

## Getting Started: Outfitting the Bride in Seaside

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Article abstract

This paper examines the outfitting of brides-to-be, the period of liminality during which a 'maid' is converted to a 'matron'. Bridal showers are defined as potent women's rituals which teach the expectations and meanings of the role of wife and the ideal of married domesticity. The form of these rituals is changing; these alterations reflect changing gender arrangements.

# GETTING STARTED: OUTFITTING THE BRIDE IN SEASIDE<sup>1</sup>

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Rites of passage process and/or celebrate a change in the status or identity of individuals. Van Gennep (1908) observed that the process of altering one's social identity is tripartite in nature: separation from the group (this may be a symbolic separation only), the period of marginality (or liminality) and aggregation (reincorporation into the group as a "new" person). Marginality is fundamentally a period of instruction: one is taught the comportment and meanings of one's new role. The marginal or liminal process has great significance, for that is "when society seeks to make the individual most fully its own" (Barbara Meyerhoff, cited by Ward 1990:90). Women have been intimately involved in the major critical rites — birth, marriage, death — particularly within complex societies. Until recently, these transitions, while female-centered, were officiated at and validated by male authorities (medical and priestly).

This paper will address an important component of the transitional period between a woman's engagement (the public statement of intention to marry) and her marriage (the rite of aggregation which bestows on her her new social identity): a series of rituals known as "bridal showers". These rituals affirm female solidarity and confirm an impending status change. Showers have been distinctively female rites; however, significant changes have taken place over the past half-century which reflect the social and cultural changes that have occurred in the wider society, particularly changes in women's roles and female-male relationships.

## The Bridal Shower

The bridal shower is a twentieth century, American invention (Baker 1977:44). Formal dowries, which are male-controlled, have not been conventional in North America although, through "gifts from home", "outfitting",<sup>2</sup> "advancement", or *aussteier* (Pennsylvania German), eighteenth and nineteenth century families provided young adults (female and male) with a "good start" for

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1. I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the following individuals who shared their experiences and knowledge with me for this paper: Doris Ball, Patricia Fallowfield, Barbara Grant, Beverly Pounder and, particularly, Jeanne Lindsay.

2. This term most closely resonates with my interests.

their own households (Lasansky 1990:4). These gifts were part of the young person's inheritance, thus controlled by the family; even though property typically was transferred through inheritance in Canada, financial investment in a marriage meant that parents could exercise some control or influence over the choice of partner (Ward 1990:143). Outfitting, like the dowry, was that which a bride brought to her marriage: household items, for example, which may have been accumulated over a period of time, including gifts from parents, relatives and friends (Lasansky 1990:7).

By the turn of this century, the blanket chest, dower chest, hope chest, cedar chest or trousseau (analogous to the "bottom drawer" in Britain) had replaced the advancement of earlier periods (Lasansky 1990:12-13). Household items, sometimes including lingerie, were carefully stored by young women until needed for their own homes. Engagement gifts sometimes inaugurated the outfitting of this household and were presented to the bride-to-be as initial recognition of her marginal status.<sup>3</sup> More formally, an "engagement party" was a ritual acknowledgement or celebration of "betwixt and between"<sup>4</sup> maid and matron, conveying social approval through the presentation of gifts to the couple. Charsley (1991) and Leonard (1980) have observed this tradition in Britain where, as in Canada, engagement gifts are domestic items. Thus, the gifts had (and have) not only practical value but were (and still are) drenched with symbolism. As women entered the labor force during the early part of this century, it then became customary for workmates to hold a shower for the departing bride<sup>5</sup> (Morton 1992:367-369).

Outfitting was undertaken by women *for* women: relatives, friends, close friends of the bride's mother and groom's mother, neighbors all contributed to the new household. Apart from workmates and personal friends, women who were older than the bride provided the things that concretely represented her new role. Gifts to the bride not only outfitted her but acted as potent symbols of conversion; gifts expressed the organic, caring relationships between particular women and between women in general. The gifts reaffirmed both the "ideals of domesticity" (Rothman 1984:167) and wife as social role. While the wife-to-be was provided with the currency of wifing, objects which would expand (and constrict) her repertoire of action into her own domestic sphere, the women present validated her status-to-be both by their presence and through the discourse of expectations typical of shower conversations. Bridal showers, therefore, were rituals of affirmation and affiliation, they celebrated both wifing and womanhood as honorable statuses.

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3. Engagement gifts are still given, of course.

4. Victor Turner's phrase.

5. In the 1920s, marriage required a woman to leave paid labor.

## Outfitting: The Past

During the 1950s, the cultural elaboration of domestic life had become almost baroque in its institutionalization of the dual roles of happy homemaker and dedicated breadwinner. The post-war reunion and restitution of families were embraced enthusiastically. Bridal showers affirmed this return to domestic stability. Brenda, Nancy, Molly and Karen<sup>6</sup> were four of the beneficiaries of the largesse.

### Seaside, 1951

Seaside was a small summer resort and fishing village of about three to four hundred souls (predominantly lower and middle class, white and of British heritage) in southwestern Ontario. In the spring of 1951, many of the women of Seaside (about forty) trooped to the local hotel to fete Brenda.

Brenda, who had worked at the hotel for many summers, was twenty-one years old, the daughter of a highly-respected village family. One elderly woman stated that Brenda was "the most beautiful girl in Seaside" when she was young. Brenda had graduated from high school and Normal School and was marrying the son of a long-time "summer family" and moving to Calgary.

Friends and relatives, eager to contribute to the outfitting of the bride, brought a variety of gifts (many of them home-made) — tea towels, aprons, salt and pepper shakers — that conveyed both personal affection for the bride-to-be (cf. Cheal 1987) and social validation of her impending status through the provision of the tools of the wifely trade (particularly kitchen utensils). The women ate donated 'goodies' and, after the gifts had been opened, Brenda was dressed in a garment adorned with the ribbons and bows that had decorated the gifts — an apron, symbol of the homemaker.

Brenda's shower was not typical of Seaside showers; generally, as Kate noted:

Showers used to be held in homes [c. 1940s] and by invitation; they were mostly small showers because a lot of the homes couldn't hold very many people. The big thing was surprise showers...I remember Brenda's shower well, it was a big one because she was well-liked and she had family connections and so did the Smiths [the groom's parents], so there wasn't a house to hold it in...

While the focus of this paper is on changes in outfitting rituals in Seaside, many of the young women of Seaside left to work in the larger centers, particularly Centertown, and so I will briefly attend to bridal showers in this nearby (c. fifty miles) urban area.

### Sparseville, 1953

Sparseville was a school district (today, subdivision) of about three to four hundred working class people on the outskirts of Centertown in midwestern Ontario. In 1953, forty to fifty women trooped to the small community hall (which also served as the kindergarten area) to outfit Nancy, the daughter of the well-loved grocer<sup>7</sup> and his wife.

6. Pseudonyms.

7. Nancy's father had been very generous to the poorer members of Sparseville during the years of depression.

Nancy was twenty-one years old and had a university degree in secretarial science (the first Sparseville alumna). She was marrying her high school sweetheart and moving to Calgary.

Friends of Nancy's mother and a few of her high school teachers brought food and gifts ("mostly unbreakable because of our move to Calgary") and expressed their social approval of the match between Nancy and Bill. Nancy was given tea towels, "tons" of tableclothes, a small silver dish and many hand-made items like aprons and "those horrible Kleenex box covers!" She particularly remembers a damask tablecloth given by a group of her mother's friends.

After Nancy had been adorned with the requisite paper plate decorated with the gifts' ribbons, the women somewhat wistfully returned home, amidst a flurry of kisses, maternal advice and wishes for a happy life. "Wistfully" because, as Nancy pointed out, "showers were a night out for women who didn't get out of the house much". Entertainment was a scarce resource for Sparseville women.

#### Centertown, 1956

Centertown is a well-known midwestern Ontario city. In 1956, about twenty-five to thirty neighbors and friends converged on the home of Widow Jones to surprise Molly, Widow Brown's daughter, with a shower of good wishes and household goods.

Molly was twenty-two years old and had graduated from the Centertown Hospital School of Nursing; she was marrying a medical student whom she had met during her training. Molly and her groom would be moving to Cleveland. Molly's widowed mother was highly regarded and many of the gifts reflected both this esteem and recognition of Molly's eventual upward mobility: fine china cups and saucers, tableclothes, English china flower arrangements were part of her outfitting, as well as the typical pie plates and mixing bowls and potholders.

Molly wore the festooned paper plate while they all enjoyed "Aunt" Widow Brown's famous baking and the women gave their seal of approval to Molly's "good match", praising her mother for her hard work in supporting her children without a male breadwinner.

#### Centertown Insurance Company, 1958

Karen arrived at her desk on her last day of work before her wedding to find that her workmates had transformed her cubicle into a bridal arbor of ribbons, balloons and paper flowers. Wrapped gifts were stacked on her chair and the young women of her department (as well as a few others who knew Karen) boisterously sang "Here comes the bride!"

Karen (Molly's younger sister) was twenty-three years old and had worked at the insurance company since leaving technical high school with some business training. She had met her husband-to-be on a blind date and would be moving to her groom's hometown, thirty-five miles from Centertown.<sup>8</sup>

Karen's gifts included tea towels, pot holders and some of the then-new Pyrex baking dishes. Her workmates showered her with confetti before she left work for the final time and her superior gave her his good wishes and part of the day off (with pay) and the "traditional box of Laura Secord chocolates".

All four of these women were outfitted within a community of women; indeed, the gifts that they received functioned as role models for their imminent status change (cf. Csikszentmihalya and Rochberg-Halton 1981:xi), being the tools of their new wifely trade. Moreover, most showers incorporated games.

8. By 1958, women were not required to leave most occupations upon marriage.

Often, these games were variations of children's birthday party games: for example, a tray of significant items (e.g. thimble, measuring tape, measuring spoons) was passed and the guests tried to recall as many as they could<sup>9</sup> or letter-scramble games (l i v e = veil) or games where the definitions were bridal or domestic words (what a bride wears on her head, veil). Games were highly symbolic in nature. For example, opening gifts, blindfolded, while wearing oven mitts or opening the gifts using only kitchen tongs signified the skills that the bride-to-be required. Age-mate showers frequently incorporated oblique references to sexuality; for example, guests had to walk with a penny between their knees and drop the penny in a pie plate, signifying the gift of sexuality that young women were expected to take to marriage (a variation in which an egg was used incorporated fertility). Finally, frankly sexual entertainment was derived from transcribing the bride's exclamations as she opened her gifts, then repeating them as wedding night dialogue: "good things come in small packages", "I always wanted one of those", "I can't get it out" (cf. Seligson 1973:45). The assumption was that the bride was sexually inexperienced. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, women were occasionally given "personal showers" by their peers; here, the gifts consisted of lingerie which objectively conveyed the sexual aspect of the wifely role. Today, showers are sometimes given in which the gifts are explicitly sexual or erotic (this also occurs within other ethnic groups, I understand).

The shower rituals, the gifts, the community of women — all functioned as multivocal symbols, reiterating and recreating proper womanhood as wife. Outfitting commenced the redefinition of the recipient as married woman, symbolizing housewifery as her new sphere of "productive action" (Csikszentmihalya and Rochberg-Halton 1990:92). The "trousseau tea" concluded the liminal period with a "show" of the outfitting, demonstrating the young woman's preparedness for marriage.

## Outfitting as Liminality: Women Apart

The bridal showers that my informants described to me entailed a variable sense of place and relationships, but, most importantly, a strong sense of community which transcended person and place, the *female* community. Through these rituals of outfitting, women actively created and recreated female culture, weaving female understandings, the lore of married womanhood, into their gifts, their advice, their admonitions and their hopes for the future. These showers celebrated full entry<sup>10</sup> into womanhood during an era when males and females led much more separate lives than they do today, when a community of women was the central constant of women's social universe.

9. Actually, recent neurophysiological research suggests that women are quite proficient at this.

10. "Full entry" because proper womanhood was conceptualized as wifehood and motherhood.

Bridal showers in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties were distinctively and wholly female gatherings. As part of the initiation process, outfitting communicated an ideology of wifing which functioned to socially reproduce wives and to perpetuate the patriarchal form of marriage. The gifts were symbols of the new role of the recipient and endowed that role with significance<sup>11</sup>. The gifts were material manifestations of the housewife role, both objects to be used and objectifications of the abstract notion of proper womanhood. Outfitting validated wifing, endorsing the outfitted woman herself *qua* woman.

Bridal showers were also self-generating: being showered established reciprocal bonds of obligations (cf. Mauss 1967, Ward 1990:99) which perpetuated the outfitting that characterized each woman's period of liminality. Recipients of community largesse were expected to attend or host showers for the women who followed them into the margins between maid and matron.

### Outfitting: "You want to really let them know you care"

The world of the fifties and sixties has given way to the world of the nineties and, today, Brenda, Nancy (recently widowed), Molly and Karen all live in Seaside, now a burgeoning resort and retirement community of well over six hundred residents<sup>12</sup>. All four have attended and planned a multitude of showers since being showered themselves. These have been watershed decades for the domestic sphere,<sup>13</sup> yet our forties and fifties brides agree that there are three constants: brides-to-be are still outfitted, the outfitting remains rooted in domesticity and gift-giving continues to generate obligations of reciprocity. Over the nearly half century since Kate (a lifelong resident of Seaside) was married, the form, not the function, of this woman's ritual has evolved in Seaside.

Kate: It's a few years back since they started the larger showers in the churches, maybe about 1960. Now, that's about the only kind of shower we have, there aren't too many personal showers anymore. Where they were held depended on what religion you were; mostly, it was the Anglican or United<sup>14</sup> churches that did it, if one was a member, usually the bride. Sometimes they were in the afternoon, sometimes in the evening. We stopped

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- 11 . Gifts also symbolized the relationship between giver and recipient: the closer the relationship, the more expensive the gift.
  - 12 . Brenda and her husband returned to Seaside twenty years ago since her husband was able to attend to his business matters from the village. Nancy, Molly and Karen have retired to Seaside: Nancy also maintains a winter apartment in Toronto, Karen and her husband winter in Florida, Molly and her husband are full-time residents.
  13. Startling changes have occurred in divorce and childbirth rates, the education of women, the number of women in the paid labor force.
  14. Seaside has five churches: Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and United Church. Only the Anglican and United churches are open year-round and, therefore, have permanent congregations.

playing games because, once the showers got larger, there wasn't time.<sup>15</sup> Now, we pass a recipe card to write your favorite recipe on or some good advice!<sup>16</sup> to the bride.

The shower isn't only for church members, it's open, open to everyone. We put up a sign and, if you know the girl and want to come, you come.<sup>17</sup> Even if the girl had gone away, to school or work, I'd say ninety per cent of the time, if the girl came back to get married, they'd have a shower. But it might be a small shower. Now, sometimes there aren't very many people there, either — not as many people go to church and the new people don't have the ties of the oldtimers.

The food has changed some: where we used to have sandwiches and sweets, now we might have fruit breads, cheeses and fruit and veggies.

Another thing that has changed is the gifts. Shower gifts today are like wedding gifts used to be;<sup>18</sup> years ago, you might get a set of salt and pepper shakers or embroidered pillow slips but not any more. Now, too, sometimes a group of women will go together and buy a large gift, like outdoor chairs.

Years ago, we wouldn't have had a shower if the girl was pregnant or living with the man. Today, they have white weddings and big showers, it doesn't seem to make any difference. If people don't approve, they don't go, just send a gift. Girls used to need everything; now, if they've been living together, they send lists — and they can be very detailed — telling us what they want. I don't think people like it, but they have learned to accept it because it's the *in* thing, any number are doing it.

The reason I go to showers is because you really want to let them know you care (cf. Cheal 1987).

While Kate did not know why the church showers started (space was a possibility), it may be significant that the church-based showers started about the same time that "open receptions" became popular. When Kate and her husband returned from their wedding trip in 1945, it was customary for friends to throw a party in the Town Hall.

Kate: Back then, when I got married, after you were married, came back, then they would have a reception for you, a dance in the Town Hall, put on by your friends. There were no gifts brought, but whatever was left at the door after paying the bills (the band, maybe lunch), that was yours.

By the early 1960s, there was a wedding dinner ("maybe about a hundred or so") and a big party or "open reception" immediately following the dinner. This open reception replaced the post-honeymoon party. Further, this variation became popular not just when open church-based showers became customary, but when there was an influx of "new people" into the village and both building and business expanded. In short, the church showers and open receptions could be interpreted as a way of redefining and asserting *community* at a time when the

15. This may demonstrate a decrease in sociality and more goal-directed or efficient conduct.

16. A highly significant statement.

17. Attendance varied from thirty to forty guests.

18. Each informant emphasized the change to more lavish bridal shower gifts. Invariably, this fact is mentioned at the showers themselves as the gifts are opened. The conventional correspondence between closeness of relationship and expense of gift has been maintained (cf. Cheal 1989).



traditional social bonds were being disrupted and at a time when the boundaries of Seaside community were becoming indistinct. Indeed, it was not unusual to hear a “new person” say that “those church women don’t want any of us new people getting involved in their events”.<sup>19</sup>

While being showered imposed a strong obligation to attend others’ showers, the open receptions were just as coercive, one was expected to attend and to donate at others’ receptions. A decorated box for the money was prominently displayed and varying amounts of cash were deposited in the box. These money gifts were in lieu of a wedding gift.<sup>20</sup> Following the dancing and a pay-bar (usually, although liquor was not always served),<sup>21</sup> a substantial lunch was served around midnight and everyone was thanked “from the floor” at the end of the evening. Carolyn (married in Seaside in 1988) observed that, by the nineteen-eighties, there were both customary amounts of money given and that the donation was put in an envelope with the donor’s name inscribed.

Carolyn: After the dinner, the reception was open. Anyone who knew the bride or groom, or their families, if they weren’t at the wedding and dinner, went to the hall. They put their money in the box: the young people put in about five or ten dollars, engaged couples about twenty and the married people about twenty to fifty.<sup>22</sup> You could be given several thousand dollars...After you were married, you were expected to go to others’ receptions, sometimes more than one in one night, and you were expected to give money to them. You expected people that you had given money to to come to your reception when you were married.

The tripartite obligation to give, receive, return the gift (Mauss 1967) is clear to the Seaside participants: these bonds of reciprocity circulate money throughout the community to set up housekeeping; the money is then re-circulated to outfit new households. Today, attendance at open receptions is beginning to diminish. While this decrease may be due to the diversification of the Seaside population base, diluting the organic bonds of community, it may also be related to the fact that the traditional “female world of love and ritual” (Smith-Rosenberg 1983) has been substantially altered in the past few decades and that marriage itself has become more privatized.

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19 . This comment was heard several times by the researcher as recently as three years ago. While this could be defined as the maintenance of traditional community boundaries (denominational boundaries were, and still are, very important in this village), in all fairness, it must be mentioned that the researcher has not experienced this exclusionary tactic and her pies and hands have been welcomed at church functions, but *only* by the denomination with which she has (fragile) ties.

20 . Kate emphasized that giving a wedding gift fulfilled one’s obligation; only those who had not given a wedding gift gave a cash donation.

21 . Inside, at any rate. That did not mean there was no liquor *consumed*. Seaside was actually a “dry” village until 1974.

22 . These were the amounts given by the late 1980s.

## Outfitting: Women and Men Together

As women remained in school longer and entered the work force in ever greater numbers, women's worlds became much less exclusively female. The "Stag and Doe" or "Jack and Jill" showers reflected this changing social world.

Kate: When my boys were married (late 1960s), there were stag parties, but not Stag and Doe parties. Now, they are great social functions in the big halls and bring in *thousands* of dollars!

The traditional "stag party" was an exuberant and explicit celebration of the social harnessing of male sexual potency, the domestication and regulation of male sexuality. The "hen party" was a rather weak analogue to the stag party: women (frequently on the last day of work before the wedding) would have a "night out with the girls" during which they would visit pubs or bars with the goal of getting the bride-to-be drunk (and, hopefully, disorderly). This ritual signified the end of the young woman's single state. The male-like behavior functioned as a typical rite of reversal by affirming the established order (Leonard 1980:152; cf. Westwood 1984:120-127). Young women today (who would vehemently reject the terms "hen party" and "girls") may, however, visit the increasingly popular clubs where male strippers perform and these nights out clearly signify both social approval and constraints on female sexuality.

While the Stag and Doe party may most clearly represent the self-initiation rites of youth, this topic goes beyond the parameters of this particular paper; for the purposes of this paper, these functions are important because they are clear indications that women's rituals have become much more inclusive, much more coupled. Men and women lived more separate lives in the past; their lives have become increasingly sexually integrated and their unions have become decidedly companionate (see also Morton 1992:364). The Jack and Jill or Stag and Doe showers reflect these changing meanings, expectations and relationships.

Stag and Doe parties became popular in the nineteen seventies. They were a variant of the bridal shower (and, perhaps, the engagement party); their purpose was to outfit the bride and groom through monetary donations. Again, the bonds of reciprocity were clear and strongly experienced.

Carolyn: Everyone went and you left money in a box. You didn't get as much as you did at a reception, but you were expected to go if you knew the couple, it got them started.

Two principles are clear: first, an implicit agreement that the money would be used for outfitting the new household (rather than a car or day-to-day expenses, for example); second, that the money would be recirculated to outfit future households. The fact that *money*, rather than gifts, was given simplified this circulation for, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:31) have ob-

served: "Money is the most social of all things because its inherent quality is that of a conventional symbol, an agreement among people for exchange." Money can be both anonymous and "cold" (Cheal 1987:165), the antithesis of "gift"; however, the principles of use and re-use overcame these defects of impersonality and lack of affect by incorporating the donations into the community cash nexus. Furthermore, Cheal (1987:158-160) contends that investing "anonymous, mass-produced objects" with personal significance has become increasingly difficult. Thus, the people who shared the outfitting money circulated through the Stag and Doe showers implicitly agreed to the principles of reciprocity. The 'parties to this agreement' signified the boundaries of Seaside community, they were the people who shared an organic tie with the betrothed couple. And, as young peoples' lives extended more and more beyond the physical boundaries of Seaside, the edges of community became less distinct and more permeable.

Carolyn: People you had known at school or at work came to the Stag and Doe and the "summer people" came, too, if they knew the bride or groom.

Ultimately (late nineteen-eighties), these rituals became merely parties and hundreds of young people would crowd into the hall for a "good time". Yet, today, the Stag and Doe remains popular as a pre-marriage ritual; it is becoming institutionalized as a liminal age-group ritual where the focus is on the economics of setting up a household. The members of the bridal party sell tickets (\$5.00 to \$10.00) and make the arrangements; the pay-bar recoups expenses. The *female* members of the bridal party, perhaps helped by other female friends or relatives, prepare the food. After expenses are paid (e.g. liquor license, liquid refreshments, hall rental), the money from donations and ticket sales is given to the couple.

The *couple* shower is increasingly popular, particularly when the hosts are friends of the groom or groom's family. Wine showers are popular and outfit the couple's wine "cellar" or bar (e.g. glasses, corkscrews, napkins). Drinking apparently is still considered a more masculine activity than cooking, thus more suitable for mixed showers.

The Church, too, is adapting to the new social arrangements.

Seaside, 1993

In the spring of 1993, several men and women trooped to Seaside United Church to fete John and Lisa on their forthcoming marriage. The women of the church had planned this first-time event for friends and relatives of the bride (an Anglican) and the groom (a member of Seaside United) to join together to contribute to the outfitting of the new household. The gifts included a table (group gift), bathroom towels and the "usual" household items characteristic of showers.

Both the men and the women enjoyed this first "mixed" shower. While the ritual was no longer totally a "woman's ritual", it was organized by the women of the church who also prepared the food, thereby keeping intact gender arrangements. Importantly, the sense of community commitment to giving young couples a "good start" was retained and new links of reciprocity were established. Kate, who attended this shower nearly fifty

years after her own marriage stated, "This is the coming thing. The men enjoyed it. I have a feeling there will be more of them." This outfitting ritual signified new understandings of the liminal period, reaffirming marriage as an honorable estate, endorsing the church as community.

After the gifts were opened and duly admired, the bride modelled her bow-bedecked pie plate hat — traditional symbol of initiation of maid to matron — and the men and women laughed together.

## Conclusions

This paper has undertaken a brief look at the changing rituals of liminality in Seaside which reflect changes in the broader society. While the form of the outfitting has altered, the function of these rituals for a good start remains unchanged. Moreover, these gatherings continue to establish bonds of reciprocity, thus perpetuating the tradition of presenting material symbols of imminent status change. Outfitting rituals affirm and convey the ideal of married domesticity, even in our changed and changing contemporary context. Indeed, the outfitting reinforces the ideal of coupling as marriage, even when the coupling precedes the marriage and even though marriages today are somewhat risky undertakings because of the current brittleness of marriage bonds. Bridal or wedding showers recognize and celebrate the couple's public declaration of their private commitment.

While both men and women increasingly participate in the modern variants of the bridal shower, they continue to be convened primarily by the community of women, whether these women represent the church, the elder generation or age-mates of the couple.

While the division of labor for showers reflects a gender ideology of the past, the showers themselves are potent socializing mechanisms for the future: women, however highly trained, are presented with household items that celebrate her domestic, not her professional, skills.<sup>23</sup>

The current trend to hold mixed showers documents changing gender ideologies and arrangements, not only men and women together (the more heterosexual nature of our lives), but men and women tacitly agreeing to share fully the marriage commitment. There are subtle differences in the outfitting, as well: cash is given, then converted into the items needed for the new household; this cash is recirculated, thereby reaffirming public support of matrimony. The couple is, to a certain extent, self-taught during the marginal period (not, of course, without the benefit of role models). The fact that many denominations now insist upon formal pre-marital (liminal) instruction before the actual marriage or rite of aggregation may be performed is perhaps meaningfully linked to these alterations in outfitting.

23 . A student recently noted that she had given a bride-to-be a cordless, portable telephone — for ease of movement while tending to the expected baby.

Finally, I must make it clear that my interpretation of the significance of the changes in these rites of outfitting has been imposed upon the material shared with me by my informants. Most often, as Charsley (1991:6) points out for the Scots, women perform these transitional rites "with no more intention than to do what is appropriate" and, as Kate so poignantly stated, to "really let them know you care".

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