

No Tempests in the Tea Pots of Mrs. Susan Mills

By Lela Angier Lenfest

To live to be 85 is not remarkable in this age of longevity, when many reach the century mark. But to have attained the age of 85 and still to have retained one's enthusiasm for a hobby is unusual. Interest in collecting implies a certain vigor and freshness, a certain margin of vital force which we do not associate with the octogenarian.

This keen interest in collecting is one of the characteristics of Mrs. Susan Mills, founder and president emerita of Mills college. Though fond of gathering all kinds of curios, her main interest is in teapots, of which she is a connoisseur, having gathered 800, representing many great potteries in many different countries of the world.

It seems entirely fitting that a college president, who has spent her life in upholding high standards of education and culture for the young women of the Pacific coast, should have selected for her hobby teapots, which are



THE LARGEST AND SMALLEST OF THE COLLECTION



MRS. SUSAN L. MILLS

ing good cheer and fellowship to a large number. The dainty trifles of one's own time—made for two—look very shabby and exclusive beside these generous old fashioned ones. Individualism has found expression even in teapots.

"Here is a curiosity!" and the pride of the collection gleamed in Mrs. Mills' eyes as she drew from the cabinet a tall ornate silver goblet shaped dish with a fragrant base.

"This is a Chilean mate, or teapot, and this," holding up a long silver tube with a perforated ball at the end, "is a bombilla."

"The bombilla, except for the ball, was like a soft drink straw."

"You doubtless know," resumed Mrs. Mills, "the Chileans do not use our kind of tea."

"Oh, yes," I replied, glad to find something that I was familiar with. "They use the Paraguay tea or Brazilian holly. I have had the pleasure of drinking it in the native way, from a gourd; the gourd keeps and preserves the flavor. I was once invited to an afternoon tea where mate was served in pretty round and pear shaped gourds. The tea, which is the finely powdered leaves of the holly, is put in the bottom of the gourd, covered with sugar and hot (not boiling) water poured over it, and one sucks it up immediately through the bombilla. If the tea is allowed to stand it becomes acrid and black. It has a very curious flavor, reminding one a little of mild licorice and still more of the Chinese licthil nut. I do not care for it, but they say one grows to like

representative of the art and culture of the people who use them. This may seem a trifle extravagant, but a little observation and consideration will show that a people's progress in social life and in the arts may be quite correctly gauged by the form, style and workmanship of its teapots.

Tea drinking ever since the days of the garrulous Pepps, who speaks of it as a new custom, down to the modern "pink tea," has been a sacred rite of hospitality, to be celebrated in one's best clothes, and with one's finest household silver and china. So the teapot in each age and country reflects its social and artistic culture. Among rude and unlettered people the teapot is almost entirely unknown, or if they have it, it is in such a crude and primitive form as to show a vague understanding of its use.

It is a privilege to see Mrs. Mills with her collection of teapots and to hear her talk of them. Each one, no matter how commonplace to the casual observer, has a meaning and significance to her. One is the gift of a pupil, another of a relation in a foreign country, and still another of a distinguished friend. And so this human interest gives value to every one of the 800, many of which have great historical interest.

"Most of them have been given to me by 'my girls,'" and there is a note of pride in her voice as she says "my girls." Without children of her own she has taken to her heart the hundreds of girls who have made "Mills" their home, and has been a mother to them all.

"The ones I like best?" and she opened the cabinet where the teapots are displayed, of all sizes, shapes, colors and materials—wood, stone, tin, copper, pewter, brass, ivory, earthenware, onyx, china, cocoonut and silver. "Why I like these old fashioned blue and white—the work of the Stafford-



BLUE AND WHITE STAFFORDSHIRE

"This old pewter one is a favorite of mine," and she drew forth a stodgy looking pewter pot familiar to New Englanders of half a century ago. Like all "down east" things, it was made to wear. To one who knows Mrs. Mills' hospitable spirit it is easy to understand why she likes those good, old fashioned, capacious teapots, bespeak-

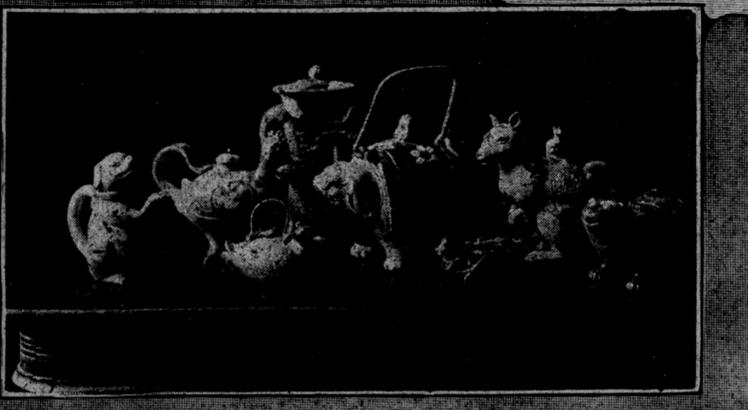
ing the flavor, and it has a very exhilarating effect."

"That is very interesting," smiled Mrs. Mills. "The Chileans do not use that variety of tea. The Brazilian holly is flex Paraguayensis, a shrub. In Chile they gather the leaves of a native plant—Froalea glandulosa, from which they make an infusion in the same

WEDGEWOOD EARL OF DUDONALD'S TEAPOT IN BACKGROUND



CREVED ONYX TEAPOT EQUIMAUK TEAPOT CARVED FROM WALRUS TOOTH



SOME QUEER JAPANESE CONCEITS

"When the French came to Chile they objected to drinking after all sorts of people, so the individual mate cup was introduced. This is one of the modern cups."

Again the note of individualism.

"Here are some fine old English teapots," and Mrs. Mills drew out two handsome specimens of Wedgwood. "These are genuine and good in color. So many of them are off color. It is rather difficult to find them good in both design and tint. This is a strange one. You would hardly take it for Wedgwood, but it has the mark," and she pointed to an awkward brown dish looking more like a casserole than a teapot. It looked like a country cousin beside the dainty blue ones. "It was invented by the earl of Dudonald and is supposed to preserve the flavor of the tea."

The earl of Dudonald's teapot was very unconvincing, even though it did have such a noble sponsor. The old fashioned Rebecca seemed easier to handle than that clumsy dish. "See the work on this," and the en-

thusiastic collector held up a curiosity in Pohnpeian onyx, beautifully mottled and exquisitely carved. Around the top was a beautiful hand carved wreath. Some artistic Italian had wrought that delicate tracery with painstaking care. Near it was a small toy ivory teapot, carved from a walrus' tooth by an industrious Eskimo, bent on tempting money from the well filled pocket of the tourist. The nearest approach to tea, which the Eskimo possesses is whale oil, so it is not much wonder his teapots look like cream pitchers.

"Here are some unique specimens from Damascus," and Mrs. Mills indicated a group of hammered brass, curiosities with acythe shaped spouts. One was elaborately ornamented with jewels.

One could easily picture them on a tabouret in some harem, surrounded by dark oriental beauties comparing jealous notes relative to their lord and master. Equally curious were Egyptian teapots made from the "red clay of Assouan" and ornamented with antique palm leaf and lotus bud designs.

SILVER CHILEAN MATE AND BOMBILLA

"Can't you imagine some old colored mammy crouching over this?" asked Mrs. Mills, as she drew out a brown lacquered southern teapot. The red roses which bedewed its surface were faded with much use. Tea for mass and his guests must have been brewed many times. Here was plainly one case where the teapot failed to express the artistic and cultivated tastes of its possessor.

Beside the tall brown teapot was placed a tiny silver toy one, complete in every detail even to a removable cover.

"A birthday present from my grand-niece," smiled Mrs. Mills.

They certainly were an ill assorted pair, the largest and the smallest of the whole collection.

"Here are many ludicrous ones," and Mrs. Mills hurried to another case devoted entirely to quaint conceits largely Japanese. Every beast of the field, fowl and creeping thing has been cast into teapot form by those clever and inventive people. It was better than going to a circus. The animals were all so well bred and never moved out of their places.

A startled cock, with body bearing a classic design in red and blue, hobbled with a squat elephant covered with a gayly flowered and fringed blanket. A terrible blue dragon with gaping jaws seemed to be about to devour the whole peaceful community. Undisturbed by this fierce creature, a simple looking kangaroo, with its gray body bedewen with pink chrysanthemums, ambled behind the elephant. More up to date than the time honored geography species, it carried its young on its back instead of in the familiar pouch. Guarding this ill assorted company were a fierce looking bull pup and a supercilious pug. These whimsical creations showed the sense of humor possessed by the imaginative Nipponese.

Besides these quaint animals were the greatest variety of geometrical shapes—round, cylindrical, oblong, triangular, square—with ingenious combinations. Some of the brass teapots were the most distinctive and artistic of the entire collection. These latter were more truly Japanese. The whimsical creations were what they imagined would appeal to the Americana. Yet, in catering to this love of the bizarre they have done it in such a manner as to remove them from the commonplace.

"They are a great pleasure to me," said Mrs. Mills, as she carefully closed the glass cabinet containing her treasures. "They are interesting in themselves, and they bring to mind many dear friends in all parts of the world."

Though Mrs. Mills will celebrate her eighty-sixth birthday in November, she is still ambitious to increase her collection. She has set 1,000 as the goal and is constantly making new acquisitions.