The Hope Chest

By Betty Kreier Lubinski

Our granddaughter, Helen, is moving into her own apartment. She said recently, "Grandma, I need everything." That reminded me of my hope chest list, which I started writing in 1944, when I was 12 years old. I, too, needed everything.

When my preteen girlfriends and I talked about hope chests, we meant the collection of articles we'd need to make a home, not the hope chest itself. I drooled over advertisements for beautiful, polished cedar hope chests. I hoped the day would come when I could own a chest like that. But I knew that was something my girlhood family could never afford.

My "hope chest" was a wooden orange crate with two shelves that stood upright beside my bed as a nightstand. It was draped with the yellow flowered fabric from a printed chicken-feed sack. In my hope chest I packed away my dreams for the future.

My cousin Dorothy's hope chest was an old suitcase, too worn to be used as a suitcase any longer. Friend Lorena's hope chest was a cardboard box.

I belonged to perhaps the last generation of girls in the United States who were raised to be wives and mothers. As soon as I was old enough to hold a needle and thread, I embroidered dish towels to put in my hope chest.

I graduated to hand-sewing fancy pot holders and crocheting edges on embroidered pillowslips. These items were useful as gifts to others, but all the young girls I knew were on the same quest: to acquire enough household linens and dishes to proudly start their own household.

Delicate candy plates, colorful casserole dishes and ornate serving spoons were considered very nice birthday or Christmas presents for marriage-minded young girls.

A recipe box containing my mother's favorite recipes was my most treasured hope chest item. This included some of the first foods I learned to cook. The instructions were usually skimpy and left a certain amount to guessing. The following recipe was one that took a special touch, which you learned by trying, perhaps over and over.

Sour Cream Pie

1 cup sugar
1 cup thick sour cream
1 cup raisins
1 egg
1 teaspoon cloves, cinnamon and vinegar

Mix together and bake in piecrust in slow oven long enough for raisins to cook through. Doesn't take long. Don't cook the crust first.

My girlfriends, cousins and I spent many a joyful afternoon inspecting each other's hope chests. We'd spread our treasures on the bedspread so that everyone could get a good look. We *oohed* and *aahed* over the roses Dorothy had learned to crochet atop her pot holders. We envied the set of towels Lorena had acquired at Christmas.

Whenever we got something new, we couldn't wait to go to school so we could tell our friends about it. We had no phones at home and we lived some distance from each other, so we had to contain our excitement until the next school day.

One of the most wonderful stops we made on the rare days when we went shopping in the big town of Vancouver, Wash., was at Woolworth's. They had counters and counters of wonderful things that every girl needed for her home.

We must have driven my mother crazy asking for little things for our hope chests—needles, thread, embroidery patterns, embroidery hoops of various sizes, threads in every color, and fabrics.

I don't sew anymore, but a fabric store can still stir my imagination. I still find myself wanting to take home armfuls of fabric in colorful prints.

I remember being the target of Uncle Ray's brashness when I tried to talk about my hope chest. "Hope chest?" he'd say. "There's no hope for you!"

There was, though. I married at 19, and I was thrilled to take the treasures in my hope chest to use in my new home. ❖

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