‘The Gift that Starts the Home’: Marketing of the Hope Chest in North America

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**Purpose** – The paper presents a history of the marketing of hope chests in North America, focusing in particular on one very successful sales promotion, the Lane Company’s Girl Graduate Plan.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The history of hope or marriage chests draws upon secondary sources and images of advertising culled from Google image searches. Primary sources located in the Lane Company Collection at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture provided insight into the operation of the Girl Graduate Plan. In addition, the authors drew upon their recollections of the role of the hope chest within their respective families.

**Findings** – The hope chest as an object of material culture has variously represented a woman’s coming of age, the love relationship between a couple, and a family’s social status. It has also served as a woman’s store of wealth. This history investigates how one manufacturer, a leader in the North American industry, collaborated with furniture dealers to promote their products to young women who were about to become the primary decision makers for the purchase of home furnishings.

**Originality/value** – The history of the marketing of hope chests is an area that has not been seriously considered in consumption histories or in histories of marketing practices to date.

**Keywords:** Hope chests, glory boxes, dowry, history of marketing practices, Lane Company, Girl Graduate Plan

**Introduction**

For many young women, receiving a chest in which to store items to furnish a future home was once a rite of passage. Known as a ‘hope chest’ in North America, a ‘glory box’ in Australia, a ‘bottom drawer’ in the United Kingdom, and a dowry or marriage chest in other regions, these objects of material culture were significant not only as a symbol of coming-of-age and romantic love, but also as markers of social status, for young women and their families. Further, in times and countries when “women were denied by law the right to own property, the bridal chest and its contents were often the only things a woman owned” (Schleining, 2001, p. 43). Although few young women today are familiar with the idea of a hope chest, there were once many companies manufacturing and marketing hope chests in North America. This research is part of a larger project examining the history of the marketing of hope chests. In this paper, we look at the Lane Company’s Girl Graduate Program, a sales promotion campaign which was extremely successful in promoting brand recognition and loyalty for the manufacturer, and in driving sales for the retailers who participated. Originating as an end-of-day project by factory workers, the miniature chests at the heart of the promotion became very popular with the target audience – young women about to graduate from high school. The company’s advertising and sales campaigns tapped into the zeitgeist of post-World War II America, and built on long-established social customs and traditions which bridged cultures.

**A Brief History of the Hope or Marriage Chest**

While our research focuses primarily on marketing practices and consumer culture associated with the hope chest in North America, it is important to an understanding of the historical context to acknowledge that the hope chest, in its various forms, has been a feature of many cultures over time. It can be difficult to determine just by looking at a chest whether it served simply for storage or was originally meant to contain a bride’s trousseau. However, Stone (2015, p. 25) comments that it is likely that the most richly decorated boxes were marriage chests and that in some cultures, the good luck signs contained in a box’s decoration or the colour of the box would also indicate its use. In the discussion which follows, we focus on historical accounts of chests typically associated with courtship and marriage, although it is likely that at least some of these chests served more than one purpose, over time.
Middle East

Among the more than 300,000 documents surviving from the Cairo Geniza are numerous marriage contracts, spanning from the ninth to 19th centuries, almost all of which refer to a dowry chest. Two forms of chests are discussed, the muqaddama, which typically contained the bride’s personal possessions, and the sunduq, which came in matching pairs and contained other goods (Goitein, 1983). Along with providing her wedding outfit, a future wife was expected to provide for its storage.

And just as the objects brought in [to the marriage home] should be as beautiful as possible, so should their repositories. This was true, in particular, of the muqaddama, the bridal trunk, which contained the wife’s lingerie and main personal effects. The term appears in almost every complete trousseau list, usually, at the end... Muqaddama means put first, leading, probably because the donkey carrying it headed the procession that transported the outfit from the bride’s domicile to that of her future husband... The muqaddama was inlaid with... tortoiseshell and ivory, as was the kursi stool, or folding chair, on which it stood... Sometimes a mirror was included, a practical accessory since the trunk contained the wife’s wardrobe... In life, a wife’s most cherished possessions were properly placed in the bridal trunk (Goitein, 1983, p. 129-130).

These chests were traditionally made of wood and were decorated as richly as a family’s means would allow. They were typically fairly large and rectangular, with a flat top, to facilitate later use as a bench or table. They were sometimes constructed with a drawer at the bottom, or with a smaller compartment inside the lid, for holding valuables. A richly decorated dowry chest continued to serve as a status symbol, even after the bride reached her new home. “Across the Middle East, where houses were traditionally sparsely furnished, such a dowry chest would often be placed in the woman’s area, where it could quietly continue to announce its status and serve as an item of practical furniture” (Stone, 2015, p. 25).

Germany

In Germany, during the 13th to 15th centuries, small decorative chests, made from various materials, were used as courting gifts. A man hoping to court a woman would commission a box and present it to her as a token of affection. Later known as minnekästchen, these boxes were often decorated on the sides, top and inside with verses and “depictions of couples talking, symbols, and animals, occasionally scenes of an erotic kind – indicating a function as love gifts” (Wurst, 2003, p. 98). Measuring approximately 8.3 cm in height by 22.5 cm in width and 9.9 cm in depth (3.25 inches x 8.85 inches x 3.9 inches), it is thought they would have been used to store tokens of affection, such as love letters or jewelry (Walters, 2012; Wurst, 2003). They could have been given as engagement gifts and may have been exchanged – women may well have given them to men (Wurst, 2003). Their size would have limited their storage capacity, making them somewhat different from the muqaddama, which held a bride’s trousseau, or later hope chests, which were large enough to hold household goods. Walters (2012, p. 10) suggests that chests of this sort would have been kept in the personal chamber in the home, close to the owner, since they were intended as private pieces. Although originating in a courtly context, by the late Middle Ages, the emerging middle class had adopted their use (Wurst, 2003). The custom of the bridal procession appears to have ended in the late fifteenth century and along with it the use of the small boxes (Wurst, 2003).

Italy

In Italy, chests originally known as forzieri, but more commonly discussed as cassone today, were placed in halls, corridors and bedrooms and used to hold household goods (Walters, 2012). The custom seems to have been that two large, elaborately painted wedding chests would accompany the bride on her way through the city to the home of her future husband. These large chests contained the bride’s dowry and her marriage gifts, including sheets, shirts and other linen goods made by the bride and the female members of her family (Gloag, 1966). A smaller chest, the forzerino, contained the bridegroom’s personal gift to the bride, including special items of clothing such as sleeves (Baskins, 1998; Gloag, 1966; Wurst, 2003). Forzieri would often be made in pairs, with one intended for the groom and the other for the bride (Baskins, 1998).

In addition to their practical use for storage, forzieri also served a symbolic purpose, reflecting the status of the bride, especially when put on display during the wedding ceremony. Thus, they were often
considered to be the most valuable and most treasured of the gifts given to the bride (Walters, 2012). The father of the bride would commission the creation of the forzieri months in advance of the wedding. The artwork painted on the exterior of the box would be quite elaborate, usually featuring a love scene or the coats of arms of the families being joined. The pieces could be identical in decoration, or complementary, with the first featuring one half of a scene and the second completing the picture (Baskins, 1998; Walters, 2012). Since a pair of painted chests could cost as much as the annual salary of a skilled labourer, the acquisition and use of marriage chests was restricted to the elite (Baskins, 1998). Historian Richard Goldthwaite (1993) argues that an increase in both the number of wealthy families in Italy’s major cities, between 1300 and 1600, and an increase in wealth held by those families, was reflected in increased demand for ‘art’, broadly defined to include consumer goods such a decorated wedding chests.

The location of cassone in the marital home reflected the public versus private emphasis on gender roles. Baskins (1998) notes that valuables, such as ledgers, books, silver, tapestry and jewels would be kept locked in a chest in the man’s bedroom, whereas cassone would not be locked up, but would remain accessible to the woman for storage and day to day access. She further notes that since early Renaissance homes contained relatively few pieces of furniture, painted wedding chests would have dominated the interior of the home (Baskins, 1998, p. 5). However, as Baskins (1998, p. 4) notes, “[b]y the middle of the fifteenth century, for reasons still unclear, the husband’s family took over the decoration of marriage chests in the course of the redecoration of a room in their home as the nuptial chamber, and brides subsequently transported their possessions in baskets.”

**Australia**

The glory box tradition in Australia “was at its most visible during the decades from the 1930s to the 1950s” according to researcher Moya McFadzean (2010), who uses the glory box tradition to examine changing consumption patterns, the interplay between handmade and mass produced goods, shifting notions of ‘essential’ versus ‘luxury’ items, and the impact of labour and wages on the consumption activity of unmarried women. She identifies working- and lower middle-class Australian women of British ancestry as the primary participants in and mediators of the glory box tradition in Australia during this time period, although other researchers have established that the collection of items for a daughter’s dowry box was also extremely important for Italian and Greek immigrant families who settled in New South Wales and South Australia, post WWII (Grace and Gandolfo, 2011; Palakgtsoglou et al., 2013-14; Tully, 1962). In contrast to some of the examples discussed above, glory boxes, during this period of time were typically purchased, mass-produced items of furniture, although some of the women who participated in McFadzean’s (2010) study recalled that during the difficult economic times of the Depression era, items such as the box used to hold kerosene were recycled and stood in for ‘proper’ glory boxes.

There is likewise evidence of a shift in how the contents of the glory box were produced. Traditional Italian and Greek customs dictated the number and type of items that were to be included in a young woman’s dowry, with some regional variations. Palakgtsoglou and colleagues (2013-14) reported that for both Italian and Greek families, 6 to 24 double sheets and matching pillowcases, 6 to 12 towels, 12 tea towels, tablecloths, napkins, blankets for summer and winter, and 1 or 2 quilts were seen as the necessary complement of goods to equip the future household. Some items and fabrics had to be purchased, and thus, required a certain level of family affluence. However, creating many of the items was seen to be part of a young woman’s training for her future role as wife and mother. The quality of the items she produced would reflect on her abilities as a seamstress and specialist in needlework (Tence and Triarico, 1999). Thus it is perhaps not surprising that within the Italian-Australian community described by Tully (1962), the tradition of hand-crafted lace, embroidery and drawn-thread work remained a matter of community and individual pride. However, from the 1950s onward it became more common to purchase at least some of the items (Palakgtsoglou et al., 2013-14). Contents of the glory box during this time period reflect the shift in the roles of women.

Australian women who owned glory boxes were simultaneously producers and consumers, for they often themselves made the things that they later consumed, but they also consumed the produce of others (both the mass produced and the handmade), and they labored to pay for the items they purchased (McFadzean, 2010 p. 158).
As women entered the paid labour force, they both gained the financial wherewithal to purchase, and lost the time to hand produce, many of the items for their glory boxes.

The process of collecting items was pleasurable for many women, who saw their glory box as the ‘start of their home’ and saw themselves as contributing to a future economic and romantic partnership. The selection of items for a glory box was an exercise in taste, and for some, an aspirational purchase which would hopefully lead to an improvement in their standard of living. Highlighting that the practice of collecting items to be kept in a glory box involved planning, saving, and the deferral of pleasure, McFadzean (2010, p. 158) argues that delayed gratification “for a future married state was the very essence of the desire the glory box embodied as a commodity.” Importantly, McFadzean (2010, p. 167) also points out that even though the ‘outcome’ of a glory box project was socially sanctioned and defined (heterosexual marriage), “[t]he glory box was their property, over which they had ultimate control”.

Thus we see that across time and cultures, wooden chests of various sizes were part of courtship and marriage rituals. These chests and some of their contents were often given as gifts and were cherished and highly prized possessions. In the process of filling the chest, bonds among female members of the family were strengthened, as mothers showed daughters how to perform the creative tasks necessary to make fine lace, linen garments, etc. Extended family members would also contribute, by gifting a young woman with household items on special occasions, like birthdays. As women entered the work force, a shift occurred – items for their hope chests were increasingly purchased rather than homemade. We turn now to a discussion of the hope chest tradition in the United States.

The Hope Chest in the United States

As in the Australian example just discussed, immigrants to the U.S. brought many of their traditions associated with bridal or marriage chests with them. In his history of ‘treasure chests’, Schleining (2001) mentions, for example, the brightly painted chests of both the Scandinavians, who settled in the northern Midwest, and the German- and Swiss-born settlers in Pennsylvania. In North America, the terms ‘hope chest’, ‘marriage chest’ and ‘cedar chest’ are often used interchangeably since many marriage or hope chests were wooden chests lined with cedar. In the early years of the settlement of the US, the marriage chest was often made by the bride’s father or her fiancé, rather than commissioned from a craftsman, as the earlier Italian forzieri were. Frequently given as a gift from her parents, a bride’s marriage chest was often customized with her initials and wedding date, painted on the front. While Schleining (2001, p. 45) argues that “the bridal chest tradition crossed economic as well as cultural boundaries and was found in all levels of society”, the quality of workmanship and materials used in construction could vary widely, reflecting a family’s socioeconomic status.

In the spring of 1907, the Caswell-Runyan Company opened a factory in Huntington, Indiana. There appears to be agreement across sources that this was the first commercial concern in the US to manufacture cedar chests (The History of the Caswell-Runyan Company; Huntington County Honors, 2018; Caswell-Runyan is topic of next historical group meet, 11 Nov 2010). By 1924, it is estimated that between 75 and 100 companies were manufacturing cedar chests, and Caswell-Runyan’s original 15,000 sq. ft. facility had been enlarged to 275,000 sq. ft. Its work force of 30 to 40 people had expanded to 600 and its cedar chests were being sold across the US, having become “a standard piece of household furniture” (The History of the Caswell-Runyan Company).

Although some sources suggest that the company did not use advertising to promote its products (The History of the Caswell-Runyan Company, wikicollecting); ads featuring the company’s ‘treasure chests’ have been found as part of our research. Thus, it seems likely that while they did not use print advertising to promote the product initially, they did adopt this marketing practice eventually.

The Lane Company

The Lane Company of Altavista, Virginia began manufacturing cedar chests in 1912, eventually becoming the largest manufacturer of cedar chests in the world (Lane, 1963, p. 11). After purchasing a box manufacturing plant that had gone bankrupt, Edward Lane’s father got the idea to enter the cedar chest market from another businessman whose furniture manufacturing business had set up in Altavista and also gone bankrupt. Apparently, the man told him that if he’d been able to keep manufacturing cedar chests, he might have been able to avoid bankruptcy since they were his most profitable item. Although Edward had no previous business experience and didn’t know what a cedar chest was, his father turned the business over to him to run.
Edward relied on his woodworking teacher from Virginia Polytechnic Institute to determine what machinery needed to be purchased, and, drawing on his father’s resources, purchased $50,000 worth of plant equipment. His father was in business with his brothers, operating as a general contractor, building railroads, waterworks and hydro-electric plants and speculating in subdivision building as Lane Brothers Company (Lane, 1963). For several years, they prospered as one of the largest contracting firms in the US, having built more than 1000 miles of rail lines (Lane, 1963). Since the family wasn’t sure this new cedar chest business would be a success, they didn’t want to use the Lane name, calling the business Standard Red Cedar Chest Company instead.

At the time Lane set up shop, there were already 25 or 30 manufacturers making chests in sizeable numbers, including Caswell-Runyan of Huntington, Indiana; Roos Manufacturing of Chicago; Ferguson Brothers Manufacturing of Hoboken, New Jersey; Klein Brothers of Long Island City, NY; West Branch Novelty Company of Milton, Pennsylvania and the Piedmont Red Cedar Chest Company of Statesville, North Carolina (Lane, 1963, p. 48). Piedmont Red Cedar was purchasing chests from Caswell-Runyan and selling via a direct-to-consumer model, facilitated by a small, one-column ad in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Lane explained,

…to establish ourselves against big, well-entrenched competition, it was necessary for us to try to make as good a product as we could and to sell it just as cheap as possible. Even today, with fifty years of know-how, besides the basic elements of good design, quality workmanship, and efficient customer service, I haven’t found but two ways really to break into a market with a new product… one is price and the other is with a well-sustained advertising and publicity program to bring it to the attention of the public. So, since we didn’t have the money to pay for advertising in the beginning, we had to do it with price, and this got some of our old, and already well-established competitors sore at us (Lane, 1963, p. 48).

The industry leader at the time was Caswell-Runyan. In 1913, the company’s president, Mr. Runyan, visited the Lane factory unannounced, and toured their facilities. He told them that if they kept selling chests at their then-current price, they would go bankrupt. He offered to purchase the business, at a price that was not acceptable to the Lanes. When they refused his offer, he is reported to have threatened to put them out of business (Lane, 1963, p. 50). Although the animosity between the two competitors forms part of the two companies’ lore, archival evidence demonstrates that they actually cooperated at various points in their history.

The Lane Company, while operating as the Standard Red Cedar Chest Company, was quite production oriented. Their plan called for them to manufacture 10 to 15 chests per day, although they did not know at the time if they could sell that many (Lane, 1963, p. 26). By 1930, the plant was making between 250 and 300 chests per day. While Lane chests could later be distinguished by “a special hidden corner joint – a locking miter that slides together [and] provides great strength and security” (Schleining, 2001, p. 54), during the first 10 years of manufacture, the company’s product was crude by comparison (Lane, 1962). Their early chests were made from solid red cedar, nailed together (Lane, 1963, p. 45). Metal bands were riveted along the edges and around the body of the chest.
Figure 1. Early cedar chest with metal banding. Source: Auction by Mayo catalogue. Accessed 6 November 2018 from: https://bid.auctionbymayo.com/n/lot-details/index/catalog/15953/lot/2174240/

Referring to their product as a ‘Hall and Bedroom Chest’, the company’s ads suggested that, “A Cedar chest is the one piece of useful furniture no home should be without.” The ad copy emphasized the versatility and elegance of their products, saying, “Our Standard Chests are not built for usefulness alone. They are handsome enough to adorn the most elegant homes” (Lane, 1963 p. 57). Ads targeted at ‘professional, business [and] college men’, suggested “the Standard Chest is the most artistic piece of furniture a business or literary man can secure for his den or office” (Lane, 1963, p. 57).

Over the years, the company experimented both with materials and production methods to improve manufacturing efficiency and product quality. The development of an air-tight dust-proof lid increased the effectiveness of the chest for storage and the removal of the metal bands in favour of polished round corners enhanced its looks (Lane, 1963, p. 58). By the time Helen Hughes Lane wrote the history of the company’s first 50 years in business in 1963, chests were being constructed with an interior core of ¾ inch red cedar and encased in a wide variety of hardwood veneers, to help them fit in with contemporary décor. Chests were tested for their ‘aroma-tightness’, allowing the firm to offer an insurance policy of up to $1000 for mothproofing (Lane, 1963, p. 11).

In the early years, the company did not have its own sales force, relying instead on commission furniture, or window and door, salesmen to represent them. The results were uneven, at best. The company tried partnering with a mail-order firm, but that also did not work out. Edward Lane himself brought in early sales orders, in addition to his managerial duties. During one sales trip that had been very unsuccessful, Lane returned to his hotel room.

[D]iscouraged and hungry for orders, I suddenly came up with an idea for a store window display which would use cedar shaving, cedar logs, small green cedar trees, cedar chests and display cards which described and showed the many uses of cedar chests. Armed with my idea… I left the hotel and went out and sold twenty-five chests to a dealer who had already turned me down. On the strength of this success, I doubled back to Buffalo, where I’d previously had a refusal, and sold fifty chests… That lesson stayed with me through fifty years of being in business… you’ve got to sell with an idea! (Lane, 1963, p. 52).
In addition to his revelation regarding ‘selling with an idea’, Lane became convinced that they must develop a well-trained sales force to represent their product exclusively. Before this could occur, World War I intervened; the government placed embargoes on freight deemed non-essential, including cedar chests. Rather than go out of business, the company secured a government contract to make pine ammunition boxes. The company lost money on the contract but learned how to make use of an assembly system, and later to employ conveyor belts to move product through processes within the plant.

After WWI, the company resumed manufacturing cedar chests. In 1922, the company experimented with its first national advertising campaign, putting up billboards on the Pennsylvania and B&O railroads between Washington and New York. Lane (1962) reported that dealer reaction to the billboards was good, so the firm decided to expand the campaign into newspaper advertising, running ads prior to Christmas in Richmond, Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia, their biggest distribution points. The firm asked N.W. Ayer to prepare the ads.

…Ayer recommended that two one-half pages in black and white could be had in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the mass publication of that day, for the same amount of money involved in running of the proposed local newspaper ads. They also suggested we rename our firm The Lane Company. So it was, that The Lane Company, as we have been called ever since, embarked on a program of national advertising to bring our product to the attention of the consumer public through mass media (Lane, 1962, p. 13).

Along with suggesting a name change for the company, Ayer was influential in partially re-positioning the product in terms of ‘romance’. While the company’s ads continued to emphasize benefits such as protecting woolen clothing from moths, the tag line ‘The Gift That Starts a Home’ “endeared the company to the public” (Gilmour Stoner, 2009, p. 5) and allowed them to target both men and women in their advertising. When starting up the company, Lane had decided that they would saw their own cedar lumber, rather than get it already sawn from a supplier. A factor of his managerial inexperience, this decision turned out to be “one of the most profitable decisions” he ever made, placing the company in a position where their production costs were 5 percent lower than any of their competitors (Lane, 1962, p. 11). During the 1920s, this 5 percent margin paid for the company’s national advertising. Lane would later (1962, p. 13) estimate that between 1922 and 1962, the company spent “in the neighborhood of $20 million on advertising and promotion”, crediting this with the fact that “a Lane cedar chest ranks along with the fraternity pin and engagement ring as a token of serious romantic intentions.” In addition to its adoption of advertising techniques, the company began organizing and training a “hard-hitting, exclusive sales force, experienced in the techniques of promotion” (Lane, 1962, p. 13). It is this sales orientation that, perhaps, most distinguishes the company from this point forward.

**The Girl Graduate Plan**

One of the most successful sales promotion ideas the company adopted had them targeting what they felt was an untapped market – the young woman graduating from high school. The idea behind the plan was to foster brand loyalty early in a young woman’s life because “the woman of the house was seen as the decision maker in the purchase of home furnishings” (Gilmour Stoner, 2009, p. 6). In the 1930s, 50 percent of all female high school graduates were married within 18 months of graduation and, therefore, were likely to need furniture (Stoner Gilmour, 2009). Lane Company employees had for some time been making little miniature cedar chests as a hobby or ‘end of day’ project. Many of these chests were given as gifts to female family members and became very popular. Most of them had a lock and key and, thus, were used as jewelry boxes or to save love letters, recalling the *minnekästchen* discussed above.

The company’s sales manager, J. Arthur Krauss, developed an idea using these small miniatures which became what Edward Lane (1962, p. 14) described as “one of the greatest promotionary plans the furniture industry has ever had.”

In the 1920s, the specifics of the program were worked out. Krauss initially had difficulty convincing the company’s Vice President and Treasurer of the plan’s viability, so he had the miniature chests manufactured by an outside firm. They paid a small amount for the miniatures ($1.35 in 1922 dollars) and resold them to furniture dealers. Initially, the company tried appealing to local newspapers to secure...
their assistance in compiling a list of graduates. The response was reported to be “very poor and in some cases … very sarcastic” (File 2788). Many newspapers insisted that the company pay for advertising space. Next, the company sent letters out to school secretaries in all cities with a population of more than 100,000 and to class secretaries in smaller cities and towns, advising them that they would give a miniature chest, free of charge, to each young woman graduating that year, if they could obtain a list of their names. Krauss noted that response to this request was “very successful”, with the majority of lists received coming from the class secretaries in medium-sized and smaller towns. Many school secretaries in larger cities replied that providing such a list was against Board of Education policy (File 2788). Each young woman whose name was received by the company was mailed a letter or brochure which enclosed a card she could take to her local furniture store and exchange for a miniature chest. The program appears to have been a winner from the start. Manufacturing of the miniatures was moved in house, with the company eventually devoting an entire division to their manufacture. In 1929, it was credited as a major source of the company’s success; a night shift had to be added just to catch up with demand (File 2788).

The Girl Graduate Plan officially launched in 1930\(^\text{10}\). In 1934, there was some concern that the promotional program had run its course, with very few dealers buying in. However, in 1935, the plan was reported to be working well. Its decline in 1934 was attributed to “business conditions” and the fact that “salesmen were not pushing it as well as they were [in 1935]” (File 2788). In 1936, the plan was even more successful. This was attributed to three factors: 1) producing a better miniature chest; 2) burning the name of the dealer into the lid of the miniature (literally, branding the piece); and 3) mailing a follow-up letter to girl graduates in the fall of the year (File 2788). Sales materials for 1937 designed to recruit more furniture dealers to join the Plan included endorsements from other dealers across the USA, extolling the good will the plan had engendered with ‘the brides of tomorrow’ and their parents\(^\text{11}\). Dealers paid the cost price of the miniature chest and were responsible for providing the names of girl graduates. Lane bore the cost of postage, imprinting the invitation with the furniture dealer’s name and address, providing a special window display and two brochures, one to accompany the congratulatory letter/invitation mailed in the spring and a second sent as a follow-up mailing in December.
Figure 2. Invitation mailed to high school seniors, circa 1938. Source: Lane Company Records, 1907-2003. Mss3 L4532 FA2 Series 5.9, Lane Girl Graduate Plan, ca. 1936-1978, Folder 2673, Virginia Museum of History and Culture. Photo credit: Reinhard Klinger.

Figure 3. Invitation mailed to high school seniors, circa 1938. Source: Lane Company Records, 1907-2003. Mss3 L4532 FA2 Series 5.9, Lane Girl Graduate Plan, ca. 1936-1978, Folder 2673, Virginia Museum of History and Culture. Photo credit: Reinhard Klinger.
Dealers were encouraged to make the occasion of receiving the miniature chest a festive one by hanging school pennants behind the Lane Cedar Chests on display in their stores and wrapping the miniature gift chests in cellophane matching the local school colours. Many dealers provided food and drink for the young women and their parents; some hosted fashion shows and later, hired DJs to play music during the event. The program developed over time, often by sharing and implementing suggestions made by one dealer across the whole network. One dealer came up with the idea of having the young woman write down the style of hope chest she liked best on a card where she also provided her parents’ names and address. The card could then be used by the retailer’s sales personnel to follow-up with her parents, suggesting the selected hope chest would make an ideal graduation gift. Lane began producing these cards, and inserted them into the miniature chests. The brochures sent to the young women also became more comprehensive over time. In addition to providing tips for how to pick a hope chest, they detailed what *Good Housekeeping* magazine recommended as ‘inventory’ for a well-stocked hope chest, as can be seen in Figure 2, an invitation from circa 1938. The inventory bears a striking similarity to traditional Italian and Greek customs discussed earlier – several sets of bedsheets, blankets, spreads, multiple bath and kitchen towels, and table linens, with the noted addition of coloured linens in addition to the traditional white.

Lane encouraged dealers to report back to them, supported by an incentive program offered to Lane salesmen – letters from dealers were rewarded with a $5 bonus, ‘good’ letters with $10. In April 1951, the manager of the Bradley Hall furniture store in New Castle, Indiana wrote to say that not only had they sold many Lane chests and pieces of luggage during their first year in the program, but they had had two young couples return to the store to purchase additional furniture – one for $600 and the other for $1300. In each case, the young woman of the couple had received a miniature chest as a gift from the store (Folder 2677). Michaels & Co. of Brooklyn, NY reported that in their first year in the program (1952), they sold more chests during the promotion than they had in the previous six months. Turnout at their event was reported to be, “seven times greater than that which we would regard as good average pull.” The company president concluded his letter by saying, “…we see cumulative benefits which we don’t want to be without, for we know of no other means (even at far greater cost) by which we could achieve contact in our own stores with so many girls, all of whom will so soon be furnishing their own homes” (Joseph Michaels, Jr. Folder 2677). The General Manager of the Byrd-Walker Company of Windsor, NC, relayed to his Lane Company salesman that company records over a period of six years showed 85% of the young women given miniature chests had returned to the store to purchase furniture. In his opinion, “…this is the best advertisement for money that we possibly could spend for we believe that from mouth to ear beats all other advertising” (Goodwin Byrd, June 10, 1955, Folder 2677). When letters contained interesting promotional ideas, Lane’s Sales Promotion Department wrote back, asking for more details.
Praise was received not only from participating furniture dealers. In 1955, the Principal of Mineola High School in Mineola, NY, wrote “Our senior girls were delighted with the beautiful jewelry chests they received … I know each girl will treasure the gift as long as she lives. The high school is grateful for having so many fine friends. On behalf of the senior girls and our professional staff I wish to thank you and your organization for the part you had in making these gifts possible. (Ralph L. Sloat, Folder 2677).

The program allowed the furniture dealer to

...become acquainted with a future homemaker at the very beginning of her furniture buying age. (Surveys show that approximately half of the girls graduating from high school are married within eighteen months.) This plan has since grown to such an extent that between one-half and two-thirds of all girls graduating from high school in the United States are presented by our customers with one of these Lane miniature cedar chests. In the 31 years it has been in operation, approximately seven million girls have received them. This, along with 40 years of advertising, may partly account for the fact that surveys show Lane as one of the best-known names in furniture (Lane, 1962, p. 14-5).

In 1968, the program was supported by prime time television advertising over the ABC network. During eight consecutive days of advertising in April on American Bandstand, Peyton Place, The Dating Game, That Girl and other programs, the audience was told to consult the May 11th issue of TV Guide to determine where they could get their free Keepsake Chest. Participating stores would have their name,

Figure 4. Lane miniature chest. Source: ebay.com.
I don’t believe the basic character of Lane advertising has really changed over the years. Lane ads always have been designed to look big and important, colorful and commanding. But like anything else, they have to be kept up to date. People have the same emotions they always had, but they express themselves differently. In advertising we are trying to communicate with people and we can’t communicate effectively unless we talk their language. This is especially true, I believe, in advertising to youth… Thirty years ago, just as today, we advertised cedar chests to young people with an emotional appeal. The ads… promoted the idea that a chest was the gift for a young man to give a girl when he became serious about her. Our ads now… sell exactly the same idea. But they copy and picture present the idea in a contemporary way” (quoted in Lane, 1963, p. 118).

By the mid-1960s, almost two-thirds of all female high school graduates in the United States received a free Lane miniature chest (Gilmour Stoner, 2009).

A research study by Herbert Otto and Robert Andersen (1967), entitled “The Hope Chest and Dowry: American Custom?” provides some insight from the consumer’s perspective. In 1964, Otto and Anderson surveyed female university students, most aged between 18 and 24 years, from families with high socio-economic status. Their results showed that 38% of respondents maintained a hope chest at the time of the survey. Others indicated they had at one time maintained a hope chest but had discontinued the practice, bringing the total proportion who had been involved with the custom to 46%. For those who maintained a hope chest, 41.9% reported that the items being saved in the chest came from friends and family; 35.3% said friends, family and their own purchases; and 22.8% indicated only one source – relatives. Interestingly, the income of the respondents’ fathers was significantly related to the practice of maintaining a hope chest. The lower the father’s income, the higher the likelihood of a young woman maintaining a hope chest. The authors concluded, “In a sense, the hope chest represents on a symbolical level a young woman’s aspirations and on a reality level her concrete investment in the marital estate prior to its onset” (Otto and Andersen, 1967, p.19).

While company officials considered the Girl Graduate Plan to be very successful for a number of years, by the early 1980s serious questions were being raised by its salesmen. An internal document entitled simply ‘The Girl Graduate Plan’ acknowledges these doubts and the lack of hard evidence supporting the promotion. It highlights several environmental influences that were thought to be having a detrimental effect:

…girls wait longer to marry, fewer of them remain in the home town after high school graduation, more go to college or get jobs in other cities. Of those who do marry shortly after high school, some follow their husbands to other environs. We live in a mobile society (File 2679, ‘The Girl Graduate Plan’).
of affiliated dealers, each covering a separate trading area, but collectively agreeing to offer special consideration (e.g., price reductions) to a young woman who could provide evidence of having received a chest from any store in the network. Unfortunately, the archival sources don’t tell us if attempts were made to establish such a network.

In 1987, the Lane Company was purchased by Interco Corporation in a hostile takeover. In 1992, Interco’s successor, Furniture Brands International, filed for bankruptcy. The last Lane cedar chest to be manufactured in the US was produced in 2001, and after that, the plant at Altavista closed for good (Virginia Museum of History & Culture, n.d.)12 As the Girl Graduate Plan wound down, the company continued to produce small boxes, but they were linked to sales promotion programs for Disney, NASCAR, JC Penny and others (Hilkemeier in Oeltjenbruns, 2016). During the life of the Girl Graduate Plan, it is estimated that over 27 million miniature chests were distributed as graduation gifts by the retailers involved in the program (Hilkemeier in Oeltjenbruns, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

The Girl Graduate Plan was not the only sales promotion used by the Lane Company. In 1930, the company contracted with National Union Insurance Company to provide five-year moth insurance policies. At the time, these policies were unique in the industry and gave Lane salesmen a competitive advantage. They also provided the company with an extensive database of information when hope chest recipients mailed in their registration cards13. In 1939, the company developed a promotion linked to Valentine’s Day, building on the experience of one of its dealers whose Valentine’s inspired sale had been ‘exceptionally successful’, even in the difficult business climate of the late Depression years. Traditionally, three-quarters of cedar chest retail sales occurred in the last quarter of the year, during the Christmas season. Information from the moth insurance cards had begun to show the firm that cedar chests were often the romantic gift of choice from a young man to his ‘intended’. Adding these three pieces of information together, the company developed a romantically based national sales promotion offering exceptionally low prices on a limited range (two or three models) of cedar chests (Gilmour Stoner, 2009; Lane, 1963, p. 80). The Valentine’s Day promotion was so successful that the firm still enjoyed a profit due to the cost savings realized through manufacturing only a few specific styles of chest, and it filled the slack in what had until then been a slower spring production schedule.

In conclusion, the Girl Graduate Plan was extremely successful sales promotion whether measured in terms of creating good will and brand loyalty or increased retail sales. Lane tapped into an under-served market – the young woman about to become a major consumption decision maker – and it did so in a way that updated a custom which pre-dated the company by several centuries. Although our database of Lane advertisements is admittedly incomplete, nowhere in the text of the ads we’ve been able to download and analyze does the word ‘dowry’ appear. Instead, the company positioned their products as an appropriate graduation gift, when targeting the young woman’s parents, and as a demonstration of romantic love, when targeting young couples. Lane also used its extensive distribution network as a source of market research – creative ideas that ‘worked’ for one retailer were often fine-tuned and shared throughout the network.

So, why did the Girl Graduate Plan eventually come to an end? It seems there were several reasons, some internal to the company, but probably the most influential forces were those occurring within the larger society. The Lane Company did experience a hostile takeover and, no doubt, this caused serious disruption. However, a successful sales promotion, especially one that had been functioning as long and as well as the Girl Graduate Plan could have been continued by the new owners. Major societal changes brought about by the women’s liberation movement in terms of how young women saw themselves in their future roles as wage earners, ‘career women’ and marital partners, along with the rejection by many of traditional gender roles no doubt played a large part (Peril, 2016). Legislative changes also played a role. Palakghtsoglou and colleagues (2013-14) note that the abolition of the dowry in Italy in 1968 and Greece in 1983 had a major impact on dowry traditions. Instead of the contents of her glory box acting reflecting a “woman’s worth and also [acting] as a sign of the respectability of a family” (p. 223), the focus shifted. While parents still provided some linen ware and contributed towards the down payment for a house, the most public and ostentatious display became the wedding celebration itself, with large
numbers of guests invited to partake in elaborate feasting. By the late 1970s, in the United States and Canada, information privacy legislation was introduced in various forms (Holvast, 2008; Solove, 2006). The Lane Company had been able to work around school board policies that restricted access to young women’s personal information, however, the increased attention given to the need to protect personal information likely caused a ‘chilling effect’ and would have made the direct mail campaigns previously used much more difficult to orchestrate.

The fact remains that for many consumers the hope chest is an item of great symbolic and emotional importance, and is thus an object of material culture worthy of scholarly attention. This research was inspired by authors’ experience while conducting a participant observation exercise at a local auction house. We saw fine china and crystal (traditional wedding related purchases) and, indeed, wedding and engagement rings being offered for sale. Our thoughts about these objects revolved around the maintenance or loss of economic value and the potential for savings from consumers re-using precious gemstones – more cognitive, objective or detached reactions. It was when a hope chest full of treasured items came up for sale that we felt truly moved (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed discussion) and were inspired to research this topic.

References


Lane, H.H. (1963), A history of the Lane Company; the first 50 years, Lane Company, Altavista, VA.


Appendix 1. My grandma’s cedar chest

It’s hard to separate the story of my grandma’s cedar chest from the story of my family. My grandma was an only child. Her Norwegian-born father joined the war effort when Quisling sold-out his homeland to the Nazis. He was killed in Belgium around the time of my grandma’s thirteenth birthday. My great-grandfather, himself, was orphaned by the age of five. Their working-class status and tragic history meant that there was little, if anything, to be passed-down to the next generation. In contrast, my grandma’s hope chest is physical reminder of a relatively idyllic chapter in my family history.

The story of my grandparents has several elements of 1950s nostalgia. They liked to go bowling and it was my grandpa’s bowling team that proposed to my grandma (the second time). He called her the next day to make sure that she was sincere when she answered “yes” (because she refused him the first time). They were married in 1953 and, keeping with the tradition of the time, my grandpa gave my grandma a cedar chest to store her valuables. My grandpa was the son of a miner and worked as a pipe fitter in the mines and paper mills in Northern Ontario. They were not wealthy people, but they had enough to purchase and furnish a modest home. They had two sons. My dad, the eldest, was a book worm and grew-up reading Hardy Boys novels and cheering for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

When my grandma passed away in 2006, the house and all its contents were left to my dad and my uncle. There was discussion about what to keep, what to sell, and what to donate. The furniture was worn, there was no piece of clothing that my grandma wore, or specific book that my grandpa read that reminded me of them. I had happy memories in that place, but little of it was tied to specific objects. I asked for the cedar chest because it was symbolic of two people who were no longer with me.

I was given the cedar chest only after my parents organized and sorted its contents. Inside were some of my grandma’s knitting projects, fine linens, the leftover lace from her wedding dress, and her wedding photos (Figure 5). The knitting projects, mostly baby sweaters and booties that she would donate to the hospital or church sales, were set-aside for my parent’s future grandchildren (no pressure whatsoever).

The chest is in good condition (Figure 6). It shows some signs of wear, but the veneer is still intact. The original moth insurance certificate and care instructions are still affixed to the inside of the lid (Figure 7). The bottom drawer is stiff, but functional.

The chest now resides in the master bedroom of the 1930s house that I share with my husband. I use it to store my husband’s wool sweaters in the summertime, extra blankets, linens and other keepsakes, including my other grandma’s wedding dress.

It was important to me that the cedar chest stay in the family. Like wedding rings and family photos, it is a symbol of the relationship between my grandparents. It felt too personal to be given away or to sit in the home of a distant family member.

I found it odd when I saw cedar chests popping-up in estate sales and auctions. In one case, the auctioneer opened the chest to find the former-owner’s personal effects still inside. I remember feeling a confusing range of emotions as I watched the auctioneer hold up children’s clothing and hand-made blankets. My first reaction was that it was an inexcusable invasion of privacy. Items kept in a cedar chest are so valuable and so personal that it felt like the auctioneer was rummaging through the deceased’s underwear drawer. Then I felt sadness that these items made it to an auction house. Was there nobody left who cared for the deceased? And, upon later reflection, a different kind of sadness that the survivors may deliberately sent this cedar chest and its content to auction to rid themselves of painful memories.

I have such fond memories of time spent with my grandparents. I find myself thinking about them more often as we prepare to welcome my brother’s first child into our family. We’ve already picked-out one of the baby outfits that my grandma knit and safely stored in the cedar chest for my future nephew. My parents will gift it to my sister-in-law at her baby shower and I am sure that we will be choking-back tears when my sister-in-law opens the package.
Figure 5. My grandparents circa 1953
Figure 6. Grandma's cedar chest in my home

Figure 7. Insurance certificate and care instructions
Appendix 2. A short biography of my mother’s hope chest

My first memory of my mother’s hope chest dates to my high school years. My mother always referred to her hope chest as her ‘cedar chest.’ It lived at the foot of my parents’ bed. One day, for what reason I can’t recall, my mother opened the chest to show me mementoes from her high school years – her ‘school letter’ and various badges she had earned by participating on school teams. She had kept a white sweatshirt, styled with collar and half-zipper, from her nurses’ college days and a charm bracelet, spelling out the name of her high school – each letter dangling from a separate silver link. I remember wearing that sweatshirt. Her training had taken place at a psychiatric hospital – wearing it raised some eye brows around the high school and appealed to the rebel in the teenage me. What became of the sweatshirt, and the bracelet, I do not know. I recall that my mother stored a bright fuschia-coloured cashmere sweater, still in its original plastic bag, in her cedar chest. And I believe she also stored a few items of clothing worn by her children, in particular, some favorite shirts that belonged to her sons when they were young. A pair of white gloves, and a silk flower corsage shared space in the long, narrow drawer, affixed to the hinges, which moved up and forward when the lid of the cedar chest was opened and raised. It seems to me the flowers were heather, a particular favorite of hers, bringing to mind her own mother’s Scottish heritage.

My mother’s ‘cedar chest’ started life as a hope chest. My father purchased it for her, from a local furniture store, after they were engaged. While she completed three years of nursing training in another town she would pick up what my father calls ‘little things’, tea towels and table cloths that could be stored in her hope chest. “I don’t think mom really liked it, but it was what I thought all the girls wanted at the time.” He chose the style of the cedar chest. He also gave her the pink cashmere sweater; “that, she really liked,” he recalls. “I think the aunts would give her little things. They did that then. She collected some things before we were married.” The cedar chest moved with them into their first home together, the apartment where they lived when I was born, then into the first house they purchased, and into each subsequent house. It almost always occupied the space at the end of their bed. Its style might best be described as mid-century modern. Over the years, it has endured various nicks and scrapes to its finish, the by-product of raising four children.

I ask my father about the small cedar box that my mother used to keep on her dresser. At first, he doesn’t seem to recall it. “Mom kept our birth certificates in it, don’t you remember?” “I think she kept jewelry in it,” he replies. I tell him about the research I’ve been doing, and the accounts of furniture manufacturers sending coupons to young women who were graduating from high school, inviting them to visit a local furniture store to pick up a free miniature hope chest. Girls would be encouraged to register for a silver pattern at the same time, with the idea being that family and friends could purchase pieces for them, to keep in the hope chest they would also be picking out. “Yes, I remember something about that. Your mother didn’t buy her silver all at one time,” my father recalls. “She bought it as she could afford it.”

My mother has now passed away. Her cedar chest lives in the basement of my father’s home. In the four years since her death, he has not been able to bring himself to open it and clear away its contents. He asks for my help. Someday. When we ‘get around to it.’ My father recently purchased another cedar chest, a used one, at auction, to take to the cottage to store woolen blankets over the summer. When I call him to ask about the cedar chest, he eagerly asks, “You want it?” “No,” I have to admit, “I just want to ask you about it.” “I guess I could put your mother’s chest up in the big front room (at the cottage),” he says. I agree that it would be a good place to store bedding when not in use. Carefully, without actually speaking the words, we have successfully delayed taking the decision to dispose of it.

1 For example, red being the colour of celebration, fertility and blood, especially in middle Eastern cultures, it is likely that boxes painted or decorated in red would have been marriage or dowry chests.

2 The Cairo Geniza is a collection of almost 300,000 manuscript fragments housed in the geniza, or storeroom, of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt. It has been described as the largest and most diverse collection of medieval manuscripts in the world, providing a detailed picture of the economic
and cultural life of North Africa and the Middle Mediterranean, particularly during the 10th to 13th centuries.

3 Schleining (2001, p. 2) attests to the persistence of the hope chest/glory box tradition even in difficult economic times. Recalling his own mother’s hope chest, he says “My mother’s hope chest, originally a humble apple crate housing the linens her mother painstakingly made her during the Great Depression, hints at a dedication to tradition, even if a traditional chest was out of reach. My mother later got a more traditional hope chest, but that apple crate served its purpose, treasuring her precious gifts for her future home.”

4 The Caswell-Runyan Company was founded by J.W. Caswell and Winfred Runyan, Winfred Runyan died of a heart attack on December 25, 1942. J.W. Caswell died one month later, on January 25, 1943 (HuntingtonCounty Honours, 2016). In spite of having twice refitted its facilities to serve war time needs, and expanding its product line to include radio and later television cabinets, stereo speakers and juke boxes, the company never stopped making cedar chests (Jones, 2018). Caswell-Runyan was eventually bought out; its machinery and inventory were liquidated in 1956. The plant sat empty for several years and was destroyed by fire in June, 1962 (Caswell-Runyan is topic of next historical group meet; The history of Caswell-Runyan Company).

5 Unless otherwise noted, much of the material for this company history has been drawn from the printed version of a speech given by Edward Hudson Lane in 1962 to the Newcomen Society, in celebration of the company’s 50th anniversary.

6 A Google search revealed that the cedar chests manufactured by several of these companies (Caswell-Runyan, Ed Roos, and Piedmont Red Cedar) enjoy considerable popularity with collectors today.

7 The hostility between the firms may have been genuine, at least for a period of time. Edward Lane recalls that his father, whom he described as “a pugnacious kind of fellow,” took offense to Runyan’s offer to purchase the firm, and “offered to whip him on the spot” (Lane 1963, p. 50). It seems likely that the Lane Company is the company the writer of the Caswell Runyan history was referring to rather dismissively as ‘advertising heavily’ (The History of the Caswell-Runyan Company, 1924). However, Lane Company records indicate that a licensing agreement was reached for Caswell-Runyan to use Lane’s patented weather stripping on their hope chests (Mss3 L2453a FA 2 Series 3.1 Agreements, Licensing, Folder 1583, Caswell-Runyan 1936-1937; Mss3 L2453a FA 2, Series 6.3. Lane, Rick. Research files. Folder 2788, Marketing, Girl Graduate program, 1928-1939).

8 Especially during WWII, the company targeted servicemen in an effort to persuade them to purchase hope chests for their sweetheart ‘back home’.

9 Self-styled Lane Box Historian, Chad Hilkemeier reported that he found evidence in the Lane Company archives to indicate Lane experimented with expanding the Plan to include male graduates in 1978, but the expansion was not successful. Since Hilkemeier did not provide archival references, I could not track down his source to corroborate this (See Hilkemeier’s blog, Lane Cedar Box, at: https://lanecedarbox.wordpress.com/2018/06/23/tidbits-from-lane-archives/)

10 This is the date of the ‘official’ launch, although there is archival evidence that the program was operating before this. In addition to Krauss’s comments cited above, the same diary dated 1929 notes a commission rate of 7.5% to salesmen for the Girl Graduate Plan (Series 6.3. Lane, Rick. Research files. Folder 2788, Marketing, Girl Graduate program, 1928-1939).

11 The booklet entitled, “Win the Brides of 1938 Now! With the new Improved Girl Graduate Plan’ emphasized in large, bold letters, “Statistics show that 28% of the girls who graduate in 1937 will be married by July, 1938 – three-fourths by 1940!” (Folder 2673).

12 The Lane Furniture (2017) website indicates that in 1972, Lane purchased a small chair company in Mississippi called Action Industries. Eventually, the company name was changed to Lane Furniture. As of 2017, Lane is owned by United Furniture Industries. Lane products can be purchased through furniture retailers in the U.S. and Canada.

13 Information gleaned from insurance registration cards revealed that “over 80% of Lane chests are purchased as gifts for young unmarried girls, 17 to 24 years of age… [and] recipients of Lane cedar chests are usually married within six months after receiving ‘the gift that starts the home’ and return to the store where it was purchased to make additional furniture acquisition” (Lane, 1963, p. 93).