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Hope chest for today's bride

BY SANDRA TOLBERT
SPECIAL WRITER

Baffled, befuddled and bewildered, today's bride must decide if she is traditional, contemporary or simply eclectic. Does she like old-fashioned antiques, sparkling crystal and ornate decor or is she more comfortable with the casual, straight lines of the contemporary mode?

Walking into a bridal registry can be an overwhelming venture for those preparing to walk down the aisle of marriage.

Birmingham newlywed Amy Young found the experience confusing and the concept strange. "I totally needed my mom's guidance. At first, I was confused. My mom explained that I should make it special and than pass it down to my children. Grandma and grandpa bought me all the fine china because they wanted to be remembered after they are gone and want the gift passed down to their grandchildren," says Young.

She quickly learned some survival techniques. "Pick out things you love, stay focused and think about the future. The salesperson at Hudson's asked my style and got a feel for what I needed. She asked a lot of questions," she says.

Young's desire to make and preserve memories for the next generation is akin to the concept behind the hope chest, a term now foreign to most modern brides.

Hope chests (also called wedding, or dowry, chests) migrated to America with the European immigrants. These elaborate and decorated chests were part of a bride-to-be's dowry, which is the sum of money and items given to the prospective bridegroom. The dowry concept, hundreds of years old, is riddled with agreements, purchases, exchanges and ideas that a bride was property of her father and then future husband.

The hope chest, usually designed and built by the father, was a place to store and preserve womanly heirlooms, embroidered linens and household items of sentimental meaning, and went with the bride along with the dowry into her marriage.

These trunks, handcrafted with intricate painted designs often included wedding dates and the bride's initials, and eventually were used as decorative furniture. In time, the trunk version evolved into a chest of drawers with a more utilitarian value.

The hope chest is a reminder of the way life was before the automobile, airplane and computer. Capturing a young girl's dreams and preserving them in its cedar lined repository, the chest continued on in the first half of this century as a traditional symbol of matrimonial hope.

In 1929 Lane Co., a U.S. furniture manufacturer, began to market the chest to graduating women using



Lasting treasures: Though the term "hope chest" is passé, family heirlooms such as Waterford crystal continue to be passed from generation to generation. Shown here are Toasting Flutes, \$115 a pair, and a cake plate, \$129. Available at Greenstones in Birmingham.

miniature versions, and quickly became popular as the maker of hope chests in this country.

Jacobson's senior vice-president of fashion and merchandising strategy Beverly Rice says, "Today's brides don't store away things. There is a change in lifestyles."

As the concept of the bridal registry took hold in this country and the need for a storage chest disappeared, the hope chest has become an obscure concept for the American bride-to-be, although a Lane hope chest is still available to purchase for that traditional bride.

Rice added, "Brides are more casual, getting married later in life and already have accumulated what they need." The bridal registry emerged after the close of the World War II according to Rice, who has been in retailing for 44 years.

Birmingham Jacobson's bridal registry sales associates Olga Wolgat and Elizabeth Moore agree that the modern bride does not use the hope chest. "Most are career women. They want things that don't need a lot of care," says Wolgat.

Today they see brides and grooms often registering together and choosing from a variety of options besides the tradition crystal stemware, flatware and fine china. Other choices include furniture, sporting goods, electronic equipment, travel, lawn and gardening items and even gifts of money deposited into an account towards a mortgage.

The bridal registry is a bride's portfolio: Indexed, organized, and complete with all the things a bride-to-be never thinks about. It is their record-keeping device tracking the comings and goings of wedding and shower gifts, duplicates, extras and future wishes. It is the new repository of memories and hopes: Computerized, digitized, organized and ready to prepare newlyweds for the new millennium.