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Wedding of the Classes at Mississippi State College for Women

Elane Westfaul

Sexuality in American History

Dr. Kempker

November 30, 2017

The Junior-Freshman Wedding was an annual event held on the campus of the Mississippi State College for Women (MSCW, now Mississippi University for Women [MUW]) through the first half of the twentieth century. The event began as a burlesque in 1909 but was remodeled into a more serious ritual as Emma Ody Pohl took charge of it in 1920.¹ The event was a lavish affair, and Pohl spared no expense in preparation for its grandeur. The wedding incorporated cross-dressing and the romantic language and gestures of any “real” wedding to solidify the bonds of sisterhood, displaying what appears to be a natural intimacy present among MSCW students that was accepted and encouraged by faculty in the early twentieth century. Opposite-sex portrayals were likely done in a spirit of playfulness rather than in conscious defiance of gender roles. However, the wedding illuminates the ease of which participants’ prescribed gender roles were transcended and the seemingly accepting position of the college to allow them to do so (especially within such an important event that attracted large numbers of alumni and spectators). What is clear about cross-dressing at MSCW is that it occurred frequently in both performance events and spontaneously around campus and was supported by the administration because it fostered school spirit and homosocial bonding. It does not provide prima facie evidence of lesbianism or homosexual activity on campus, though it does provide evidence of the acceptance of some fluidity surrounding gender roles and relations.

Pohl’s elaborate wedding featured a “bride” from the freshman class and a “groom” from the junior class. The “bride” and her “maids” dressed in traditional wedding attire that evolved with the styles of the decades. Whether she wore a hat, flower crown, or veil, the “bride” always wore a white dress and exuded femininity. In contrast, her “groom” was a staunch portrait of masculinity; whether clad in white breeches or a black suit, “he” was a convincing “man” in both

¹ M.D. Sanders, *The Pohl of Memories* (Columbus: Mississippi State College for Women, 1967), 20.

dress and comportment. The selection of the groom and bride appear to have been left to the students. Helen Campbell, class of 1927, wrote in correspondence with Mrs. J.D. Johnston: “The Juniors elected the prettiest freshman girls and the tall, handsome juniors with *good* legs because they always wore knee-breeches.”²

Photographic archival evidence reveals that students strived for believable opposite-sex impersonations, and Pohl and her students worked tirelessly to replicate them. Although the wedding was produced in a spirit of play, male imitation through cross-dress was no parodic performance. Sarah Lynne Jünke³ writes extensively of the relevance of these “passing” expressions of gender- bending on women’s campuses and supplies a definition for the term: “[g]ender performances that are considered ‘passing’ are those that are passively seen as ‘nothing... out of the ordinary,’ or ‘(mis)read as real.’”⁴ In addition to traditionally masculine dress donned by the “men” in the ceremony, photographs supplied by Jünke convey an even deeper sense of how seriously “passing” was taken by the individuals involved in her study of (what was formerly known as) Florida State College for Women. The “men” appear solemn and stare at the camera in a manner near resembling intimidation; in many photos, with hands in pockets and shoulders shrugged, they emanate a lax display of power so often assumed by “real” men. However, the “women” are often smiling and even physically supported by the “men” with

² Helen Campbell to Mrs. J.D. Johnston, General Subject Correspondence, Mississippi University for Women Archives, Mississippi University for Women.

³ Sarah Lynne Jünke, “Take Another Look At ‘Em: Passing Performances of Gender in the Junior-Freshman Weddings of Florida State College for Women, 1909-1925” (master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 2011).

⁴ Butler, “Performative Acts”; Rosalind C. Morris, “All Made Up: Performative Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 573; McKenzie, “Genre Trouble.”

arms interlocked in a familiar scene. Thus, cross-dressing reinforced traditional interpretations of the gender binary but allowed for women to re-create and re-imagine it.

Although students were allowed (and even encouraged) to participate in the Junior-Freshman wedding, questions may still be posed surrounding the privacy of the event. On November, 27, 1938, the *Commercial Appeal* writes⁵: “[n]ever before in the 23-year history of the event has the ‘wedding’ ceremony been photographed, and special permission was granted The *Commercial Appeal* to take the photographs above which depict the enactment of the union.” Campus newspapers publicized the event, but little evidence reveals publicity outside of the university. It is unknown whether this was due to a want of preserving the sanctity of the ceremony or for fear of negative parental and communal reactions.

Florida State College for Women, Jünke’s object of study, also held an annual all-female wedding. Jünke writes that cross-dress was permitted within campus boundaries; women often dressed as men for dances and embodied men in clubs⁶. However, it should also be noted that the women were not allowed to wear slacks onstage when portraying a male in a play for fear that audience members outside of the university would see them⁷. MSCW does not appear to have followed the same trend. On the contrary, photos reveal evidence that cross-dressing was permitted in staged theatrical productions and happened throughout the year, as the annual yearbook pictures attest.

Pictured below is a photograph from the university collection that was simply labeled “two dancers”:⁸

⁵ “Wedding of the Classes,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), Nov. 27, 1938.

⁶ Jünke, 36-37.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Two dancers*, Mississippi Public Digital Library.

Figure 1:



In this photograph, the “man” is passing; she wears slacks, has pinned her hair back, and wears flat shoes. Though perhaps a bit more flamboyant than Junior-Freshman wedding photographs, nothing about this photograph suggests that the cross-dressing woman is attempting to mock men for comedic effect. In contrast, the “woman” wears a skirt and high heels. This does not seem to be an isolated event. Photographic evidence reveals passing cross-dressing to be a recurring theme throughout the history of the college. Unlike in Florida, cross-dressing was not confined to a single annual event, but seemed to happen spontaneously and in performance events. Cross-dressing appears to have been prominent at MSCW until at least the 1940’s. However, pants-wearing appears to have been ascribed to men and women embodying men, reinforcing the gender binary.

A photograph from the year 1910 reveals students on the tennis team in ankle-length skirts as they played.⁹

⁹ *1910 Tennis Team, I. I. & C.*, Mississippi Digital Library.

Figure 2:



Full-length skirts were traditional and commonplace for the 1910 woman; the tucked shirts and full skirts were part of their uniform¹⁰. One can imagine that a full-length skirt (complete with a petticoat, as the skirts do appear to take this shape) might hinder the students' ranges of motion while playing sports; nevertheless, they wear skirts, suggesting that the college understood pants to be reserved for men (or the women who portrayed them). Other photographs reveal the students in skirts during an agriculture class, plows and hoes in hand. Full-length skirts were customary for the 1910 female sports player; the college (and students) likely followed suit. Regardless, it is apparent that pants were almost exclusively worn by men.

It appears that pants were only donned in this era when adopting a male persona, with one major exception: The Joan of Arc Pageant. Pohl had a great love of theatre, dance, and the arts (in addition to her talents in formal physical education) and staged many productions in her

¹⁰ Bridget Smith Pieschel and Stephen Robert Pieschel, *Loyal Daughters: One Hundred Years at Mississippi University for Women* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984).

time at MSCW¹¹. In 1912, the Joan of Arc pageant reportedly attracted 2,000 visitors (including former governor of Mississippi, Earl Brewer)¹². The original production featured Mary Bell Smith as the title character (pictured below)¹³:

Figure 3:



Ms. Smith is armored, solemn, and wears pants. Ms. Smith, however, does not portray a man: she portrays a female war hero who was known largely for her insistence on cross-dressing. Whether or not this aspect of Joan's story was incorporated into the production is unknown; however, it is clearly exhibited above, even if not a major theme of the pageant. Students do not wear pants when playing sports but were evidently permitted to do so in dramatic productions.

Numerous photographs are found throughout the *MEH Lady* of passing cross-dressers outside of staged events. In addition to the Junior-Freshman wedding, it appears that all-female

¹¹ Sanders, 20.

¹² Sanders, 20.

¹³ *Joan of Arc*, Mississippi Digital Public Library.

dances were common. Pictured below is a photograph from the 1922 *MEH Lady*¹⁴. Upon first glance, it may appear as a typical dance. Boys and girls embrace, arms locked, laughing and dancing under decorations of hearts and streamers. However, upon closer inspection, it is revealed that these young lads are actually female students.

Figure 4:



Figure 5:



Scrawled in blue and barely legible from nearly one hundred years of wear are the words, “But, oh! To be in Greenwood with you!”¹⁵ signed with the name “Edith Lynne.” The inscription from 1922 (Figure 4) shows the use of romantic language between women; by 1950 (Figure 5), no such evidence exists.¹⁶ The women in Figure 4 are holding each other closely in full embrace. The inscription suggests that these women desired physical closeness from each other. Whether or not this desired intimacy was sexual in nature is unknown, but one might argue that significance is found in the appearance of the gender relations themselves. They are allowed a physical closeness and intimacy that may or may not have been associated with sexuality to

¹⁴ 1922 *MEH Lady*. Columbus: Mississippi State College for Women. Published annually.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 1950 *MEH Lady*. Columbus: Mississippi State College for Women. Published annually.

begin with, which speaks volumes on its own accord. An understanding that these women are allowed to hold and touch one another without being associated with lesbianism attests to a rigidity in gender relations that was not present on the 1922 MSCW campus. If the physical intimacy pictured in Figure 4 was associated with lesbianism, it was apparently of little concern to the college. The fact that many of these women are dressed as men has the power to reinforce a traditional perception of gender roles, as it reinforces the gender binary. However, it also has the power to subvert it, as gender bending for these women is apparently inconsequential.

Figure 5, found in the 1950 *MEH Lady*, reveals an absence of gender fluidity so evident in the 1922 photograph. Gone is the blatant affection shared between the female students present in 1922, replaced by dapper young co-eds in crew cuts and tuxedos. These women are poised, posed, and physically supported by their male dates. Society typically deems physical embrace between two women as less problematic than physical embrace between two men. Ergo, female students likely continued to hug and embrace each other on campus in this era; however, it is publicized less frequently in annual yearbooks, falling in line with the conservative sociopolitical shift of the time. Men were not present at dances in 1922 or spotted on campus in affectionate embrace with MSCW students because MSCW restricted romantic relationships between its female students and male suitors from other colleges in the 1920's. According to Sarah Neilson's unpublished history of MSCW, "dances were not permitted (by order of the board of trustees) and there was a regulation against M.S.C.W. students going directly from the campus to attend a dance held elsewhere."¹⁷ Such restrictions were abolished by the 1950's, elucidating a shift in cultural attitudes that accompanied the priority of the youthful nuclear family and the "baby boom."

¹⁷ Sarah Neilson, "The History of Mississippi State College for Women" (Columbus, 1952), 125.

Photographs from the wedding itself also provide evidence for the shift. By 1942, the junior groom and groomsmen's ensemble had been confined to a white uniform due to wartime restrictions. With this change in uniform also comes a change in the previously stark distinction between "man" and "woman" in the ceremony, as the only true and obvious contrast between the white uniforms are breeches and hats versus skirts and a veil. Notwithstanding changes in dress due to circumstances beyond their control, the demeanor of the "men" also appears to change. They are no longer reserved and solemn but are smiling as giddily as their "lady" counterparts. A shift appears to emerge in this era, as these women seem to strive less for "passing" and more for "pretty."

The Junior-Freshman Wedding, Joan of Arc pageant, and the all-female dance are but a few occurrences of cross-dressing found throughout the school's annual yearbooks. Photographic evidence of off-stage cross-dressing and female intimacy are found in abundance throughout the era's annual yearbooks. Figure 6 is one of many examples. Figure 6 was featured on a page of the 1922 *MEH Lady* amongst many other depictions of female students locked in similar embraces. The woman to the left might be cross-dressing for a staged production, as she seems to be dressed as a male cowboy or Westerner; however, there is no way to know for sure. The woman to the right does not appear to be in costume at all. Regardless of whether or not this student is dressed in this manner for a production or event, the couple is not on stage in this photograph. Moreover, the fact that these two women are holding hands is apparently not even of note. The yearbook editor provides no caption to the reader, which might suggest that this relationship needs no explanation.

Figure 6:¹⁸

Jünke provides some insight into possible explanations for the affection so conspicuously present in these photos, explaining that deep emotional connections between women were largely considered acceptable in the late-nineteenth century¹⁹. She states, “married women wrote loving letters to other women, had them spend the night in their beds, and pined for them, and this was all considered evidence of ‘one of women’s noblest characteristics’ – her capacity for love.”²⁰ Jünke describes these relationships as perhaps platonic or sexual depending on the individual but that their relevancy is largely related to the role these relationships play in the American family, as well as in society as a whole.²¹ As the century drew to a close, female intimate relationships (entangled in a growing number of female college students) fell subject to disapproval and criticism as they were seen as a rejection of the traditional woman’s duties (marriage and motherhood).²²

¹⁸ 1922 *MEH Lady*, Columbus: Mississippi State College for Women. Published annually.

¹⁹ Jünke, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

Ironically, Southern women's colleges were able to maintain these intimate female relationships even in a notably socially conservative environment.²³ Why were these relationships deemed socially acceptable here? The answer is one ever familiar to MUW and MSCW: the bonds of sisterhood.²⁴ In the 1920's, social clubs began to develop at MSCW. Although not noted or obvious cross-dressers, The Black List social club (through dress and presence) emanates a sense of strength and power previously associated with masculinity. These women wear overalls and eye-patches. Many sit in a very "un-lady-like" manner atop a horse and buggy. They are proud of this, and they want to be known by it. Gone is the portrait of the "Gibson girl." This club demonstrates the strength and power that were found and realized in the intimate relationships found among women at an all-female college.

Figure 7:



Intimate bonds were encouraged by faculty and the college as a whole and demonstrated in events such as the Junior-Freshman wedding. Pohl provided an engagement ring, invitations, and a grand party that resembled any "real" wedding one might have attended in the era. Pohl was

²³ Ibid, 33.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ 1930 *MEH Lady*, Columbus: Mississippi State College for Women. Published annually.

revered on campus: anyone would have wanted to participate in this event. Pohl's wedding vows cemented the students' bonds to each other, as well as to MSCW:

. . . In pledge of this faith the Juniors come now to wed the Freshmen, that by the power of their love they may help the Freshmen to an understanding of the spirit of our college. . . the Juniors in token that the years have taught them something of the Alma Mater's spirit, bring to this union of classes the sincere wish to serve as only sisters can. The freshmen bring youth and quickening of new ideals. Live united twenty-three and twenty-five. From this hour let nothing divide you in your love or your *high purpose*. Cleave to the vision of Alma Mater, and when the hour comes in which you must part from her and from each other, yet may one of you carry the light of her perennial spirit into the world; and the other, staying behind, still guard the flame like some sleepless vessel. So may all Juniors and Freshmen, through the years to come, by union, strengthen the steadfast ideal and breathe upon it that bloom of newness which shall preserve it from the touch of time.²⁶

Initially, Pohl calls upon the Juniors for guidance; moreover, she calls upon them to guide the freshmen into the spirit of the university "as only sisters can"²⁷ in an effort to usher them to their "high purpose"²⁸ through "sisterly love." It is clear that Pohl (and presumably the college, as it sanctioned and funded the event) believed deeply in the power of sisterhood to foster an understanding of the students' life purposes. Although Pohl's vows appear to reference only the love of sisterhood, she believes it to be a powerful force so worth preserving that it is enshrined in the most holy union of marriage.

The bonds of sisterhood emphasized in the Junior-Freshmen wedding and the overall presence of gender-bending on the MSCW campus may be seen as a source of empowerment to its female students, as they both allowed for them to transcend (to some extent) the traditional gender roles that would have been prescribed to them outside of the college. Sexual relationships may or may not have been present among the women at MSCW in the Progressive era, but

²⁶ Sanders, 20.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

photographs and correspondence provide clear evidence of intimate relationships. The relevancy of events such as the Junior-Freshman wedding and the Joan of Arc pageant manifest as the natural intimate bonds present between the students at MSCW, events that blur the lines of the gender binary themselves. The frequency of cross-dressing and the level of accepted female intimacy present at MSCW in the early twentieth century are important, because they provide alternative glimpses into the history of gender constructs and gender relations that so often continue to succumb to scrutiny in Mississippi and other parts of the conservative South.

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