

"A Fad That Would Make Grandma Blush"
Carroll County Times Article for 24 June 2001
by Jay A. Graybeal

Fifty years ago, most Marylanders were enjoying their summer blissfully unaware of the impending disaster at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii Territory, that would plunge the nation into war. During that last peaceful summer a new fad appeared among the social elite in Southern Maryland. It received nationwide attention in the July 27, 1941 issue of the American Weekly under the headline of "A Fad that Would Make Grandma Blush":

"What would Grandma say about the latest fad that has become the rage in the exclusive circles of southern Maryland Society?

Stout dowagers and sophisticated matrons are busily combing attics and cellars for those handsomely decorated antique chamber vessels of early Colonial days to use as punch bowls. Large cut-glass punch bowls are definitely passé. In their place, wearing an air that they have at last reached their proper niche and function, come these quaint, and delicately decorated, but antiquated Americana items which have been confined to a dust gathering role in attics, closets and cellars ever since modern plumbing relieved them of their important nocturnal function in the days of our forefathers.

These vessels, brought back from obscurity by a social prank have won a distinct place on the Southern Maryland entertaining schedule. House servants are busily engaged in polishing these ancient masterpieces until they gleam while the mistress of the household vies with her neighbor in formally presenting her find to Maryland's social set.

Large vases of lovely cut flowers, fresh from the garden estate of some doughty social arbiter, conceal the only ugliness the inventive genius of modern society damsels have been unable to erase—the sturdy handles. The vessels themselves are charming with scenes of the picturesque, pastoral days long gone by, done in delicate pastel tints and frequently outlined in fine gilt.

This vogue was started unexpectedly a few months ago. A popular hostess in Charles County, Maryland, hard pressed for an extra punch bowl, happened to remember an old crockery vessel up in her garret. It was brought out of its long retirement, scoured, polished and put into active service. The antique was placed on a table in one corner of the room, flowers arranged so as to conceal the handle protruding from one side and glasses were arranged in front. The vessel itself was filled with a famous Maryland punch. Then, quite as if nothing was amiss, the hostess nonchalantly went forth to receive her guests and for the moment forget her innovation.

'My dear, such lovely punch you are serving today.' Cooed one guest in her ear. Recalling the improvised punch bowl the hostess smiled inwardly.

'What a lovely party, and my, oh my, what a divine punch bowl,' said another guest, and then came the shocking question out of the blue, 'and where did you ever find such an exquisite bowl? It's one of the nicest I have ever seen.'

'Why Mrs. B_____, what a really clever idea you have,' interloped another guest with a wicked smile that forecast complete ruination of the party, and then sarcastically: 'I often wondered what to do with grand-mother's.'

'What do you mean?' came a chorus of voices from the younger and less sophisticated set. And then explanations were in order.

The jig was up. The discovery had been made by one of those catty socialites that infest every community. Mrs. B_____ had, she feared, been ruined socially. What a fool she had been to utilize, of all things, such a vessel for punch, she thought.

Then came the almost instant reaction: 'Why my dear, Mrs. B_____ has outwitted us all.' Instead of being angered over the incident, as the catty one had expected, quite the opposite happened. Mrs. B had unearthed a clever idea, it seemed, for it caught on everywhere.

And that's how it all started. Since then antique dealers have had trouble supplying these daintily decorated intimate and outmoded relics. Back in her day Grandma would blush at such a thing which couldn't and wouldn't have been done—but in 1941 anything can happen, as the social lights of the State of Maryland discovered."

Although the writer found the article amongst the papers of a Westminster resident, it is unclear whether Carroll Countians embraced the fad or simply found it amusing.



This unflattering illustration accompanied the July 27, 1941 "American Weekly" article about a fad to use chamber pots as punch bowls in Southern Maryland. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.