Odette's Desk

Uncovering the Past... Literally

After publishing my latest book *Birthless: A Tale of Family Lost & Found,* the result of a year of immersion in the creation of three women characters haunted by the secrets of their youthful pasts who use genealogical research (including DNA testing) to confront the aftermath of life-altering decisions, I was ready for a change. Of course, with me, diversion generally comes in the form of something old or historic, often with a genealogy connection. I turned my energy and curiosity once again to one of my life-long favorite pursuits, antiquing (translate that: flea-marketing and eBay trolling). I am never looking for high-end or highly-valuable antiques. I am often a "rescuer," drawn to the beaten down survivors of the 19th century, particularly miniature and child-size pieces. The items I rescue have lost their original finishes and identities, some of those identities buried and suffocating under layers of paint or varnish. I scoop them up, saving them from likely oblivion, set about repairing and stabilizing them, and then reimagine them as folk art using paint, stencils, sponging, stain, or other techniques.

The Desk Prior to Stripping

Just months ago I found a potential rescue item on eBay. Described as a "salesman sample desk," it was a miniature slant-front secretary desk measuring only ten inches tall. Scratched, dinged, with some veneer loss and wearing a shiny, orange-tone finish, it was calling to me. It was listed with an asking price and a "best offer" option. The pricing was higher than what I usually spend on my rescues and I resisted pursuing it for a couple weeks. I finally caved and contacted the seller (in Ohio) with an offer about 25% below their asking price. They accepted. When the little desk arrived I wasn't sure what approach I was going to take in

The Desk After Stripping

Note the Inlay Detail After Stripping

working on it. Should I try basic clean-up, working on the scratches and scrapes and veneer loss, or something more aggressive? I decided to go basic and, long story short, I wasn't getting the results I hoped for. I set the desk aside for several weeks and then, breaking the cardinal rule of the Antiques Roadshow, I pulled out the citrus stripper with the goal of taking off the dark, reddish-orange finish. I knew there was a chance that doing so would also take off what I thought was painted detail, including a small cartouche of a seashell. What happened next was totally unexpected.

Multiple applications of the stripper slowly loosened layers of old finish that came off as what looked like thick, dark brown syrup. As I removed the goop, I noticed that the seashell cartouche and the trim on the drawers and top of the desk were not being dissolved. In fact, rather than being painted on, those details were inlaid wood, finely and artistically done. The ugly old finish removed, I discovered a wonderful handmade piece of antique miniature furniture expertly made and likely a gift for a much-loved little girl in the 19th century. Needless to say, I was delighted to have rescued it and restored it to some semblance of its original glory.

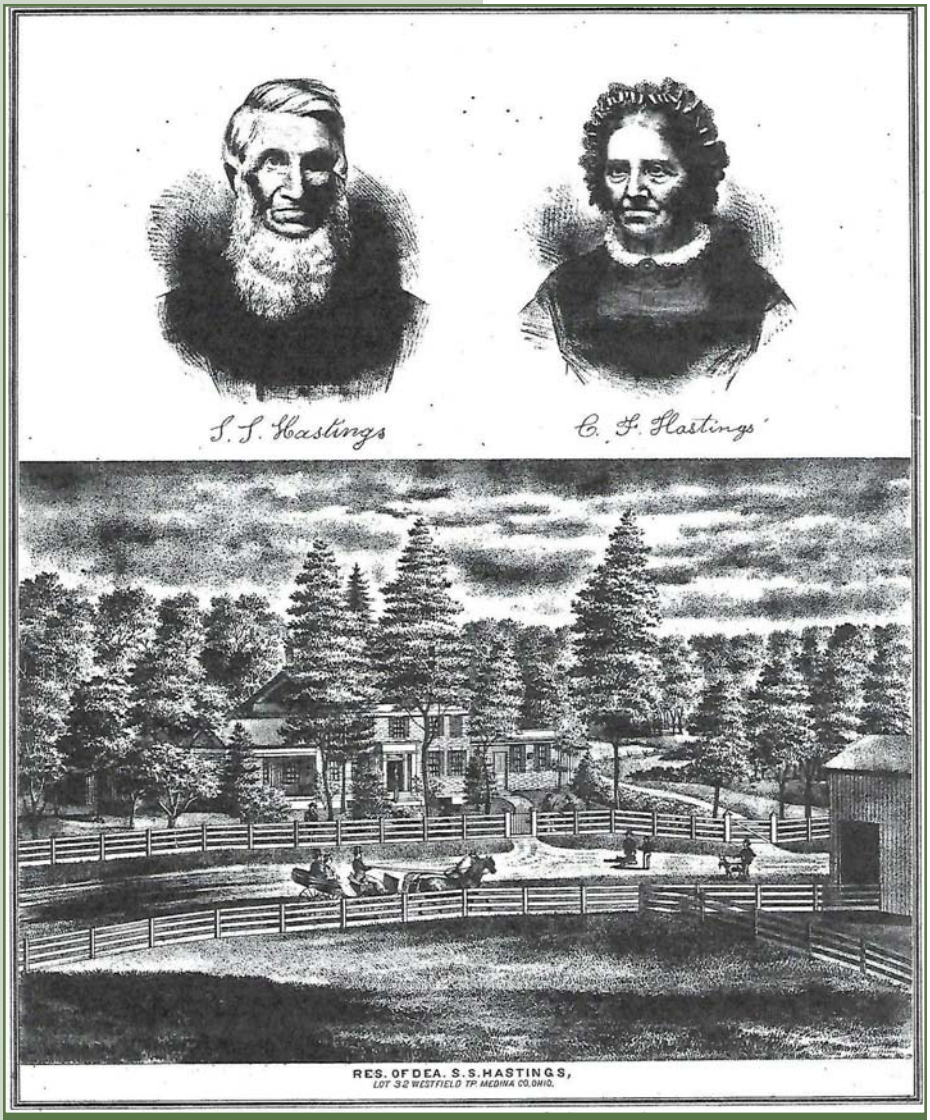
That could have been the end of a happy story but I wasn't finished with my "investigation" of the little desk. When I first saw the photos of it on eBay, the picture of the back of the desk included a small typed label that gave the name and address of a one-time owner. When the desk arrived, that label had been removed but, thankfully, I had downloaded the photo of it from eBay. The former owner's first name was Odette and she lived in Ohio. It didn't take long to find information about Odette on Ancestry.com. She was born in 1894 in Ohio, her maiden name being Hastings. Could the little desk have been made for Odette Hastings when she was a child?

Miniature Toys Found in Odette's Desk

I decided to take some "after" photos of the rescued desk and emailed those and some "before" photos to one of my favorite Antiques Roadshow appraisers. I made sure to confess to being the one who had stripped the old finish from the desk. About a day later, a response popped up in my email inbox with the good news that I had not ruined the little desk and, even better, that it was a good deal older than I had surmised. It was most likely made in America in the very early 1800s and was a "beauty."

Knowing that the age of the little desk meant it could not have been made for Odette, I wondered if it could have been passed down in her family. I was soon tracing Odette's family history, moving back in time through generations of her ancestors. Just as Odette's desk had come with unexpected surprises, so did the search for her roots.

Odette's Hastings ancestors were among the earliest settlers in Massachusetts. Her 6th great-grandfather was Deacon Thomas Hastings born in 1605 who, with his first wife Susan, sailed from Ipswich, England to Massachusetts in 1634 on the ship *The Elizabeth.* After Susan's death, Thomas married Margaret Cheney. Among Thomas and Margaret's many children was Benjamin Hastings (1659–1711), Odette's 5th great-grandfather. Odette's 4th and 3rd great-grandfathers were also named Benjamin Hastings. Both Odette's 3rd great-grandfather Benjamin (1728–1806) and his son, Oliver Hastings (1755–1826) served in our Revolutionary War for independence. Benjamin Hastings was a Lieutenant who



Sidney S. Hastings

served from 1776 to 1779. His son Oliver was a Private who served from 1775 to 1779.

Oliver's son Sidney S. Hastings (1800–1887) was Odette's great-grandfather. He, like the three generations of Hastings men before him, was born in Massachusetts but, unlike them, he left New England and settled in Ohio by 1840. Sidney became a *very* successful farmer, the 1850 US census indicating that he owned real estate valued at $4,500. Ten years later, the 1860 census reported the value of Sidney's real estate holdings as $6,400 and, twenty years later, the 1870 census reported that he owned real estate valued at $12,000. Odette's grandfather, Sidney's son Russell Hastings (1830–1916) became an Ohio farmer as well.

Unlike the two generations of Hastings men before him, Odette's father Terry S. Hastings (1863–1935) went into sales as his profession. In the 1900 US census, taken when Odette was six years old, he was listed as a dry goods salesman in Ravenna, Ohio. By 1910, Odette, her parents and her sister were living in Akron and, when the 1920 US census was taken, Odette's father was working as a furniture salesman. Odette Hastings married an Akron rubber company executive in 1916 and remained in Ohio until her death in the late 1960s.

Still curious about how Odette's desk found its way to eBay, I emailed the dealer who sold it to me and asked what they could tell me about how they acquired it. The dealer's response to my email explained that it was brought to their shop by a woman who said she was the great-granddaughter of the "salesman" who had owned the "sample" and that she had found it in the attic of her father's house after his death. I am guessing that "salesman" was Odette's father Terry Hastings and that recent generations of Odette's family connected the little desk to Terry's work as a furniture salesman, not understanding that it was made a century earlier.

I thought about the two hundred years that little desk had

Research Sources:
-Ancestry.com
-FamilySearch.org
-Fold3.com
-Wikipedia.org
-Newspapers.com

survived and its travels on the way to meeting up with me and a bowl of paint stripper. Built by skilled artisan hands, most likely as a young girl's plaything, it moved from generation to generation and owner to owner, its bumps and bruises treated with new coats of stain and varnish on the way. I cannot say with any certainty that it remained in the Hastings family for two centuries until it became a "rescue" project for me, but I believe that is very possible. Today it sits proudly in my living room bringing a smile to my face each time I pass it by. As the old saying goes: *if only it could talk, oh the stories it could tell!*

Desk Interior

"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies."

—Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

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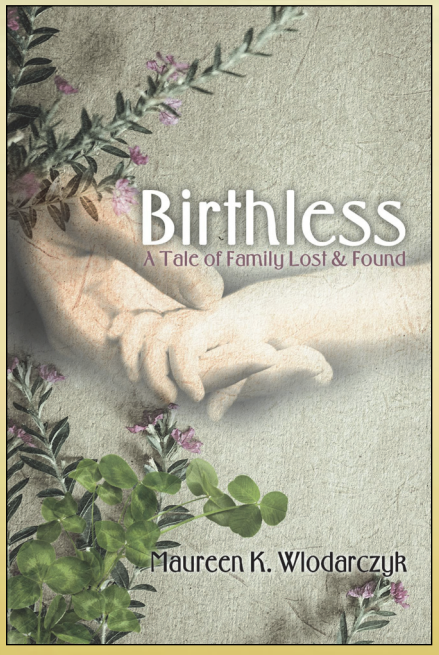

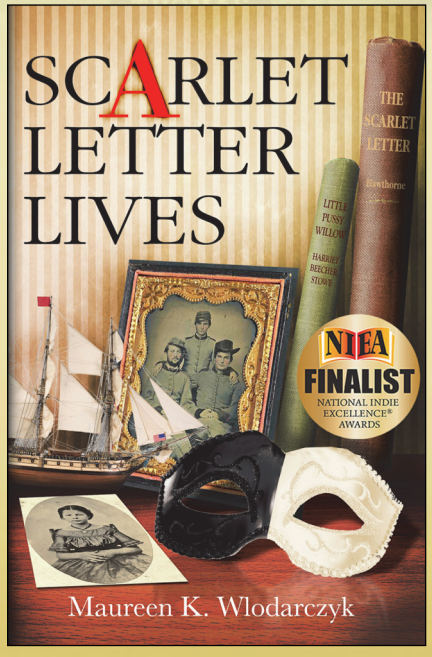

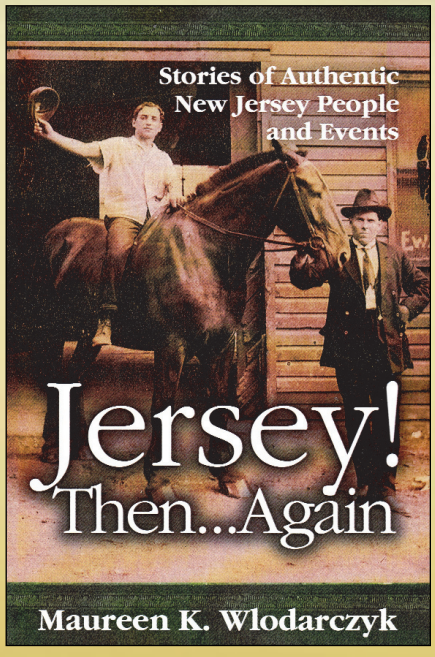

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