KEEPING THE DEVIL AT BAY

The Pastimes of North Carolina Women in the Victorian Age, 1837-1901

Mother Cotten and Crazy Daisy:

North Carolina Women at the Turn of the 20th Century

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by
Anastatia Sims, Professor of History, Georgia Southern University

North Carolina historian Lu Ann Jones once compared beginning a new research project to falling in love. It's a very apt analogy. In my youth – much of which was spent as a graduate student here in Chapel Hill – I was seduced by North Carolina club women – Elvira Moffitt, Gertrude Weil, Cornelia Palmer Jerman, and, in particular, Sallie Southall Cotten. I was not the first historian to be drawn to Mrs. Cotten, nor would I be the last. Anne Scott, Peter Filene, and others mentioned her and quoted her, and William Stephenson wrote a full-length biography of her. More recently, Marjorie Hudson discovered her while she was, in her words, "Searching for Virginia Dare."

Indeed, Sallie Cotten was the kind of woman historians fantasize about: thoughtful and articulate, with legible handwriting, she had the foresight to save her papers, and her descendants had the wisdom to deposit them in the Southern Historical Collection. Soon after I started graduate school, I entered into a long and, at times, obsessive relationship with her and her colleagues in North Carolina women's organizations. Their experiences were compatible with my historical interests, and the marriage between scholar and subject was, for the most part, a happy one.

But with the passage of time, what had once been new and exciting became familiar and stale. I drifted away from Sallie Cotten and "my" club women and a few years ago, I was lured into a new fascination with another woman, Juliette Gordon Low,

and a different voluntary association, the Girl Scouts. Juliette – known to family and friends as Daisy – captivated my mind and the paraphernalia of her life story took over ever increasing portions of my house. I packed away the keepsakes of my earlier relationship (notes, pictures, photocopies) and believed that my separation from North Carolina club women, while amicable, was complete.

As I became more deeply involved in my research on Daisy, I found myself comparing her to an archetypal southern woman of the early twentieth century – an archetype who, I finally realized, looked a lot like Sallie Cotten. Time and again, I had seen Sallie's experiences replicated in the biographies of her contemporaries. I expected to find that Daisy's story, like Sallie's, had unfolded in a logical, straightforward fashion, and that founding the Girl Scouts was the capstone of a lifetime spent working with voluntary associations of various kinds and thinking about women's roles. But Daisy surprised me; at every turn, she defied my expectations.

Instead of composing variations on a theme, I was working on the kind of assignment I give my students: "Compare and contrast Sallie Southall Cotten and Juliette Gordon Low. In what ways were they similar? In what ways were they different? What were each woman's goals, and how did she use voluntary associations to achieve them? What do their stories tell us about southern women leaders at the turn of the twentieth century?" So get out your bluebooks; those are the questions I want to consider tonight.

A study in contrasts

These two women are in many ways a study in contrasts. Sallie moved to North Carolina as a teenager and remained here for nearly seventy years. Daisy always called Savannah home, but spent most of her adult life in Great Britain and traveled so often and so extensively that I've considered calling her biography, *Where in the World is Daisy Low?* (Unfortunately, I have not found any evidence that she ever visited North Carolina, although she must have passed through the state during the numerous journeys she made by train up and down the eastern seaboard.)

Sallie was a happily married woman with a large family. Daisy and her husband separated after fifteen years of marriage and were in the process of getting a divorce when he died; they had no children. Sallie was an astute leader who planned carefully and acted deliberately. She had a keen intellect and constantly observed, reflected, and commented on society, especially on woman's place within it. Endowed with a sweet disposition, she exuded such warmth, gentleness and strength that club women dubbed her Mother Cotten. Daisy was exuberant and impulsive, known for adopting projects with enthusiasm and then abandoning them abruptly. She had difficulty managing both her time and her money, and logic was not her strong suit. As her brother once wrote, "Two and two by no means made four to her. They made anything she chose to imagine they made . . ." Witty,

charming, sensitive, and kind-hearted, she was also headstrong and, at times, domineering. When she was a teenager her family called her Crazy Daisy because of her erratic behavior, and I suspect that others may have used that nickname behind her back for the rest of her life.

Despite their vast differences, Sallie and Daisy shared some characteristics in common. Both were southern. Both were well-educated, and both were creative. Sallie was a musician – she sang and played the piano – and an author; her published works included a long poem about Virginia Dare, shorter poems and essays, and a history of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. Daisy was an artist who sketched, painted, sculpted, and worked with iron. She made a bust of her grandfather, a prominent lawyer, businessman, and politician, that still stands in Savannah's city hall, and she crafted a pair of wrought-iron gates that are now located at her birthplace, which is also in Savannah. Above all, both Sallie and Daisy understood that they lived in a time when women's roles were changing; both were concerned about female education in its widest sense; and both saw voluntary associations as vital institutions that could provide girls and women with opportunities for personal development and public service.

Sallie Southall Cotten

Sallie was the older of the two. She was born in Lawrenceville, Virginia, in 1846, the fifth daughter of a family that was respectable but not prosperous. She left home in 1859, when a cousin invited her to live in Murfreesboro, North Carolina, and attend Wesleyan Female College with his daughter. Sallie was thirteen years old, and she would never live with her parents again.

The Civil War began two years after she arrived in North Carolina. Wesleyan closed in 1862 as Union troops approached Murfreesboro, so Sallie went to Greensboro Female College to complete her education. In 1863, at the age of seventeen, she took a job as a governess. A year later, while she was teaching in Edgecombe County, she met a Confederate soldier named Robert Randolph Cotten. They married in March 1866. During the next twelve years, as Robert built a career as a merchant and planter in eastern North Carolina, the Cottens moved six times, and Sallie gave birth to eight children, six of whom survived infancy. In 1878 they settled at Cottendale, a plantation near Greenville in Pitt County, and in 1886, their last child was born.

The years that followed were busy ones for Sallie. In a world without freezers or microwave ovens, without washing machines, vacuum cleaners or dishwashers, and in which all fabrics wrinkled and no diapers were disposable, the routine chores of cooking, cleaning, and laundry involved more drudgery than they do today. The Cottens usually employed a cook, a laundress, and a seamstress, as well as a nurse to care for the younger children and a governess to teach the older ones, but this did not mean that Sallie was a lady of leisure. She supervised all of the household employees and performed many tasks herself.

Free time was a scarce commodity, and Sallie tried to use it wisely. She did needlework, practiced music, and read as much as she could. She also wrote – poetry, essays, and numerous letters to friends and relatives. Her correspondence reveals how hectic her life was. In one letter she complained of having "No time to read–no time to sing–no time to write rhymes – no time to play" and in another, written a few years later, she declared, "I continue too <u>busy</u> to <u>breathe</u> except when breath becomes absolutely necessary. One of two things is certain–I am either the busiest woman in the world, or else the [worst] manager."

Her life became even more complicated when servants left and could not be replaced immediately. In October of 1882 she reported that she was having difficulty getting household help because the cotton harvest was underway. The following summer she published a poem that was perhaps inspired by that experience. It was called "The Housewife's Lament." It began:

At early morn when sleep is sweet,
I rise and with reluctant feet,
Unto my empty kitchen hie,
And to the kettle softly sigh
No Cook!

At fervid noon by heat opprest
The laboring man seeks shade and rest;
Still in the kitchen lo! I reign
With sweltering brow and addled brain –
While tears of perspiration roll,
I cry in agony of soul
No Cook!

The poem goes on for several more stanzas; day fades into night, men finish their chores, but the housewife – presumably Mrs. Cotten herself--labors on. The final verse reads:

Poor woman! To man's heart so dear,
Still in the kitchen finds her sphere;
And this will surely be her fate,
When hired servants abdicate –

No dreams, no rambles, no new book
No leisure time – no rest –
No Cook!

While this verse certainly would not have secured Sallie Cotten a place among the pantheon of America's great poets even if it had reached a wider audience than the readers of the local newspaper, it does tell us something about her life, the lives of other rural women, and the attitudes and assumptions that influenced her perspective on "woman's place."

Preparing meals and cleaning up after them constituted a full-time job. When, as Sallie put it, hired servants abdicated and the mistress of the house was consigned to the kitchen, she had less time to fulfill her other responsibilities and no time for herself. But Sallie did not seem to realize that her leisure time, limited though it was, depended entirely upon the labor of other women – African-American women, for the most part – who left their homes to work for wages. Who cooked for the cook's family? Who cared for the nurse's children? Apparently, those questions did not occur to her. For Sallie, as for most white southerners of the time, race trumped gender, and her efforts to improve women's lives and elevate women's status would be focused entirely on whites.

While Sallie's privileged social and economic position relieved her of some of the drudgery that was the daily lot of most African-American and poor white women, neither white skin nor money could spare her from all of the suffering that other women endured. In the 19th century, many mothers of all classes and races witnessed the death of one or more children. Sallie lost two when they were infants; she mourned, but she recovered. Then, on July 13, 1883, her oldest son, Robbie, drowned while swimming in the Tar River; he had turned fifteen that very day. Sallie was devastated. Because of her domestic responsibilities she could not let

grief overwhelm her, and she struggled to maintain a cheerful demeanor to lift the spirits of the rest of the family. But the wound left by Robbie's tragic death never healed completely. According to her biographer, William Stephenson, she wore the colors of "half-mourning," the period that began a year or more after a loved one died and usually lasted about six months, for the rest of her life. (In case you're curious, the colors included black, white, gray, lavender and purple.)

Juliette "Daisy" Gordon Low

In the early 1880s, while Sallie Cotten coped with the demands of running a large household, Daisy Gordon was living a relatively carefree life. Born into a prominent Savannah family on Halloween night, 1860, she was too young to remember much about the hardships the Civil War imposed on Georgians. After the war ended, her father, a cotton broker and commission merchant, quickly rebuilt his business, and the family enjoyed a higher standard of living than most southerners knew.

Daisy, like Sallie, was sent away to school at thirteen; she went to a boarding school in New Jersey for one term. She then attended two different female academies in Virginia before completing her education at a finishing school run by two French women in New York City. During the summers, the Gordons followed the custom that prevailed among Savannah's elite; Mrs. Gordon and the children usually spent

July and August at the beach, in the mountains, or visiting relatives in the North to escape the oppressive heat and the threat of disease, while Mr. Gordon toiled away at his firm.

When Daisy left school in December 1879, she was nineteen, two years older than Sallie had been when she graduated from Greensboro Female College, and she faced a very different future. Sallie had immediately found employment as a teacher because she had to support herself; by the time she was 20, she had married Robert Cotten and was expecting her first child.

Daisy, in contrast, entered a carefree interlude in which she was free of some of the constraints of girlhood but not yet burdened by adult responsibilities. She studied art; attended parties, teas, and dances; visited school friends and relatives in the Northeast; and toured Europe. When she was at home in Savannah, she helped care for the two youngest Gordon children. Although she had a stormy relationship with her mother and sometimes complained that Mrs. Gordon mistreated her, Daisy lived a life of ease, with fewer obligations and more leisure time than Sallie had ever known.

Still, Daisy, like Sallie, faced sorrow and loss. One of her younger sisters died of scarlet fever in December, 1880, and four years later Daisy sustained an injury that permanently damaged her hearing. From childhood onward, she had suffered from painful ear infections. In January of 1885, she asked her doctor to try a new treatment, an injection of silver nitrate. The doctor hesitated; Daisy insisted; the doctor capitulated. It became apparent almost immediately that something was dreadfully wrong. For the next several days, Daisy was in agony. As soon as she was able to travel, her mother took her to Atlanta for treatment, but the damage to her ear drum was permanent. She never again heard well.

Daisy was twenty-four when she injured her ear, five years older than Sallie had been when she became a wife, and beyond the age at which most southern women married. She had her share of suitors, but only one captured her heart, William Mackay Low, called Willie. His father was a Scottish immigrant who had made a fortune in Savannah before retiring to England after the death of his second wife, Willie's mother.

Daisy and Willie had known each other as children, but had not seen each other for several years when they met again in their early 20s. They fell in love almost immediately, but tried to keep their romance secret, and broke off the relationship once or twice because they feared parental opposition. Their courtship lasted for nearly five years. Finally, both families bestowed their blessings, and Daisy and Willie married in December of 1886. But their wedding day ended ominously. As was customary, the newlyweds departed amid a shower of rice tossed at them by guests. A grain of rice became embedded in Daisy's ear. An infection ensued that compounded the hearing loss she had suffered the previous year and left her almost completely deaf.

Daisy and Willie settled in England, and Daisy took up the responsibilities of housekeeping. Here again, her experience was very different from Sallie Cotten's. The Lows bought a country estate, called Wellesbourne, in Warwickshire to use as their primary residence, but they didn't live there all the time. They summered in a castle in Scotland, and spent time in London.

Although Daisy had expected to become a mother, no babies arrived, thus she had even more freedom than other upper class women in the Victorian era. She and Willie traveled extensively; sometimes together, often separately. When they were at home – whether at Wellesbourne or at the Scottish castle – they entertained frequently. Their guests included members of the nobility as well as other prominent Englishmen; Rudyard Kipling, for example, was a close friend. Daisy did little housework herself. Instead, she supervised a full staff of servants, including an African-American cook that she and Willie brought with them from Savannah.

Although Daisy had grown up among the elite of her hometown and had associated with the daughters of wealthy Northeastern families when she was in school, she had never before lived on such a grand scale. Willie was part of an exclusive group of wealthy and titled Englishmen who surrounded Queen Victoria's oldest son, the Prince of Wales, and, Daisy had the honor of being presented to the Queen.

So while Sallie Cotten spent her days at Cottendale caring for her children, tending to her housework, directing the labor of servants, when she could get them, and savoring the few moments she could steal to read, practice music, or write, Daisy was hobnobbing with English nobility, planning lavish dinners and house parties, developing her skills as a painter and sculptor, and learning how to work with iron so she could make the gates I mentioned earlier. Had their paths crossed in the late 1889 or 1890 – to the best of my knowledge, they never met – I expect that the planter's wife and the English socialite would have found little in common. But for both of them, the next two decades would bring about changes that would propel them out of their homes and into public life.

Mother Cotten: A "lady manager"

For Sallie, the transformation began in the early 1890s, when she was in her forties. Most of her children were away at school or establishing homes of their own. Only the youngest – a daughter, born in 1886 – remained at Cottendale, and when she was ten, Robert and Sallie sent her to a boarding school in Tarboro so that she could be around other children. Having an "empty nest" meant that Sallie at last had the leisure time she had yearned for when her children were young.

Like many North Carolina women, she chose to use that time constructively. She was certain that the knowledge and skills she had acquired while keeping house and rearing children could be put to good use in the community, the state, and the nation, and she believed that women's organizations would provide her and other

women with the opportunity to do that. So while she continued to read, write, and practice her music, she became an ardent club woman, the "mother" who taught, encouraged, and led Tar Heel women as they banded together for self-improvement and social reform.

Her own public career began in 1890, when she was appointed one of the "lady managers" for North Carolina's exhibit in the woman's building at the Columbian Exposition, which was to be held in Chicago in 1893. Fundraising for the project expanded her acquaintances with women throughout the state, and a four-month stay in Chicago during the fair brought her into contact with women from around the nation. The experience convinced her of the importance of women's voluntary associations, and she devoted the rest of her life to promoting them in her home state. She was instrumental in the founding of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs as well as a number of local clubs. In addition, she held office in the National Congress of Mothers (a forerunner of the PTA) and was active in the King's Daughters and the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

In the years immediately following the Columbian Exposition, however, the organization that consumed the greatest share of her time, thought, and energy was the Virginia Dare Memorial Association, a group that she formed along with another of North Carolina's "lady managers," Florence Kidder of Wilmington. Originally they had hoped to raise enough money to build a North Carolina women's building at the fair. When financial contributions fell short of their goal, they made other arrangements for the exhibit, and decided to use the funds they had accumulated as seed money for an even more ambitious project, one that would serve the needs of women in the present at the same time that it honored one of North Carolina's most famous daughters. Virginia Dare held a particular fascination for Sallie, who believed that the fact that the first English child born in North America was a girl destined white women to play a major role in shaping the American nation.

Since both custom and conventional wisdom decreed that women exerted their greatest influence within their own families and that their most sacred obligation as citizens was to maintain homes where patriotism and virtue could flourish, Sallie thought that the most fitting monument to the famous child of the Lost Colony would be "a national school of industrial arts and sciences for women, where they can be systematically trained for the science of domesticity and peace, just as boys are trained for war at West Point and Annapolis." Girls would study chemistry, psychology, nutrition, heredity, and architecture along with cooking, sewing, and the domestic arts; they would learn to be "self-reliant as well as intelligent; womanly as well as scientific." Sallie's plan called for the school to be endowed by the federal government and located in North Carolina because, she explained, "in that State the history of America, and the history of white woman in America, begins."

Mrs. Cotten was the driving force behind the Virginia Dare Memorial Association, and in it she displayed the organizational skills that she would use later in the state federation of women's clubs. She advised local chapters to meet once a month, to

levy fines on members who were absent, and to follow correct parliamentary procedure. Holding regularly scheduled meetings and conducting them in a systematic manner served to remind members that they were engaged in serious business and, at the same time, prepared them for participation in other voluntary associations. Sallie herself campaigned tirelessly for the establishment of the Virginia Dare Training School. As she told a friend, "I am so enthused about it that I imagine I can enthuse others." She succeeded in persuading the North Carolina Teachers' Assembly to endorse the proposal in 1893, but she was never able to rally enough support to make her dream a reality.

Although the Virginia Dare Memorial Association failed to achieve its goal, Sallie remained convinced of the benefits that voluntary associations could bring to North Carolina and to women themselves. In 1899, she made an unsuccessful attempt to form a state federation of women's clubs. She later recalled that at the time, "Clubs were few and unpopular – were considered unwomanly and existed solely for mental culture." Three years later, representatives from seven clubs met at Salem College and founded the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. They chose Sallie to be vice-president.

In the years that followed, she became the leading spokeswoman for Tar Heel club women. She chaired several committees, acted as liaison between the federation and other women's organizations, and in 1911, was elected state president. She championed a variety of reforms, ranging from public libraries to reformatories for juvenile delinquents. She led a successful campaign to win for women the right to serve on school boards in 1913 and was named honorary chair of the women's Liberty Loan drive during World War I. But the cause that remained closest to her heart was education for women. Although she never attempted to revive the idea of the Virginia Dare Training School, she continued to insist that educated women made better wives, better mothers, and better citizens.

Daisy Low: Mother of the Girl Scouts

At the same time that Sallie was emerging as a leader of North Carolina women, Daisy was enduring the disintegration of her marriage. Willie Low had proven to be a less-than-ideal husband. He preferred carousing with his friends and hunting wild game to staying home with his wife, and as years passed, he and Daisy spent more and more time apart. In 1901, he fell in love with an attractive young widow named Anna Bateman. He decided he wanted to marry her, and began trying to goad Daisy into divorcing him. He invited Mrs. Bateman to the castle in Scotland while Daisy was there with other guests. Daisy left shortly after Anna Bateman arrived, and she and Willie never lived together again.

The next five years were the most difficult of Daisy's life. At first she refused to consider dissolving the marriage because she wanted to avoid the scandal and publicity that would have inevitably accompanied the divorce of a couple of the

Lows' social standing. She changed her mind after several months, resolved to emerge from the crisis with her dignity intact and her financial future secured, and retained the services of one of the best attorneys in Great Britain.

Daisy learned, however, that wanting a divorce and getting one were two different things. Because of the requirements of English law and complicated negotiations over a financial settlement, the divorce suit was still pending when Willie Low died in June of 1905. His demise should have ended Daisy's troubles, but he stunned her and her lawyers from beyond the grave by leaving behind a will that bequeathed the bulk of his estate to his mistress, Anna Bateman. Daisy, his wife of nearly twenty years, had to sue for her rightful inheritance.

The final settlement of Willie Low's estate made Daisy a wealthy woman. She received all of his property in the United States, including the Low mansion in Savannah, and a substantial quantity of British stocks and bonds. Although she still considered herself an American, she made her home in London and leased the Savannah house to various tenants. Unencumbered by family responsibilities or the necessity of earning a living, Daisy continued to do the things she had always enjoyed, most of which involved travel.

She made annual visits to the United States to see family and friends. She spent part of each summer in Scotland. She went to Paris to study art and to a German spa to seek a cure for her deafness. She made a trip to India, just because she wanted to go. Frequently she invited a niece, a nephew, or the child of a friend to accompany her on her journeys, but she demonstrated no inclination to organize children into groups or to join organizations herself. And there is no indication in her voluminous correspondence that she gave much thought to the status of women.

Still, as she approached her fiftieth birthday in 1910, she felt that something was missing was from her life. Despite her talents, her charm, her many friends, and her wealth, by the standards of the day, she was a failure. She was single and childless in a society that glorified domesticity and motherhood as women's highest callings. Unlike the era's "new women," she had not found fulfillment in devotion to a cause or a career. Her notorious lack of punctuality and her inability to manage money – even after Willie's estate was settled, she still occasionally had to make urgent appeals to her father when she found herself overdrawn at the bank – had convinced her family that Daisy, though lovable, was not very competent. It seemed that "Crazy Daisy" was destined to spend the rest of her days as poor, pitiful Daisy, who had been both unlucky and unwise in love, and who could never do anything right.

Then in 1911, she met Sir Robert Baden-Powell. At the time, Baden-Powell, a military hero who had begun the Boy Scout movement in 1908, was one of the most celebrated men in Great Britain. Scouting was wildly popular. When girls clamored to join, Baden-Powell's sister, Agnes, started a separate organization, called the Girl Guides. Daisy and Sir Robert soon discovered that they had a great deal in common.

Inspired by his example, Daisy organized a Girl Guide troop in Scotland that summer and two more in London in the fall. She also began making plans to bring Girl Guiding to the United States.

She founded the first troop in her hometown, Savannah, in March 1912, and devoted the rest of her life to building the Girl Scouts in the United States and around the world. She poured considerable amounts of her own money into the organization – she subsidized it completely during the first few years – and enlisted (some would say conscripted) family and friends. She hired a secretary for Girl Scout headquarters and left routine operational details to others, while she concentrated on creating an organizational structure, garnering favorable publicity, and recruiting adult volunteers. Because of her efforts, the Girl Scouts quickly overshadowed similar groups, such as the Camp Fire Girls.

Daisy built the Girl Scouts on the same general premise that had guided Sallie Cotten in her proposal for the Virginia Dare Training School twenty years earlier: the belief that girls should be prepared to be useful citizens. The first Girl Scout handbook, written under Mrs. Low's direct supervision and published in 1913, was entitled *How Girls Can Help Their Country*. But Daisy's vision was different in nature and wider in scope than Sallie's had been.

Sallie had dreamed of a national school that trained girls in the domestic arts and groomed them for roles as wives and mothers. Daisy not only wanted to organize small, voluntary groups at the local level, she encouraged girls to develop a variety of skills. Although the first Girl Scouts learned how to cook, sew, do laundry, and care for infants, they also were taught how to signal in semaphore and handle firearms. They could earn badges in aviation, motoring, and telegraphy. The first few editions of the handbook even included instructions on how to tie up a burglar with eight inches of rope – something that Sallie Cotten had never even considered including in her curriculum.

Now, we know that Sallie Cotten and Daisy Low never met, and I speculated earlier that if they had been introduced around 1890 they would have had little in common. But what if their paths had crossed twenty years later? In light of the recent controversy over author James Frey, whose book *A Million Little Pieces* contains at least some little falsehoods, I want to stress that what I'm about to say, while rooted in fact, is entirely fictional. With that disclaimer out of the way, let us proceed.

An imaginary meeting

It is May 1913. Sallie Cotten is at a railroad station, awaiting the train that will take her home from the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs annual convention. She has just stepped down as president, and the meeting has been a great triumph for her. During her term, she established an endowment for the federation and successfully lobbied for the bill that made women eligible for school board

membership. Delegates begged her to seek re-election, but she refused. However, they expressed their gratitude for all of her efforts on behalf of North Carolina women by establishing an award in her honor; the Sallie Southall Cotten Fund will loan money to young women who want to attend college.

As Sallie reflects on the opportunities that will be made available in her name, she is joined by another woman – a short, plump person wearing an unusual costume; it looks almost like a military uniform. The two women start to talk. The woman in the peculiar garb introduces herself as Daisy Low of Savannah, and immediately begins to tell Sallie about the organization she has started for girls. Although she formed the first group–what does she call it? A troop? – just a little over a year ago, she has plans to make this a national movement. Today she is on her way to Washington to rent rooms for a national headquarters. She talks on and on; Sallie can barely get a word in edgewise, so she just smiles and nods. Suddenly, the woman pauses, looks up, and realizes her train is pulling out of the station. She says good-bye to Sallie, then races down the platform, ordering the conductor to hold the train! She has to get to Washington!

Sallie probably would have been a bit bewildered by this odd woman – people frequently had that reaction to Daisy – and while she likely would have approved of the idea of a voluntary association for girls, she might have been dubious about Mrs. Low's chances for success. Daisy was clearly somewhat eccentric and seemed a little scatter-brained. Besides, she had no children and no experience in women's clubs. What could she possibly know about developing a suitable program for girls, or building a national organization?

Yet, as we know, Daisy succeeded beyond anything that Sallie Cotten, or perhaps even Daisy herself, could have imagined. The Girl Scouts of the United States would grow to be the largest voluntary association for women and girls in the nation. "Crazy Daisy," who, at age fifty worried that her life was meaningless, left an enduring legacy that touched the lives of millions of Americans, while "Mother Cotten's" carefully planned scheme for a national school for women remained an unrealized dream. How did this happen?

As with most historical problems, there are a number of explanations. Daisy had access to resources that were unavailable to Sallie. She had time and money, and she was not distracted by family obligations. Moreover, she was part of a trans-Atlantic network of friends and kin with social, political, and economic influence. For example, she maintained close ties with friends from her days at the French finishing school in New York. When she started the Girl Scouts, they introduced her to people like Edith Macy, wife of the owner of Macy's Department Store. Daisy's sister was married to a Republican Congressman from New Jersey, and her mother, a Chicago native, had relatives in that city and contacts in other parts of the country through her work with the Colonial Dames. The Gordons were also acquainted with President Woodrow Wilson through his first wife, Ellen. When Sallie Cotten tried to drum up support for the Virginia Dare School, she wrote letters and published a

pamphlet. When Daisy Low launched the Girl Scouts, she secured an invitation to have tea with Mrs. Wilson at the White House.

Moreover, Daisy was driven to succeed in a way that Sallie Cotten was not. Sallie found joy in her roles as wife and mother, and won admiration for her activities as a club woman. Contemporaries praised her as an exemplar of the finest qualities of southern womanhood and urged other women to emulate her. Daisy, on the other hand, was loved but not necessarily admired by family and friends, and had suffered public humiliation when her husband deserted her for another woman.

Sallie at middle age had seen her prose and poetry appear in print, had organized a successful exhibit at a world's fair, and had become a leader in several organizations. Daisy at the same age was a dilettante. The failure of the Virginia Dare Memorial Association to fulfill its objective was a disappointment for Sallie; the failure of the Girl Scouts would have been a catastrophe for Daisy.

In my book about women's organizations in North Carolina, I wrote about Sallie Cotten and other Tar Heel women who created public roles for themselves that were rooted in domesticity. They cherished the ideal of the southern lady, always took care to "act like ladies," and frequently declared that they weren't seeking rights for themselves, they were merely carrying out their traditional obligations as wives and mothers. I concluded that this strategy reaped mixed results – some victories, such as the women's school board bill; some defeats, such as the never-realized plan for the Virginia Dare school.

Perhaps the story of Mother Cotten and Crazy Daisy suggests a corollary hypothesis. While a southern woman who aspired to introduce new institutions in the early twentieth-century could achieve modest public successes by relying on maternalism and adhering to accepted gender conventions, in order to succeed on a grand scale, perhaps it was necessary for her to be placed, by choice or circumstance, just beyond the boundaries of ladyhood, though still safely nestled in the South's economic elite. Perhaps she needed to be a little eccentric and unconventional. In short, perhaps a little craziness was not such a bad thing after all.

Anastatia Sims delivered this talk in conjunction with the exhibition "Keeping the Devil at Bay: The Pastimes of North Carolina Women in the Victorian Age," which appeared in the North Carolina Collection Gallery in UNC's Wilson Library from October 20, 2005 through January 31, 2006.