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Past meets present: Victorian Society breathes new life into celebrated era

February 01, 2009 ¦ Teresa Dunham

Liberty University's Victorian Society proves you're never too old to play dress up. Its formal tea parties are the ultimate gathering of lace, frills, gloves, hoop skirts, puff sleeves, bonnets and all things elegantly vintage and lady-like.

"I like to get dressed up," said sophomore history major Hannah Moses. "I love history, and I like to do hands-on stuff."

That's why Moses came to the group's first formal tea of the school year, held in autumn at Lynchburg's historic Miller-Claytor House, which dates back to 1791. Legend has it that Thomas Jefferson nearly gave the home's former inhabitants a heart attack by eating a tomato from their garden to prove that tomatoes aren't poisonous — but that was just one small topic of conversation for the dozen Liberty University ladies and gentlemen gathered in the home's small parlor.

Sipping Earl Grey from dainty teacups, the ladies had polite discussions between piano and voice performances by fellow society members. "I don't know that the tea we had was necessarily historically accurate, but it tasted really good," joked Moses. Nonetheless, the society's hospitality coordinator, Jo Lovett, made sure the young ladies were drinking their tea properly by giving them a lesson in tea etiquette.

“You need to be very controlled and very elegant when you drink your tea. The way of stirring is actually folding the tea rather than stirring it, and you want to do it very noiselessly, very gently, very lady-like and not even letting the spoon touch the rim at all. It’s these things that show that you’re refined,” she said.

Lovett, a junior English as a Second Language major, called the society’s formal teas a calm, quiet break from her typically busy schedule. “I love doing living history things like going to a historical house and putting yourself back in that period and just experiencing a different time when things were more refined, a little more serious, but at the same time people really knew how to enjoy what they had,” she said.

Though tea parties are a Victorian Society specialty, that’s just the beginning of the group’s activities. Up to 180 members, including students, staff, faculty and the greater Lynchburg community, are on the society’s email list — and they have many society functions to choose from, such as Victorian book club meetings, sewing circles, film and theater gatherings, concerts, living history tours and historic architecture walks.

Founder and LU professor Dr. Brenda Ayres, who teaches Victorian and 19th century literature, inquired about starting the group soon after she came to Liberty University in 2003.

“For me personally, I just love Victorian literature, especially the Victorian novel. There’s not anything I’d rather do, other than being with the Lord and being in the Word, than to read a Victorian novel,” said Ayres, who has published more than 12 books of Victorian scholarship. “I think it’s the most beautiful literature ever written.”

The Victorian era of the United Kingdom spanned the time of Queen Victoria’s rule from June 1837 to January 1901, though the society is a bit more eclectic than that, embracing Jane Austen (who arguably predated that period) and the American Civil War period.

“It was an age of great morality and chivalry. Ladies were treated in a very special way, and men had to hold up their end of the bargain. It was a more civil age. For us contemporaries, I think we’re rather nostalgic to go back to an age when there were absolutes. Things were black and white,” Ayres said.

This year, she said, the Victorian Society is being invigorated with even more student involvement.

“This is the first year that I am trying to empower the students to turn it into something more meaningful to them and that they’ll be more involved with,” said Ayres, who often loans students Victorian garments from her extensive collection.

Vice president Anneke Darling, a junior government major, is especially excited about the active role students are taking this year.

She named off numerous society activities — watching a film of Jane Austen's "Persuasion," decorating Dr. Ayres' Victorian-themed Christmas tree, caroling in period dress and helping with the annual Civil War seminar hosted by LU — but her vision goes beyond all of that.

"The direction I would like to see it go is more of community outreach," she said.

For her, the ultimate event would be a community children's tea party with proceeds to benefit the Liberty Godparent Home.

Society President Brandi Hatfield, a junior history major, also expressed long-term plans for the group.

"My big passion with the society is to show people what they can do in the area, for us not to just be on the campus, but to be able to have a presence in the community in a positive way with different historic tours [and] even on campus when we do the Civil War seminars," she said. "We would love to have people participating from the community."

For more information, email Brandi Hatfield at bmhatfield@liberty.edu.