



## **CHARTER MEMBER**

### **SYLVIA SILVERMAN**

Sylvia Silverman wouldn't think twice about hopping on a plane to rendezvous with her hubby in India! Nor would husband Harry lose time surprising his wife with a sudden appearance at Vienna's InterContinental Hotel. "We're a travelling family," she cheerfully proclaimed. "And you never know what'll happen next at our house".

Sylvia is the happy mother of three children, "My two daughters have artistic talent. The oldest, a nurse, draws beautifully. The second sews original boutiques. My son? He's taken over his dad's plumbing concern." Obviously proud of her family, Sylvia also loves to sew whenever time allows. She's a good judge of children's creative abilities: twenty-five years of teaching Home Economics, sewing and millinery, arts and music to children qualifies her.

She undoubtedly inherited her creative energies from her mother, who, aside from mending clothes for the whole family, embroidered... "yards and yards of scalloped and eyelet edging for a cup and saucer display shelf." Until Sylvia entered college, her mother made all of her clothes. "She always added that personal touch to garments, making each one look just a little bit different," she fondly recalls.

As far back as she can remember Sylvia always had a passion – "an intense curiosity and devotion" – for all types of creative activities. "Somewhere in the background of every sewing-and-thimble-collector", declares Sylvia, "... there must be a love for sewing, an interest in the arts, and a curiosity about the past." Her own curiosities are about the Victorian and Edwardian Eras.

Sylvia, herself one of three children, was born and raised in New York City. She attended Hunter College, where her interests were varied. She graduated from Hunter College with a Degree, and two teaching licenses. During the late '30's and early 40's there were gloomy days with little prospect of obtaining a teaching position. Finally she landed a job as Head Kindergarten Teacher at a very exclusive private school in New York. For two years, a chauffeured Rolls-Royce delivered Sylvia to and from her job. What luxury!

Her infatuation with fashion of the Victorian Era deepened. She enjoyed the details and romanticism of elaborate clothing. She attended every costume party in full Victorian attire. Being a constant traveler to Europe (at least three or four times yearly), she would purchase authentic French prints, on Paris' Left Bank, and turn these into three-dimensional caricatures of days gone by. She would search for lace and beaded finery and attach these hand-made items to the prints. Her first attempts lacked some finesse, but it was not long before Sylvia's animated ladies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were being purchased as groupings by very exclusive decorating establishments. Sylvia also made costumes and millinery for school plays, student fashion shows and other such activities. She also gained popularity by lecturing to groups of millinery teachers and demonstrating some of her student's work.

She recalls having to constantly impress upon her students the importance of wearing a thimble while working ... but it was difficult. "I tried to motivate them by talking about the history and development of thimbles; I told them that in early days, it was worn on the thumb (a thumbell). Later the thumble was worn on

the third finger of the working hand and became known as a thimble. The students would chant, "Whoever wears a thumbell is a dumbbell."

In retrospect, Sylvia, who retired from teaching in January 1977, wishes she had started her thimble collection "way back when." But somehow, she was more interested in sewing aids. Even as recently as 1965, she regretfully admits, when she took Sabbatical leave to travel the world for three months (including Eastern Europe); she still hadn't been a serious collector of thimbles, although while in Russia, she did purchase an enameled thimble with chain and ring. Never had she realized how prominent a place this would have among her collection of sewing items.

She purchased, collected and studied about antique jewelry of Victorian and Edwardian days. Her collection became so large, she began weeding out and selling some of her things. What had originally started as a lark -- a hobby -- was now turning into an almost full-time experience. From dabbling, Sylvia has gone to full-fledged Antique dealing in jewelry and silver items she collects on her travels. She displays her collection at a few important shows a year, where she also has the opportunity to snoop around and hand pick thimbles and sewing aids to add to her collection. When she would return from her trips to antiques fairs, flea markets, garage sales etc., her family recites in unison "Here comes Thumbelina, Strike up the band! What goodies did you find?"

Admittedly, Sylvia is a relative newcomer to serious thimble collecting. She began as recently as four or five years ago, yet has already accumulated 600 thimbles, which take their place alongside her 200 pin-cushions, 150 dresser doll boxes, silver chatelaines and antique Victorian silver jewelry.

Her thimbles consist of all types of wood, metal, brass, silver, gold, leather, ivory, and scrimshaw, jeweled, plain and elaborate. Many are old and still in excellent condition; a few are slightly misshapen -- a needle hole here and there. Sylvia does not mind the condition of her thimbles. She has an attachment to each and every one of them.

Since the Toledo Convention, Sylvia's search for thimbles has been very successful. And, she has become more selective about her choices. The Convention, she claims, gave her enormous insight into how many people are "hooked on thimbles." "Nothing else," declares Sylvia "brings such diverse groups of people together on a mutually shared basis." She has established some wonderful pen-pal friendships because of this hobby. Sylvia shared an amusing anecdote about her trip to Toledo from Florida. "Thimble Convention" she said when asked why she was going to Toledo. The young lady repeated "Cymbals?" Sylvia replied, "No thimbles ... thimbles". She overheard an eavesdropper mutter, "How corny!"



Sylvia enjoys all of her thimbles, but some hold extra-special meanings for her. She has just added two thimbles which were sent to her by the daughter of a late Chicago Industrialist, with whom Harry and Sylvia were associated for some 38 years.

One of these thimbles is heavily enameled around the band, and the other is designed with scrolls. She adores her 24K gold thimble, made in India, with Repoussé design, a Star Ruby imbedded in the cap, surrounded by seed pearls. This was a gift commissioned expressly for her by one of Harry's customers in India.

**A few of Sylvia's thimbles in display cases.**

Another favorite is her scrimshaw thimble, with matching egg-shaped cup stand. It is completely covered with American stars, and dated '1883'. Although Sylvia feels she paid too much for it, she considers it an unusual, unique addition. A recent purchase is a Coquilla nut thimble holder and matching thimble holder -- both in mint condition. There is also a lovely pink celluloid thimble, with a farm-yard scene hand painted around the band. An unusual purchase was one of simple brass with a magnifying glass imbedded in the cap. All of are familiar with the thimble, "For a good little girl." Sylvia has just purchased the original container!

Sylvia's vast collection of sewing-related items includes those made of beads, carved ivory, leather, wood, papier-mâché, silver, as well as pinchbeck needlecases, carved and enameled thread and bodkin holders. George Baxter needle prints, tatting shuttles, lace bobbins with sentimental sayings and unusual spangles. She has also added Victorian brass spool holders, sewing birds, figural pin cushions and tape measures to her collection.

(Text and excerpts taken from the *Collector Circle Gazette*, Summer 1977)