

by Andrea Leonard

These are the winter days we've promised to ourselves all through the year; these are the days we'll use to "Catch up." Catching up loose ends is seldom a joyous task, but we can choose to catch up in ways that will give us and others many hours of pleasure in years to come.

In other days, in years gone by, catching up included keeping scrapbooks. Into scrapbooks, which were often given to loved ones as gifts, went all sorts of local news items, poems, quotations from the Bible, stories of disasters and commentary on national and international activity of every sort. Anything was included that might be of interest to the recipient or that was of concern to the maker.

Such collections might have been busy-work while being compiled although how folks found time for them before "modern conveniences" make housekeeping less arduous is beyond my capacity to imagine.

One short entry in an old scrapbook, entitled "How Do Women Kill Time," is as appropriate today as when it was written, well before 1900.

The guileless man who asked his foolish question got his answer from a woman who lived with her husband and two children in a nine-room house. Having kept a statistical account for an entire year (and she must have been 'riled up' to have been that meticulous), she provided these results:

"Lunches: 1,157; meals planned, cooked and served 963; desserts made, 172; lamps filled, 328; rooms dusted, 2,259; times dressed children, 786; visits received, 879; visits paid, 167; books read, 88; papers read, 553; stories read aloud, 234; games played, 329.

"Church services attended, 125; articles mended, 1,236; articles clothing made, 120; fancy articles made, 56; letters written, 429; hours in Sunday School work, 208; hours in gardening, 49; sick days, 44; amusements attended, 10.

"Besides the above," she continues, "I nursed two children through measles, twice cleaned every nook and corner of my house, put up 75 jars of pickles and preserves, made seven trips to the dentist's, dyed Easter eggs, polished silver, and spent seven days nursing a friend through a serious illness; besides the thousand and one duties too small to be mentioned, yet taking time to perform."

One cannot help wondering how she found time to keep track of how she "killed" her time.

Scrapbooks served importantly in the lives of a large segment of America's population. Sailors, when seafaring was a common calling, stook their long watches as duty demanded; betweentimes, they slept, ate, mended their clothes, worked scrimshaw, whittled tools and decorated them intricately, and read scrapbooks.

Scrapbooks were a cherished delight on shipboard; from just such a source come a record dated 1894 concerning these collections. The yellowed old clipping tells of the Plymouth Bethel located on Hicks Street in Brooklyn, N.Y., and how the good Bethel members served the sailors who came ashore from vessels being laden with cargo.

Making scrapbooks for the ships to carry in their forecastles to provide reading material for the crew was part of the good works of the Plymouth Bethel. The scrapbooks voyaged great distances, going out with one tide, coming back on another, spending a few days ashore to be mended, then setting forth once more aboard a different ship this time.

American seamen were turning the leaves on one Bethel scrapbook when Admiral Mello (with the rebel Brazilian fleet, including the cruisers AQUIDABAN, REPUBLICA and TRAJANO) carried out his threat to bombard the forts guarding the Bay of Rio de Janeiro.

Another was carried on a steamer 1,000 miles up the Amazon River. A third sailed around the Horn to San Francisco, and then to the Orient before returning to Plymouth Bethel. Scrapbooks traveled to foreign ports the world around.

If the Bethel scrapbooks could have talked, they'd have

told more and better stories of sailors and their habits than anyone has ever written; for months at a time they journeyed forth aboard the great ocean going steamships that had called at the port of Brooklyn. Those books could have spoken of sights and sounds, about hardships, squalor, pathos, and of the quiet heroism of a sailorman's life aboard his vessel.

The Plymouth Bethel invited all seamen to enjoy the free reading room on Hicks Street; it was open every weekday evening from 7 to 9:30 P.M. There, the men could write their letters, or, if they couldn't write (as many could not) someone would pen their words for them. There were books, and newspapers for those who could read; if the men wished, although there was no compulsion, they might participate in religious services on Tuesday and Sunday evenings. All races and creeds were welcome without question.

Between the 1st of January, 1891, when the Bethel opened, and the 1st of June, 1894, when the scrapbook article was published, over 6,000 sailormen signed the Bethel's register.

As well as reading and writing, the men were encouraged to discuss their troubles, worries and problems with the ladies who volunteered to staff the haven for these lonely men far from home.

"Sailors," one said, "are wonderfully frank and confident, and when you've won their confidence, they trust you with all they have."

In addition to the other services, the Bethel kept on hand a number of cloth bags fitted out with thimbles, thread, needles and buttons, a Testament, and an Easter or Christmas card. These were called "diddy bags"; We now use the similar term "ditty bag."

A century ago, when the sea was many a man's calling, sailors did all their own mending and darning, and "dit it in a very thorough and artistic manner." Unquestionably the sailors found the didy bags a pleasant surprise and a most useful gift.

"Away from his floating home," the article summarizes, "a sailor is a very shy and helpless sort of person, and it has only been by the exercise of tact and patience so many of them have been induced to accept the invitation to visit the Bethel."

These scrapbook treasures breathe of the stuff of life; the people are as vibrant and alert as we ourselves, this minute. Most histories fail to picture day-to-day activities of ordinary people. Scrapbooks, however, are filled with trivia and it's mostly trivia that goes to make up our own lives. Trivia gives perspective and color to history.

If you hope your passage through the short span allotted you will survive in a personal way, if you want to ensure your life will be remembered and understood, if you'd be satisfied to attain a simple sort of immortality, keep a scrapbook.

Clip bits and snippets from daily newspapers and monthly magazines. Flesh out your record with notes of family interest. Include birth announcements and obituaries important to your family and friends. Provide publication sources and dates, for these are readily lost and forgotten.

You might concentrate on a particular subject, or collect a miscellany to reveal ways we go about our business of living.

There's probably nothing more valuable you can contribute to the generations to follow than your own transitory experiences. The pieces you choose to include will reveal your own impressions and thoughts, whether of local, national or international concern.

Your scrapbook will breathe life into the dry musty printed pages, the stiff illustrations, and recreate for your readers the events and actions occurring in these years, the late 1900's; it will clearly reveal your feelings, for the scraps you choose will reflect your personal emotions and interpretations of what happens in your daily life.

Making scrapbooks has gone out of fashion, but whoever is lucky enough to find an old one today opens a window on the past. The scenes viewed are richly colored and brightly lit, are people with flesh and blood humanity, are embroidered with joys, sorrows, hopes and despairs.

In what better place than in your own scrapbook can you preserve for your great-great-grandchildren your own feelings and thoughts as they are being experienced in these final decades of the Twentieth Century?