



CRETE M. SHIRLEY

(1904 - 1999)

CHARTER MEMBER

Photo taken in mid-1920s.

Crete, or Mrs. Shirley as many referred to her, was born in 1904 in a small town in Arkansas and was the oldest of six girls. She learned to cook and sew, as she referred "from the time she could walk." I recall her remark once that her first thimble was a gift from her mother, a silver thimble, at the age of sixteen. She dearly treasured it. She married the day she turned eighteen, to Byron Shirley, a third-generation Arkansan whose great grandfather was appointed the first County Treasurer by the Governor while beginning to settle NW Arkansas. Crete and Byron both devoted their lives to working hard and caring for their children, seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Crete passed away in 1999, not seeing her first great-great-grandchild, but she would tell you her life was very full and long.

During my childhood years, as far back as I can recall, a wooden mahogany display case hung over the marble fireplace in "the Divan" or sitting room. The case was made by her son, who was a wood turner. It held some of her beautiful collection. I spent many summer vacations at her house, and most evenings we were working on our needlework in that sitting room. Her pelican scissors and turtle pincushion could be found next to her daily devotion book. There isn't a Christmas that goes by without my recalling the years we spent putting up the fresh Christmas tree at the Methodist Church. This tree was decorated with so many of our handmade ornaments. Crete was a cook, seamstress, a quiet philanthropist and successful local business woman, starting her flower shop business in Paris, Arkansas at a not-so-young age of fifty-five. Thirty years later she retired, and as many do, she did more during her retirement years, with more time to travel, give to others and to better herself.



American, 14K gold thimble on a chain. Crete wore this thimble often when she presented programs at Garden Club: when she attended TCI conventions and even when she went out to lunch.

She loved to crochet or sew railroad quilts for men and women who lived at the local nursing home. She would say, "That could just as easily be me." When the state of Arkansas offered her the opportunity to earn her Master Gardener certification, at the age of eighty-four, she did not hesitate and became the first to be certified in her county. She gave her time to her Methodist Church, annual fairs and local 4H club (known as the Head, Hearts and Head Club when she joined) – she was known for her breakfast biscuits and for presenting garden programs at the local ladies club, which included topics on collecting thimbles. She even enrolled in classes at the state university to further develop her writing skills. Family and sewing were never far from reach. When my own daughter was born, I will never forget the little diaper shirt she handed me seemingly from nowhere -- the soft, white cotton material had little green Lady Bugs on it. I realized she had not asked me what size to make. When I mentioned this, she replied, "Oh, I just guessed," with a big grin on her face. As my mother explained, being the oldest of six daughters and not having access to patterns during the depression, she could just look at anyone and make a pattern to fit. I still have the little diaper shirt. All the above events -- telephone calls, cooking for fairs, planning travels, and her sewing projects were under the watch of her thimble collection.

When Crete passed away, it left a hole in our hearts. It wasn't until my mother entrusted me with her thimble collection a few years later that I was able to examine them individually and in detail. (We were told as children "don't touch" and as an adult, I still followed that rule!) It was like opening a time capsule. Not just thimbles, but there were issues of **Thimbletter** and almost all the **TCI Bulletins** dating back to the first issue. There were also many handwritten letters between her and other collectors dating back to the mid-70s.

Some thimbles were in boxes, like her Statue of Liberty thimble with authentication certificate from Ellis Island and her gold thimble that she would often wear when going out. (She was not much of a jewelry person, so anything that she wore was very precious to her.) Her thimble collection seemed to have a little bit of everything, including ceramic or glass souvenirs from her or a friend's journey to a far off place. Many were marked with a small sticker on the inside so that she knew who had given it to her. Others had been bought through mail order. My mother later told me she stood in line at the local department store in the 1980s to buy a Waterford thimble to add to her mother's collection.



Brass. "Centennial Apr'30 1889."

A friend gave her a brass George Washington Centennial commemorative thimble "Centennial Apr' 30 1889." One particular thimble she found, inspired her to write a short article for the **Thimbletter** Newsletter March/April 1982. She was sharing the way she transported thimbles for her thimble programs which she gave to local groups.

She also mentioned that the previous summer she had found a Webster Company Salem Witch thimble at a Tennessee flea market for \$15. Can you imagine that, a Salem Witch at that price!



American, Webster Co. Sterling silver Salem Witch.

During her lifetime, she collected leaded glass, hand-painted ceramic, American patriotic and elegant gold thimbles. There were approximately 300 antique thimbles, and just as many that could be considered modern. She even had a few needlework tools made of ivory, mother-of-pearl, and mixed metals. My personal favorites were two I did not anticipate that I would cherish -- both are aluminum premiums: American Red Cross and Angelus Marshmallow Co., a Cracker Jack Co. Both companies were owned by Rueckheim Brothers & Eckstein Co. from 1872 to 1922. The American Red Cross motto "Neutrality, Humanity" was in use prior to the 1904-1905 American Charter until 1920. None of her collection could be considered "rare" but for her, each piece represented beauty in life, special friends and unique experiences along the way. Lastly, standing guard was her Florenza turtle nodder pincushion with "jeweled" eyes, her trusted companion over the decades.

Written by her granddaughter, Pamela Owen, January 8, 2012.



Small metal turtle pincushion with a nodding head. Pincushion has the word "Florenza" on the underside.

This was one of my grandmother's favorite pieces, displayed with her thimble collection.



Florenza strawberry box. Red enamel over a gilded surface.

It too is marked "Forenza." This company was in business from 1940 to 1981. This piece dates 1955 to 1981, based on the signature (with copyright mark). Some people refer to this as a pill box, while others have described it as a perfume keeper.



Bone ribbon threader, bone crochet hook and a lovely Mother of Pearl awl or punch.



Ivory needle box, large and small Mother of Pearl needle cases with gold fittings.



Sterling Silver thimble, circa 1890s made by Stern Bros.



**Mahogany Display case made by her son.
This case holds ninety-six thimbles, including some
of her special gold thimbles. The needlework tools
are on the shelf below.**



**Two Aluminum Premium Advertising thimbles.
Left, American Red Cross.
Right, Angelus Marshmallow Co., The Cracker
Jack Co.**

**American, 10 K gold thimble.
Beautiful leaves on a stippled ground.**





Statue of Liberty thimble and certificate.

The card reads: "This Statue of Liberty Commemorative Thimble is crafted with iron and copper removed from the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island during restoration. These materials have been made available by the Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. and the National Parks Service. Authenticity of materials in this product is validated and certified using a chemical identification process. Signed: Lee A. Iacocca, Chairman, Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation.