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COMFORT MAGAZINE

By CLARA CARTER WEBER

THROUGH the kindness of Mrs. Jean Williams, of Portland, and of her brother, Mr. John H. Gannett, of Augusta, the Colby College Library has received on indefinite loan a valuable file of the monthly magazine, *Comfort*, founded and published by their grandfather, William H. Gannett. Mrs. Williams, who is president of the Guy P. Gannett Publishing Company, and Mr. Gannett, vice-president of the same firm, have placed this collection at Colby in memory of their father, Guy P. Gannett, and of their grandfather, William H. Gannett.

Students of Americana will find this file of *Comfort* valuable as source material, and students of rural Maine customs and interests will discover in it a gold mine of information.

Few people today may realize that Augusta, Maine, was a busy mail-order and publishing center for the nation in the fifty years from 1875 to 1925. William H. Gannett was one of several enterprising Maine men who went into this business, but he made an outstanding record in many ways. His *Comfort* was the first magazine in the United States to attain a circulation of over a million. The first rotary color convertible web-fed press in this country was built by Mr. Gannett for *Comfort Magazine*, and at this point *Comfort* left the flat-bed presses of the other Augusta publishers far behind. Another important pioneering move of his was the decision to use his magazine to advertise the tonic "Oxien" for sale. This venture, launched in 1887, was an immediate success and with it was born the practice of selling patent medicines by mail.

*Comfort Magazine* was entered at the Augusta post-office in the fall of 1888; the first issue was the November number. The Colby file begins with Volume 3 and comprises

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fourteen bound volumes, the dates of the last one, Volume 42, being November 1929 to October 1930. This span of forty years of the magazine gives a fair sampling of the various stages this Maine periodical passed through.

In the eighteen-nineties the list of special monthly features was planned to interest all members of the household except the men. Later, in 1912 and 1913, there were informative, up-to-date columns for farmers. In 1893, however, we find these columns appearing regularly: Chats with Aunt Minerva, Busy Bees, Children's Circle, Cooking Column, Household Hints, Column for "Shut-ins," Puzzle Club, and What Women Wear. The Nutshell Story Club awarded prizes for the stories that were printed at this time. Later we find columns on Palmistry and Astrology. *Comfort's* Cycling Club sprang up beside Talks with Girls. What Women Wear (with patterns for the shapeless shrouds of those days!) runs along with Kitchen Chats (with news of the wonderful new rotary egg-beater and other gadgets). Colored pages began to appear with the issue of July 1895, and a page of music was frequently printed.

The advertisements are often illustrated, are full of information, and give a glimpse of the interests and problems of the day. The ads for patent medicines take up a great deal of space and tell their story—as, for instance, the emphasis on the desirability of *gaining* weight, especially for women. *Comfort* was in business to sell everything you could think of, from sheet music, parlor organs, and peanuts, to an "oil portraiture" of Admiral Dewey, and "a Magical Sponge," the "wonder of the 20th century."

It is perhaps not fair to try to judge the literary features of the magazine after a perusal of only fourteen of its forty-two volumes, but some conclusions can be drawn and they are probably reasonably accurate. In the earliest years of publication, prizes were awarded every month for stories that were accepted and printed, and in this way the magazine obtained its fiction. Subscriptions were also multi-

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plied rapidly by this system of prizes, and one can imagine an army of unpaid workers sending in lists of subscribers and busily writing stories for *Comfort*.

Helen M. Winslow is the only author of any importance who appears repeatedly in the Colby file, and she is a very minor figure whose name is probably not known outside of New England. Holman F. Day and Edward Everett Hale are more important names, but they contributed only three serialized stories (two by Day and one by Hale) in these Colby volumes. By 1906-07 *Comfort* had taken up the reprinting of popular fiction, and the paper and type are of a poorer quality at this period. Stories by Horatio Alger, *St. Elmo* by Augusta Evans (copyright 1866!), and various works by Mary J. Holmes were featured. In 1910 *David Harum* (copyright 1898) appeared serially in the company of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's *Unwilling Bride* and Georgie Sheldon's *Ruby's Reward*.

By 1910 there is evidence that the sales of *Comfort* were greatest in rural districts, and more columns for the farmer appear. "Poultry Farming for the Women" verifies the tradition that hens and their eggs used to be women's business (often the one way by which farmers' wives could pick up some pennies of their own).

Up to 1913 *Comfort* was entered only at the Augusta post-office, but sometime between the end of Volume 25 (October 1913) and the beginning of Volume 40 (November 1927) the system of distribution changed, possibly because of new postal regulations, and we find it "Entered at post offices at Augusta, Maine, Pittsburgh, Penn., Terre Haute, Ind., and Dallas, Texas." However, Volume 41 is again "entered" at the Augusta post-office only.

The last three volumes in the Colby file are devoted entirely to matters of interest primarily to women and children. But it is very interesting to note that the last editorial by "Comfort's Editor" in the last volume in this file (Volume 42, October 1930) is on the "Startling Exposure of Communist Revolutionary Plots in the United States."