be on her own.

Completing the session at Moorhead just before her eighteenth birthday, Florence was qualified to teach in one-room, ungraded elementary schools. That fall she was hired at a school near Clinton, possibly one of the four in the Artichoke Lake area. The next year, 1921–22, she taught in Pope County, near Starbuck.

Florence’s experiences while teaching left indelible memories. She boarded with a farm family and either walked or rode to her school in a horse-drawn wagon. When weather permitted, she strapped on the homemade skis the farmer had crafted and glided across the fields. Before the children arrived she built a fire in the stove, brought in water, put the room in order, and wrote the lesson assignments on the blackboard. The students ranged in age from about six to as old as sixteen or seventeen. She found that each needed an individualized lesson, depending on knowledge of English, previous schooling, and ability.

Her less pleasant memories included unheated bedrooms, outdoor toilets, the harshness of the prairie winters and wind, and the isolation of the country schools. But she enjoyed the social life of the rural community, attending dances and learning from the “hired hand” to play the piano and guitar. She continued to work on
the home-study course, and in January 1922 completed Division 6—the halfway mark. Her teaching salary was ninety dollars a month, out of which came the four-dollar installments for the lessons. She made the last payment in May 1922, near the end of her final year at Starbuck.\textsuperscript{15}

Florence returned to Clinton with her art career very much in mind. Her teaching obligation was fulfilled. She had saved some money and wanted to concentrate on finishing the commercial art course. Division 9 covered fashion illustration, and exercises she submitted during 1922 and 1923 garnered positive notations: “You have handled this well,” and “nicely handled.” With this encouragement, she made a leap of faith in her own abilities and joined the post-World War I migration of rural population and farm workers. Florence was determined to build her future in the city, even though she had probably never been to a town larger than Moorhead, which had a 1920 population of 5,720, compared to Clinton’s 512. Her Clinton address appeared on a Division 10 exercise in June 1923, but later that year, when she was twenty-one, she left the prairie for Minneapolis, in pursuit of her dream.\textsuperscript{15}

Staying with an aunt for a few months, she accustomed herself to urban living and learned the streetcar lines while seeking employment. Florence’s first job in Minneapolis was as a waitress in the Tea Room of Donaldson’s department store. It was known as a special place to lunch, with sparkling chandeliers, elegant furniture, and fine linens. Her pay was about twelve dollars a week, plus tips. This, too, was only a temporary phase in her plan.

Early in December 1923 Florence started her first job as an artist in the painting department of the Buzza Company. This south Minneapolis firm manufactured greeting cards, decorative mottoes, and party goods, many of them hand tinted. Buzza employed legions of workers (mostly women) to apply spots, dabs, and lines of watercolor to portions of preprinted images. The job required “ability to distinguish colors, deftness and accuracy in applying them . . . and speed.” The company’s plant, known as “Craft Acres,” boasted the latest in modern production, up-to-date working conditions, and employee benefits. Women were employed on a piece-work basis, and the pace determined the size of the paycheck. Florence learned the technique of fanning out and overlapping a quantity of cards on the table, holding two brushes at a time, and quickly applying the colors.\textsuperscript{15}

Though the work was repetitious and often boring, Florence found humor in the daily routine. Poetry was one of her hobbies, and she adopted a nom de plume, “Carthame Fonce,” derived from the name of one of the red watercolors and, coincidentally, her initials, F.O.N. After several months of hand tinting, she wrote, “And though I paint a thousand years/I have my doubts and even fears/That though I be of sense bereft/There’ll be a couple hundred leftl”\textsuperscript{15}

Ruth, Florence’s younger sister, had moved to Minneapolis in 1924 and also worked at Buzza. For six years they lived together at several addresses in the south Hennepin Avenue and Uptown districts. Their experiences typified the good, clean fun available to single, young, working women in urban areas during the Roaring Twenties. They wore the styles dictated by the new freedom women enjoyed: knickers, knee socks, shirts and ties topped with masculine sweaters, “ban-deauxed” (flattened) breasts, bobbed hair. They swam and canoed at city lakes, attended movies and plays,
Dressed for the times: Florence’s friends Clara Rasmussen and Edna Eckstrom flanking Ruth Nelson.

and ate at Minneapolis institutions such as Becky’s Cafeteria, Richard’s Treat, or The Leaves Tea Shop. The sisters also became avid tennis players. Many summer evenings they walked to the Minneapolis Parade Grounds to use the public tennis courts. They played hard in their tennis dresses of lightweight wool—and then walked home.

In their search for recreation and social contacts, Florence and Ruth joined the Minneapolis Municipal Hiking Club. This flourishing organization, started in 1920, offered a wholesome pastime and plentiful opportunities to meet other young people. The group hiked on Saturday afternoons, two Wednesday evenings, and one Sunday a month. Walks were as short as the three miles around Lake Harriet or as long as the thirty miles to Farmington. The “first Midnight-to-Dawn hike” lasted until 7:30 A.M. as club members traveled from the Minneapolis city limits to Shakopee. After hiking they usually ate, danced, and played cards or games, before collapsing on the streetcar or chartered bus that took them back to the starting point. The club sponsored frequent outings and parties, and the sisters made many friends—men and women—who were also new to the city. They were active members, and it was the focus of their leisure time during their first few years in Minneapolis. Florence worked on the entertainment committee, contributed cartoons and poetry to the newsletters and yearbooks, and, in 1926, served as an associate editor.17

The change from rural living and teaching in an isolated school was one that Florence relished. Her six-day work week and other activities did not prevent her from continuing the Federal School lessons. She completed Division 12, comprised of 156 questions and 15 art “problems,” in October of 1925—almost seven years after enrolling.18

Hiking buddies at Lake Pepin (bottom to top): Florence, Ruth, Edna Eckstrom, and Clara Rasmussen, June 1928.

17Minneapolis Municipal Hiking Club, Year Book, 1924, 1925, Year Book, 1926, 7, copies in MHS, and Year Book, 1927, 8–17, in the author’s collection.

18The author’s collection includes a drawing inscribed “Problem 5, Division 12” and the division lesson book marked to indicate completion.
"This Will Be a Cotton Summer," and 3,000 Cotton Dresses
—in a Sale Offer Cool, Colorful, Dresses to Parade Charmingly the Pathways of Summer Pleasures

2 for $5
or $2.65 each

"A Cotton Summer"—Warm days all a-flutter with cool, colorful, tiny dresses of sheer cotton fabrics. These Dresses will take their places charmingly in any daytime gathering because they are certain to redouble your company. Print Patterns to gay color and to the size of simple, youthful lines.

Florence's first major fashion ad, which ran in the Minneapolis Evening Tribune, June 26, 1928

THE FEDERAL SCHOOL had a job-placement service for graduates, and Florence requested assistance. In the spring of 1926 she left the Buzza Company for an "artist's position" at Brown & Bigelow in St. Paul. It turned out to be a drudgery of constant hand lettering, which Florence particularly disliked, and the job was short-lived. Determined to focus her career on women's fashions, she decided to be a free-lancer.

Free-lance artists, then and now, are a hardy and persevering lot. Obtaining jobs requires calling on retail, wholesale, publishing, printing, and other businesses to show a portfolio of published and unpublished work samples. Sometimes appointments are needed, sometimes a lucky "cold call" may produce an assignment. Talented, personable, and reliable artists survive and often thrive. In the 1920s, before photography became common in advertising, much of the work was drawing for pages of newspaper ads filled with everyday articles—hot-water bottles, bolts of fabric, radios, luggage, lamps, and table linens.

Florence probably accepted that type of work to gain experience. Meanwhile, she persisted in her determination to do fashion illustration. In late 1927 and early 1928 several of her women's fashion figures appeared in newspaper ads, but the clippings that she saved do not preserve the company's name. Then, in June 1928, Dayton's Downstairs Store, which sold lower-priced merchandise in a less showy, "bargain basement" atmosphere, ran an ad that had a small "FN" in the corner and a tennis figure in the background. The full page featured cotton dresses, with drawings of nine fashion figures. This was probably Florence's first assignment from a major department store, and it must have been a source of great pride. The income was welcome, too, as the job would have paid about three dollars per figure, or twenty-seven dollars. But full-time employment remained elusive.

In the autumn of 1928 Florence enrolled in an evening class at the Minneapolis School of Art (now Minneapolis College of Art and Design) to study figure drawing. The Federal School course had included a section on human anatomy, but she realized she needed more study, working from a live model. The class offered a traditional approach, with emphasis on contour, line, form, and proportion, and students produced charcoal drawings of nudes in classical poses. Ever focused on her goal, Florence completed drawings of female nudes, then drew women in the same pose clothed as fashion figures.

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Early autumn also brought more fashion jobs, including a series of small ads featuring coats and dresses for Gerner’s, a Minneapolis women’s ready-to-wear shop. Later in October she did a full page “grand opening” ad with seven illustrations of fur coats, dresses, and hats for Kaye’s, Inc., a “New Shop for Women,” located a few blocks down Nicollet Avenue from Gerner’s. Wanting her work to be noticed, Florence again marked “FN” by the two major figures in her illustrations.9

By 1928, Florence had spent five years in Minneapolis learning, growing, and adapting to urban life and the changes of the times. During this time she and fellow hiker Gordon D. Kennedy were getting to know each other, after meeting about 1924. He was from Mankato and lived in southeast Minneapolis while attending the University of Minnesota. The two participated in many hiking club events, but to all appearances their friendship was casual. Gordon graduated in July 1926 and returned to Mankato to work long hours as a stockman at the S.S. Kresge store. During the next thirteen months he had little time to see Florence, but they kept in touch, and she and Ruth visited Mankato over the 1927 Labor Day weekend. Early in November Gordon quit Kresge’s and drove to California with a friend. He sent photos and postcards to Florence, telling her about the trip, his visits with relatives, and the job he found there.9

When Gordon returned from California in August 1928, he went to work for the Blue Earth County highway department and lived with his parents in Mankato. His four-year friendship with Florence remained strong, and he made frequent weekend trips to Minneapolis. Florence and Ruth also visited Mankato on several occasions during the next year.10

DURING THE SPRING of 1929 Florence’s dream was realized when she started work as a fashion artist in the advertising department of the L. S. Donaldson Company. The forty-five-year-old business, located in the heart of the downtown retail district, advertised the “newest styled garments, smartest accessories.” Donaldson’s advertising manager hand picked employees for their skills and abilities to work together. Apparently, he knew Florence’s talent from her free-lance contacts with the company. When an opening occurred, her competence, as well as her good humor, probably made her the most suitable candidate.11

The advertising department was a friendly and congenial environment. Donaldson’s staff included the advertising manager, an art director, layout artist, sales-promotion manager, production coordinator, artists, copywriters, and clerical/secretarial workers. Many of the positions were held by women, most of whom were single. The store also contracted with free-lance artists when special sales or seasonal promotions required heavy advertising.12

The department occupied a crowded area on the seventh floor of the Nicollet Avenue building, and the staff was “parked in each other’s laps.” Each artist had a drawing board, high-quality art materials, a taboret (small supply cabinet), and a tall chair. They were

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10 Minneapolis Municipal Hiking Club, membership directories, 1924, 1925; Gordon D. Kennedy, diaries, 1924–26; Kennedy to Nelson, postcard, Sept. 15, 1926; Clayton L. Kennedy, diary, Sept. 3–5, 1927; assorted postcards, photographs—all in author’s collection.

11 Clayton L. Kennedy (Gordon’s father), diaries, 1928, 1929, author’s collection.

12 Tweton interview, Jan. 12, 1992; Minneapolis City Directory, 1926, 113.

lined up in a row near the windows so that natural light came in from the left. The space was cold in winter and hot in summer.

The store’s primary advertising venue was the daily newspaper, and Minneapolis had both morning and evening editions at that time, requiring a steady flow of ads to meet the never-ending deadlines. All employees punched a time clock but were paid a weekly rate, regardless of the number of hours worked. Their day started at 9 A.M., and they were expected to stay until the necessary assignments were completed. Employees also worked on Saturday; Sunday was their only full day off. The word overtime was unknown. Florence’s starting salary was about twenty-six dollars per week.

The young artist found that her chosen profession had some pressures and frustrations. Donaldson’s scheduled its newspaper advertising so that layouts and illustrations were done only one day before the ads were to run. This meant that the featured items had to be selected, samples provided, a layout designed, copy written, and the artwork done to meet the newspaper’s next-day deadline. A bottleneck in the department chronically held up the layouts, and often it was mid-afternoon before Florence could start her drawings. It was a situation over which she had no control, and the waiting caused her much anxiety. If the work was not ready for them, the illustrators could—and did—spend mornings shopping in the store, where the other employees viewed them as “pampered artists.”

Once the layouts were ready, the pressure was on to get the drawings done. Florence worked at top speed, as she had while painting cards at Buzza Company. The completed illustrations went to a production coordinator who sent them to the newspaper, with the layout and copy, for proofing. Florence often left the store late, only to ride home on the streetcar while fighting a migraine headache. Some department stores, such as Schuneman’s in St. Paul, ran advertising production schedules with more advance planning, but the frantic method was routine at Donaldson’s.

There were compensations, however. Florence especially enjoyed one of the benefits of her new position—the employee discount on purchases. Donaldson’s was a major fashion retailer in Minneapolis, and the new fashion illustrator built a stylish wardrobe to enhance her professional appearance. She was attractive, slim, and a bit taller than average. A friend remembers her as always looking elegant.

As the months of 1929 passed, Florence became a valued employee. By the time the stock market crashed that fall, she had established herself as a versatile and diligent artist, turning out pages of dresses, coats, furs, sportswear, accessories, children’s clothing, and lingerie. Even early in her career, her drawings were competent and typical of the straightforward Art Deco style used by department stores such as Powers Mercantile Company and John W. Thomas & Company. While a few advertisers, such as the Young-Quinlan Company and Schlampp’s, enhanced their identities with unusual art renderings and distinctive layouts, all supplied detailed drawings of specific garments. Women’s fashions had important seaming, trims, and features; reproducing them required careful, time-consuming attention. Florence rendered clean lines, soft washes of gray, delicate textures and patterns, and always the well-defined particulars of the style. She was proud of her career and distinguished herself by completing quantities of appealing figures, often in record time, while the quality of her drawings progressed.

HER RELATIONSHIP with Gordon also progressed. He made frequent trips to see her in the early months of 1929, and Florence, with Ruth, took the train to Mankato to spend Easter Sunday with his family. In November Gordon moved to Minneapolis after accepting a job as manager of a Scott Variety Store. Florence and Gordon surprised their friends and family when, on January 12, 1930, they were married in the pastor’s office at Simpson Methodist Church in Minneapolis. Florence’s career was running smoothly, but Gordon had lost his job the day before the wedding. Scott stores had “replaced men with women as part of [an] economy plan.”

Florence and Gordon on borrowed skis, 1932
The newlyweds intended to keep their marriage secret, but someone at Donaldson's spotted the license application in the newspaper's statistics column. Florence's mother, apparently happy about the marriage, sent out wedding announcements. Gordon's parents would have preferred a formal church wedding, which the couple did not consider important. There was no honeymoon trip; he simply moved into her apartment. Ruth had become registrar at Fairview Hospital, and the position provided her with new living quarters.33

Gordon soon had a demanding new job operating a service station for the Deep Rock Oil Company, and Florence's workload remained heavy at Donaldson's. Leisure hours were scarce, but they found time for evenings of cards with friends, fishing, some golf, and skiing at Theodore Wirth Park. Florence and Ruth remained close, vacationing to Canada and Clinton, for example, in the summer of 1930 when Gordon's job kept him in town.

Marriage did not change Florence's goal; she had no intention of relinquishing her career to become a dependent wife. In the early years of the Great Depression many women were pressured to give up their jobs to "make way for married men," but the position of department-store fashion illustrator was one for which men seldom competed. Women dominated the field, often continuing their careers after marriage and childbearing.

As 1930 and 1931 passed, Florence gained experience, and her work displayed a distinctive flair. She especially liked to draw hats, which were an important fashion accessory and a thriving department of the store. The millinery buyer demanded—and got—Florence's best efforts for her ads. In turn, the artist earned praise. In August 1931, for example, Donaldson's vice-president, Lois Black Hunter, wrote: "How happy I am about the drawing for Miss Veneman's millinery page . . . it was splendid, I am very proud of all that you are doing."34

Furs, too, were among Florence's favorite garments to illustrate. Their fashion and function were important at a time when fur and wool were among the few options in warm clothing. Furs were plentiful and, when compared to other clothing, quite affordable. Donaldson's ran frequent ads for coats, jackets, and scarves. August fur sales, a longstanding tradition in retailing, offered bargains at a time of year when shoppers were concerned with summer heat instead of winter cold. In August 1932 Florence's work won commendation in Retail Ad-News, a national trade publication. It reproduced a fur-coat ad and noted "good illustrative technique . . . illustration of DONALDSON'S (Minneapolis) ad deserves a point all by itself."35

As the Great Depression deepened, Florence increasingly valued her employment status. Her salary of about thirty-eight dollars a week was a good one. Gordon, who now operated a Standard Oil service station

**Art Deco-style Minneapolis Journal ad, September 17, 1929, from Florence's first year at Donaldson's**

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33Here and below, see Nelson family history; wedding announcement; G. D. Kennedy, work history; postcards and photographs.


Fur-coat illustration, done in ink wash and line, that won the Retail Ad-News accolade

on commission, usually brought home less than she did, but with two incomes they lived relatively comfortably. Then, in the autumn of 1932, at the height of her career, Florence became pregnant. It very probably was an unexpected event at an inopportune time, considering the era, her career success, and Gordon’s uncertain income. Loss of her paycheck would reduce their monthly income by about half. But she was buoyed by the happy attention of her coworkers and anticipated motherhood as another dreamed-of step in her life. It is not known if Donaldson’s required employees to leave at a certain stage of pregnancy, but Florence did, early in 1933. Their son was born in May.  

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Alice Tweton, a Minneapolis artist who had been doing free-lance illustration for Donaldson's, was hired to replace Florence. Alice was initially offered the job at the same rate of pay as Florence, but another manager cut the amount to about thirty-two dollars a week. She accepted anyway. In 1933 regular, full-time employment was scarce, and it was foolhardy to hesitate. Once hired, the wise employee was diligent, uncomplaining, prompt, and healthy. The long line of others who would like the job was an incentive to perform at top efficiency, regardless of demands, health, or family situations. Benefits included the employee discount, some allowance for illness, and a paid week of vacation, but little else."

Facing the "motherhood vs. career" dilemma with characteristic determination, Florence found a viable resolution for herself and her family. Essentially, she and Alice Tweton traded positions. Florence was one of a number of women who had married and started families after establishing themselves as fashion-art professionals. Because newspaper advertising utilized drawings of all types of merchandise, free-lance work for them remained plentiful, even in the depths of the depression. This was especially true for those who had proven themselves in previous full-time employment. They survived on jobs from retail and wholesale firms and the numerous printing and publishing companies in the area. With the diversity of art techniques at their disposal, artists could offer variations in illustrative style, eliminating the time and expense of heavy retouching sometimes required to outline, define, and highlight details of photographed images."

By August, Florence was doing fashion art for Donaldson's on a free-lance basis. The family needed her income, but, equally important, she wanted to remain active in the field where her talents had earned her a valued identity. Employment uncertainties for men were a fact of life, and a woman who could combine wife-mother responsibilities with a profitable, home-based career was in an enviable position. Florence had a drawing board at home, and the rented house was on a streetcar line with easy access to downtown. While a neighbor cared for the baby, she went to the store and picked up job assignments, sometimes staying for lunch with her former coworkers. The advertising department (uncharacteristically working a few days in advance of deadlines) provided her with the garments to be illustrated and the layout from which to work. When she returned the completed job, it is likely another was ready for her. She worked on newspaper ads, sales brochures, and special promotion flyers."

Other advertisers, such as Dayton's Department Store, also hired Florence as a free-lancer. Dayton's was considered the crème de la crème of Minneapolis department stores at the time. The Daytonian, a quarterly fashion catalog for charge-account customers, was illustrated by nonstaff artists, displaying a wide variety of styles and types of artistic renderings. The jobs paid well, and free-lance artists were eager to get them. Working at home, Florence illustrated several Daytonian pages of dresses, suits, sportswear, swimsuits, coats, and golf wear in 1934, 1935, and 1936. Her art had developed an elegant fashion feel, featuring slim, feminine figures that enticed customers to buy the garment and fulfill the image. (Alice Tweton once bought an impractical fur jacket and muff, a "frivolous" purchase, solely on the appeal of Florence's illustration.)"

Florence's earnings regularly and significantly supplemented Gordon's income. The couple bought a new Ford in 1935 and enjoyed a summer fishing trip to the Gunflint Trail that year. By 1940, however, two daughters had been born, and Florence found it increasingly difficult to combine her work with motherhood. She was torn between her devotion to her family and the desire to maintain her art career and income-earning status. But day-care options were limited, and the cost for three children would have negated any benefit of a return to full-time employment. The change from two incomes and one child to one income and three children challenged their budgeting abilities, but they managed, like so many others, to get by."

During World War II Florence had occasional free-lance jobs, but for the most part her art career was set aside, and she became immersed in the traditional wife-mother role. She remained in touch with her artist friends, and lunched with them when she shopped downtown, but her children were always on her mind. Gordon found wartime civil-service positions, and later worked, until his retirement in 1969, for the Minnesota highway department. The job offered the security he sought after the struggle of the Great Depression years.

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POSTWAR EVENTS brought a new opportunity for Florence. Military personnel returning to civilian life were seeking career training under the GI bill, and the Minneapolis School of Art, where Alice and her husband, Eddie, were teaching, was crowded with new students. Instructors were in demand, and the Twetons helped arrange for Florence to teach an evening session in fashion illustration. She welcomed the opportunity and was especially pleased to be earning income again. The large class proved to be a heavy load, however, and she realized that many students, despite high hopes and motivation, had limited talent and no foundation of previous art training. It was a frustrating situation, and she taught only one or two terms before returning to her role as wife, mother, and homemaker."

As the 1950s boomed along, Florence tried to stay in practice, drawing fashion figures when she took a break from household chores. While she devoted herself to her family and excelled at homemaking and nurturing, she missed her earlier career. In the fall of 1958, after the last child had graduated from high school, she returned to the Minneapolis School of Art as an evening student in fashion illustration. Her dream was to resume her career, and she hoped that the refresher could further that goal. She completed the course and may have shown her portfolio to prospective clients but was unsuccessful at finding jobs. She was fifty-six years old, and many of her contacts were no longer in positions to give referrals."

Florence never again worked as a fashion illustrator, but she would not let her talents idle. In the late 1960s she began entering samples of her sewing, knitting, crocheting, and baking in Minnesota State Fair competitions. The ribbons and cash premiums she won were welcome confirmations of her artistic abilities. She also began painting as a hobby, working in oils, acrylics, and watercolors, and rendering portraits, landscapes, and flowers until arthritis in her hands made it increasingly difficult to draw or paint.

After Gordon’s retirement the couple did some traveling, but the effects of aging began to take their toll. In 1980 Florence and Gordon moved to a retirement community in Bloomington, where she died in 1987, at the age of 85.

IN THE EARLY DECADES of the twentieth century, fashion illustration offered exciting, lucrative job possibilities. Florence’s talents were well suited to the era, and her determination and spunk carried her from rural Clinton to her dream of a career in the city. Maturing during the flapper era, when many young women were seeking jobs and finding independence, Florence Nelson Kennedy remained exceptionally committed to her goals, and her abilities won her the respect of others in the field. She fulfilled her earliest dream, then dreamed of marriage and motherhood. Eventually, she traded the first dream for the second, with a fifty-seven-year marriage and much pride in her children. Longtime friend Alice Tweton summed up the profile of talent and determination: “She was a remarkable woman, and her life was a triumph.”

"Here and two paragraphs below, see Minneapolis School of Art, Permanent Record Card . . . First Semester 1958–59 . . . Fashion Illustration, registrar’s office, Minneapolis College of Art and Design; Nelson family history; Tweton interview, July 27, 1992.

All illustrations are from the author’s collection.