

A "TRUE WOMAN'S SPHERE":
MOTHERHOOD IN LATE ANTEBELLUM KENTUCKY

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Motherhood. A woman of south-central Kentucky labeled it a "true woman's sphere." One of her contemporaries from Ashland thought it was a "gift from God." Antebellum advice manuals glorified the "sacred" role of motherhood, asserting that each birth brought married women to a "higher place in the scale of being." Certainly it was an experience shared by more antebellum Kentucky women than any other; yet scholars of the commonwealth's history have tended to overlook the importance of this common feminine experience. Using the actual words written by a select few Kentucky women as they lived the day-to-day joys and sorrows that characterized their lives, this study looks at the major themes that typified motherhood: pregnancy, childbirth, and custodial responsibilities.¹

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¹ Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (New York, 1848), 91. Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), serves as a paradigm for this study. McMillen, however, devotes her attention to the Old South and includes few references to Kentucky and the border states. For additional information see Nancy F. Cott, "Notes Toward an Interpretation of Antebellum Childrearing," *Psychohistory Review* 6 (1978): 4-20; Ronald W. Hogeland, "'The Female Appendage': Feminine Life-Styles in America, 1820-1860," *Civil War History* 17 (1971): 101-114; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Rela-

To examine closely the everyday activities of motherhood necessitated finding diaries and collections of letters written with regularity to an intimate — a husband, mother, or a close relative. Kentucky's repositories have only a handful of such collections for the late antebellum years, and while they represent various geographical areas of the state, all were authored by well-educated women. None of the correspondents, furthermore, were African-Americans, recent immigrants, impoverished, or unmarried. Thus they cannot be considered "typical" of the state's female population. Nevertheless these women shared many experiences with their less fortunate contemporaries, and they undoubtedly recorded many of the feelings and attitudes of the silent majority. Interspersed among the descriptions of offsprings' latest clever activities, in which families took — and take — so much pride, can be found many revealing comments about motherhood in the Bluegrass State.

For antebellum Kentucky women, success in achieving and fulfilling the role of motherhood could not be assured. High infant and maternal mortality rates were the rule, but Kentuckians, like other nineteenth-century Americans, believed that childbearing and childrearing were central to a woman's existence. Perhaps tongue in cheek, an eastern Kentucky mother commented that, while her friends' preserves and jellies might win prizes at the Boyd County fair, she would "take the premium on the greatest number of babies under four years old."²

Those wives without children became objects of pity. Elizabeth Underwood of Bowling Green remembered a childless couple whose property was "kept in the nicest order & the front yard is beautiful by evergreen and roses. . . ." Of the wife, Underwood

tions Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (1975): 1-29; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74.

² Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 8 September 1860, Means Family Papers, Special Collections, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

Harriet Hildreth Means, the mother of six, lived in Catlettsburg and Ashland with her banker-husband John and wrote frequently to her mother and physician-father in Marietta, Ohio.

wrote, "She has no children & that is the secret of her nice establishment, which looks in & out as though inhabited by some old maid." The Bowling Green matron queried, "Do you not reckon there is a void in the household, & that the merry tones of a prattling urchin, such as one of ours, would be worth all the rest?"³

Most married women, no matter what their wealth or station, faced the hardships of pregnancy and childbirth. For nearly all, a persistent fear of death for one's own self or for the child clouded any anticipation of the arrival of a new son or daughter. Underwood, recalling her terrors at the thought of this "mystery of nature," deemed childbirth "the event most *dreaded and terrible* to the inexperienced young wife." Fearing she might die during the birth of her third child, Ellen Green of Henderson assured her husband Hector that she had "lived so happily with you" for three years and instructed him to educate their son Charley for the ministry. She added that if the new baby were a girl, "What little dress or jewelry I have I wish taken care of for her." In a scarcely more positive tone, Susan Grigsby of the Danville area wrote, "I trust that all will end well for surely there are few mothers more indispensable to their little helpless children than myself." Caroline Jamison of Mercer County also feared the "precarious situation" and admitted that she had wondered if she would ever again be of "any more service to my family."⁴

3 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 25 January 1851, Underwood Collection, Department of Library Special Collections (Kentucky Library), Western Kentucky University.

A native of Georgetown in the District of Columbia, Elizabeth Cox Underwood came to Kentucky in 1838 as the bride of congressman, and later U.S. senator, Joseph Rogers Underwood, a widower and the father of four teenage children. Elizabeth Underwood gave birth to eight more children between 1839 and 1858. Although she once accompanied her husband on his travels to the nation's capital, the Kentucky matron remained in Bowling Green during his last three years in the Senate. Underwood wrote over two hundred letters which she filled with details about her daily activities and those of her children.

4 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 8 May 1852, Underwood Collection; Ellen Green to Hector Green, 27 August 1837, Green Family Papers, The Filson Club manuscript department; Susan Grigsby to John

To many, pregnancy represented an almost interminable illness. Living in Lexington during one of her many confinements, Susan Yandell wrote her mother that she had been "ill and in bed for ten weeks." Elizabeth Cox Underwood related the improvement in her pregnant stepdaughter's health, stating, "Eliza is . . . not so much of an invalid as I expected to find her. She is better the last week or two. She is compelled however to spend the most of her time on the bed in consequence of the weakness of her back." In a similar vein, Sarah Jacob admitted, "I cannot call myself ill but a slight hemorrhage [*sic*] has been upon me for 3 weeks and I have dreaded to be alone."⁵

Never well during her numerous pregnancies, Susan Grigsby penned, "My legs are more swollen than they have been at any time during my illness. The swelling seems to subside pretty

W. Grigsby, 10 March 1866, Grigsby Family Papers, The Filson Club; Caroline Jamison to Mary Collins, 21 June 1850, Collins Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Ellen Green, a New Englander, married Henderson-resident John Green and a few years after his death wed his brother Hector. She corresponded with her family near Boston, a cousin in Louisville, and with Hector during his business trips. The Greens had five children; their youngest child is remembered as Civil War hero Johnny Green of the Orphan Brigade.

Susan Hart Grigsby, the daughter of Virginia Preston and Nathaniel Hart, married John W. Grigsby in 1850, and the couple settled at Traveller's Rest, the home of Susan's grandfather Isaac Shelby. Her frequent but usually undated letters to her husband and her mother, then Mrs. Robert J. Breckinridge of Lexington, reveal her efforts to care for the couple's six children despite serious financial need.

The wife of historian-journalist-jurist Richard Collins, Mary Cox Collins, the mother of four, received a number of letters from her female relatives relating to their pregnancies as well as her own.

⁵ Susan Yandell to Sarah Wendel, n.d. January 1836, Yandell Family Papers, The Filson Club; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 20 August 1852, Underwood Collection; Sarah Jacob to Kate Jacob, 27 December 1859, Jacob-Johnson Family Papers, The Filson Club.

A Middle-Tennessee native, Susan Wendel Yandell lived in Lexington (1826-1837) and Louisville (1837-1859) where her physician-husband taught and practiced his profession. She raised four children to maturity, buried at least six others who died as infants, and suffered numerous miscarriages and stillbirths. Her letters were written to her family in Murfreesboro and to her husband during his and her occasional travels.

The daughter of Missouri politician Thomas Hart Benton, Sarah Hart Benton Jacob married Oldham County native Richard T. Jacob in 1848. In her letters to her sister-in-law Kate, Jacob admitted that her three children were her "weak spot."

much at night, but they are really frightful about ten o'clock in the morning, which is an hour after I begin to sit up." In 1853 she wrote that she was not well, "more unwell within the last few days than I was at any time at all before Alfred's birth." Thirteen years later, still experiencing difficult pregnancies, she stated, "I have never under similar circumstances had more or as many uncomfortable feelings."⁶

Several of Sarah Jacob's pregnancies were not successful. "I had been taking great care of myself to try to escape another miscarriage," she related to her sister-in-law, "and on the first symptom of such a mishap kept to my bed, thinking that if I retained a horizontal position for some time I would escape." Despite such caution Jacob miscarried again. "I . . . have suffered very much ever since with weakness and pain in the back and [am] very hysterical."⁷

In 1851 thirty-three-year-old Elizabeth Underwood, already the mother of four living children and dead twin sons, also miscarried. A month after the event she recalled in a letter to her husband, "That evening I grew worse and had the misfortune to lose my infant in the third month of its embryo existence, which the Dr. informed me was the most critical period in such selections." In a subsequent letter, she wrote poignantly, "Edith is my *baby* yet."⁸

Antebellum Kentucky women did not always welcome numerous pregnancies. Elizabeth Underwood informed her husband, "I think our present number makes quite a snug little family, & *am liberal* enough to wish my neighbors all the rest." Two years and a miscarriage later, she rejoiced that neither she nor his daughter Jane were "in Julia's present [pregnant] condition

6 Susan Grigsby to Virginia Breckinridge, n.d., Susan Grigsby to Virginia Breckinridge, n.d., c. 1853, Susan Grigsby to John W. Grigsby, 10 March 1866, Jacob-Johnson Family Papers.

7 Sarah Jacob to Kate Jacob, 28 January n.d., Jacob-Johnson Family Papers.

8 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 6 February 1851; n.d. [c. mid February, 1851], Underwood Collection.

otherwise the state of affairs would be lamentable. Jane is very happy to be an exempt case, for a while at least. Poor Eliza has not the same good fortune." A month later Underwood reiterated her point in a letter to her husband:

Quantum sufficient is my cry. I am much obliged to you for the verses and the gift too, provided you add the ways and means to fill the little open mouths, and cover the little naked limbs. But as to any more of the same sort, I beg to be excused, having my time sufficiently filled up now, with washing soiled faces and patching garments; and so I am quite contented to make a pet for a while of a little *grandson*.

Within a few years Underwood would bear two more daughters.⁹

Expectant women often failed to mention their pregnancies; and if they did, they frequently imparted information in a veiled tone about "coming events." Occasionally they noted that the family would soon have another "companion," "partner in our affections," "little stranger," or "juvenile stranger." Elizabeth Underwood used the French noun *enceinte* to refer to one stepdaughter's pregnancy, labelled the other's "her disease," but she did not mention her own pregnancy until after her miscarriage.¹⁰

The sick and the harried sometimes related their experiences only months after delivery, if at all. Having delivered a stillborn child in a previous marriage, Harriet Means of Catlettsburg did not inform her parents of her second pregnancy until after the birth of her son. A month later she told them, "I suffered much more than I expected at the birth of the baby. You remember I took chloroform when my other child was born & had no idea of the suffering." Lamenting that she did not have any of the ladies of the town present because they did not like to attend births, Harriet delivered the baby after five hours in labor. Her

⁹ Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 13 June 1850, 8 May, 8 June 1852, Underwood Collection.

¹⁰ Susan Grigsby to John W. Grigsby, 6 March 1866, Jacob-Johnson Family Papers; Charles Hildreth to Harriet Means, 5 March 1860, Means Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 21 May, 21 April, 11 December 1852, 6 February 1851, Underwood Collection.

help and support came from what she called "a rather select party," a doctor, her husband, and a black neighbor woman. She had wanted chloroform again, but the doctor would not agree. Means was pleased to report that she had gotten along well since the birth of the child: "I did not have any fever & have been very prudent, not sitting up till the tenth day keeping to my room for weeks and as yet I do not go out to my meals." "To look at me," she added, "You would not think I have been sick as my cheeks are so red & complexion so clear. . . . I am still though very weak as I have taken no medicine to strengthen me."¹¹

In fact, Means never mentioned any of her pregnancies until they reached successful fruition. In 1862 she wrote her mother, "I suffered a great deal at the birth of my child. Dr. Van thought I suffered more than I did with any of the other children. . . . I think the child was born about four weeks too soon." In 1865 after the birth of her seventh child, Means told her mother, "I suffered greatly at time of his birth as his head is quite large & he weighs 9½ lbs." Yet she hastened to add, "I had very few after pains & mv milk came more easily than ever before, the babe taking it all without my having to use [a] breast pump . . . to draw it as I always have before."¹²

Most antebellum women breast-fed their infants; it was their duty. When Susan Sillman contracted a bad cold, she lamented, "My dairy apparatus has been a little out of order in consequence." Although stories abounded about the frequency of employing black and white wet nurses, few antebellum Kentucky mothers used them unless it was absolutely necessary. Elizabeth Underwood, who nursed "little pig Edith" until "she pulled me

11 Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 31 December 1856, Means Family Papers. Chloroform was first used as an anesthetic in 1847, but physicians generally shunned its use in childbirth (Genesis 3:16 — "In pain you shall bring forth children") even after it was given to Queen Victoria in 1853 during the birth of her seventh child.

12 Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 25 June 1862, n.d. January 1865, Means Family Papers. Undoubtedly because her father and brother were physicians, Means had access to the latest medical information.

down," employed a black wet nurse for her stepdaughter when her infant grandson was "near starving to death." Hoping the situation would be temporary, she stated, "It was attended with so much trouble to have a wet nurse & another child & with so much risk to raise them on the bottle." After the birth of twin daughters, Harriet Means also employed a wet nurse to supplement her children's dietary needs. Her family of physicians, however, sent word that if she were not pleased with the Irish nurse, she could "get along very well with the help of a good cow and nursing bottle."¹³

The birth of a healthy child usually brought congratulations and advice to the new mother. A relative wrote Mary Collins to share in the joy at the birth of healthy children to them both, "I also have had another little darling entrusted to my care. Kind Providence has favored us Mary, but with new joys we have new responsibilities." After extending well wishes, a cousin warned Ellen Green, "Be careful my dear for ladies who get up so smartly from their confinements are apt to be imprudent & suffer severely from it after." Harriet Means's mother, however, predicted happiness: "It [the birth of twins] is now over & you are well. The children will be sources of enjoyment — to see them & provide for their wants that I think you will not be sorry it is so. God directs all things well."¹⁴

Child care filled their days and monopolized the thoughts of most antebellum mothers. To her husband away on business,

13 Susan Sillman to Henrietta Dana, 2 January 1850, Sillman Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 17 December 1849, Underwood Collection; Charles Hildreth to Harriet Means, 3 February 1860, Means Family Papers.

Susan Sillman and her three children lived in Louisville from 1849 to 1854, while her husband taught at the medical department of the University of Louisville. Writing every week or so to her family in New York, she recorded her observations about Louisville society and her daily activities. Perhaps in jest, she complained that her infant son had already acquired a "bad Kentucky habit" — spitting!

14 Carrie _____ to Mary Collins, 2 February 1846, Collins Family Papers; Elizabeth Williams to Ellen Green, 10 February 1838, Green Family Papers; S. P. Hildreth to Harriet Means, 13 April 1860, Means Family Papers.

Susan Grigsby wrote that their "precious little ones" required "constant personal attention from me" and were "quite enough of themselves to employ my whole time." Grigsby found the children so "interesting" that she resented having her "thoughts directed from their improvement by my other duties." Even when confined to the house by inclement weather, she felt "quite content . . . reading, writing, and *babies* are all inexhaustible sources of my enjoyment." Admiring a little blond curl she compared to a sunbeam, Sarah Jacob admitted that her children were her "weak spot" and that her family and home occupied her "whole interest . . . time, and thoughts." With days "so short and so full of occupation that I have scarcely an hour in the day to call my own," she devoted her mornings to overseeing children's lessons, sewed in the afternoons, and supervised lessons again "after tea" until eight o'clock. Once the children were in bed, she and her husband sat "cosily [*sic*] up to the fire" and discussed topics germane to 1859, from "the right of secession to fattening hogs."¹⁵

Elizabeth Underwood's life also revolved around her children, and to them she credited her own usually contented state. On seeing her three boys come in from play "mired to the knees," she admitted humorously that children could be both "the plague and joy of one's life." On another occasion she reflected that "It is strange how love can lighten and diversify the routine of daily toil encountered by a mother."¹⁶

Fearing that their children would be offensive to others, most mothers believed in the value of discipline and devoted a great deal of attention to carrying it out. From Boston, Martha Simmons wrote her sister Ellen Green who was concerned about her child's lack of manners, "I grieve for you dear Ellen that you

¹⁵ Susan Grigsby to John W. Grigsby, 15, 19 May 1857, Susan Grigsby to Virginia Breckinridge, Christmas Day, n.d., Grigsby Family Papers; Sarah Jacob to Kate Jacob, 1 April 1850, 28 November [1859], Jacob-Johnson Family Papers.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 29 January, 14 May 1850, Underwood Collection.

fear for the disposition of your child. . . . I can only pray for you that your trial will be less than you apprehend." Simmons continued, "I see before you a painful duty. To obtain the entire control of it [the child's disposition] will be the utmost importance to your future happiness but above all to the happiness of your child." Their mother agreed, and she wrote Green, "I hope you will never give up on your government for on it depends the happiness not only of your children but your own & your husband." She also warned Ellen not to allow the children to spend a great deal of time with the slaves who might spoil them or allow them to become "tyrants." For both children and slaves, she advised, "Be firm in your government and make your word a law never to be departed from for that is the chief cornerstone."¹⁷

Horror stories about unruly children abounded. Susan Sillman recorded in her diary that she visited a young widow who could not control a two-year-old who insisted on "pulling lighted sticks from the fire." She recalled, "From what I saw of the mother's management I predict if he lives, that he will cause her trouble." Union-sympathizer Harriet Means remembered a child who was named for General Don Carlos Buell and who had "a great propensity for biting & pulling hair." She stated, "He bit Hildreth every chance he could get . . . & the poor twins like to have reached home bald as he pulled their hair out in great handfuls & bit them."¹⁸

Corporal punishment tended to be a favorite mid-nineteenth-century recourse for unruly children. Many mothers agreed with Elizabeth Underwood who found direction in the Bible. She often quoted Proverbs 29: "The rod & reproof give wisdom; but a child left to *himself* bringeth a Mother to shame. . . . Correct thy son & he shall give thee rest; yea he shall give delight upon thy

¹⁷ Martha Simmons to Ellen Green, 6 July 1839; Sarah Ruggles to Ellen Green, 1 August 1839, Green Family Papers.

¹⁸ Susan Sillman to Henrietta Dana, 6 January 1850, Sillman Family Papers; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 16 December 1862, Means Family Papers.

soul." From Ashland an exhausted Harriet Means, who had coped with children all day, reported, "Bub got sent away three times from dinner by John [her husband] and the last I saw of them, he was after him with a switch. He puts in his spare time nowadays switching him I believe but I can't see as Bub's temper improves under parental discipline."¹⁹

Elizabeth Underwood's oldest son John also often ignored her attempts to curb him. On one occasion he told his friends, "No matter boys, I will steal away from mother." His younger brother Rogers also declared, "I'll steal away from her too when I get big as Johnny." Confronting the child, Underwood gave him "a severe lashing with a riding whip." She recalled, "He begged very stoutly & promised obedience in the future but I kept on a little longer determined to make an impression that would be of service." She admitted that it pained her to punish the child, but she did it because "God had placed him in my charge & I am responsible for him." That night she heard him call out in his sleep, "Oh don't, Mother, don't. I will be good."²⁰

In addition to exemplary behavior, antebellum mothers emphasized the importance of education. As a young bride and still childless, Susan Yandell asserted, "... according to the course of nature, most females have to fill the important station of a wife and mother and to them is entrusted the entire formation and proper regulation of infant minds." Eight years and a number of children later, she still praised the value of education, declaring, "I know of no more pleasant employment to a mother of six or eight children than to be able to give her whole time to their education, certainly none as profitable to both parties." Susan Sillman agreed: "The whole afternoon is occupied in aiding her [daughter Alice's] studies."²¹

19 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 20 January 1851, Underwood Collection; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 21 July 1860, Means Family Papers.

20 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 20 January 1851, Underwood Collection.

21 Susan Yandell to David Wendel, Christmas, 1824, 28 October 1832, Yandell Family Papers; Susan Sillman to Henrietta Dana, 16 November

Having no faith in the provincial schools of which she may have been a product, Sarah Jacob confessed concern over her children's education. "I was holly [sic] at a loss . . . so after much thought I determined to keep school myself," she said. For at least three years she conducted classes for her own children and several neighbor children for "several hours in the morning and an hour in the afternoon." She reserved Sunday for "reading a chapter in the Bible, hearing their lessons and catechism." Jacob even continued to hold classes in the summer because the children "are making such good progress that I do not like to lose any time."²²

Although not usually responsible for their children's total educational experience, most mothers heard lessons and tried to instill good study practices. Susan Yandell insisted, "After a child can read, the most important step is to learn to think; this they are never taught at school; and even in the irregular manner in which I can attend to her I can learn [sic] her [Mag] something of this." Elizabeth Underwood also listened to her children's lessons in the evenings, and she wanted her eldest son John always to set a standard in education and life for his siblings. She reminded him to "stand firm in virtue like the rock of the ocean, resisting the waves of sin & folly & . . . [your] example will serve as a light-house to guide . . . [your] little brothers safe to the shores of eternity."²³

While there were not a great number of publications devoted exclusively to motherhood, *Mother's Magazine* proved a favorite for at least one antebellum Kentucky woman. "I now take a pamphlet called 'Mother's Magazine,' published in Utica, New York once a month, at \$1 a year," wrote Susan Yandell who de-

1850, Sillman Family Papers. Susan Yandell's little sister Mag was about the same age as her first child.

²² Sarah Jacob to Kate Jacob, 3 March 1856, 6 June, 28 November 1858, Jacob-Johnson Family Papers.

²³ Susan Yandell to David Wendel, 30 December 1838, Yandell Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 9 December 1849, Underwood Collection.

clared that "it should be in the hands of every mother." She heaped continuing praise upon the magazine, claiming it "to be a more important influence on the rising generation than any other publication." Often exasperated by the countless demands upon her time, Yandell admitted to her mother that the New York magazine "may save the soul of one of your children."²⁴

With the responsibilities of child care often all encompassing, many mothers found little time for social activities. When Frances Peter's husband chided her for not accepting several invitations extended to her, the Lexington mother of seven questioned how she could occupy her or "any other parlor when I have constantly the care of the young children?" She enjoyed company, she explained, and expected to entertain his friends when he was in town; however, because of her domestic responsibilities, she had dismissed all notions of giving "Lady parties."²⁵

In contrast, Susan Sillman enjoyed a relatively busy social life. The Sillmans lived in a boardinghouse during their first year in Louisville and without housekeeping duties, Susan Sillman found time to make social calls. On learning that one of her new acquaintances could not "sew a stitch" she wondered how the poor woman managed to "bring up a family of 12 children without this knowledge." Sillman was a fine seamstress — and apparently barely completed one season's wardrobe for her three youngsters before it was time to prepare togs for another season — "I have as much to do . . . as I can well accomplish." Susan Yandell often apologized for writing infrequently because so much of her time had been used "making and cutting summer

24 Susan Yandell to Sarah Wendel, 12 May, 28 July 1833, Yandell Family Papers.

25 Frances Peter to Robert Peter, 16 December 1850, Catherine and Howard Evans Papers, Special Collections, University of Kentucky (hereafter cited as Evans Papers).

Frances Peter bore eleven children between 1836 and 1857. Throughout these years her husband Robert taught chemistry at the Transylvania Medical Department and, for a brief stint in the early 1850s, at Louisville's Kentucky School of Medicine. Because his duties in Louisville involved less than five months of the year, Frances and the children remained in Lexington.

clothes for the children and servants." Sarah Jacob likewise made all of her children's apparel "which is no slight job I assure you."²⁶

The arrival of the sewing machine proved a godsend to those willing to try the new gadget. When her husband went to New York in 1853, Mary Collins asked him to examine a machine she saw advertised for \$25.00, for one "could be made useful." However, she warned him not to purchase it until he talked to her. "A lady alone can be the judge of its merits," she advised. Harriet Means spent several weeks each spring and fall patching, adapting hand-me-downs, and making new clothes for her rapidly expanding family. Consequently, she was "determined to have a machine. . . . Now they are down to \$50 I think I can afford it," she decided in 1858. Six years later she purchased a second, manually operated device that clamped on a table. With the second machine her maid could help her stitch "the piles laid up to be lengthened and altered" as well as new breeches and dresses fashioned from patterns supplied by her mother.²⁷

Mid-19th-century mothers also saw to their youngsters' physical well-being. Although many families of the late era had access to the ministrations of a trained physician, mothers nevertheless provided most of the nursing care. Then, as now, the ills suffered by their wee ones tortured parents' emotional systems and challenged their skills and stamina. Susan Grigsby "had a fright," (which she claimed was made worse by her "indisposition") when a pony kicked her daughter "flat." Believing the child's shoulder merely bruised, Grigsby nevertheless sent for the doctor, and although he confirmed her diagnosis, she remained apprehensive, for "it is impossible to control our feelings under all circumstances." Harriet Means was "scared half

26 Susan Sillman to Henrietta Dana, 6, 29 January 1850, Sillman Family Papers; Susan Yandell to Sarah Wendel, 14 April 1839, Yandell Family Papers; Sarah Jacob to Kate Jacob, 8 March 1851, Jacob-Johnson Family Papers.

27 Mary Collins to Richard Collins, 4 February 1853, Collins Family Papers; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 15 November 1858, 12 September 1864, Means Family Papers.

to death" when her daughter broke her arm. The local physician set the limb, but the pain continued and the child cried constantly for several days and sleepless nights. Cautious, Means left the splints on a few extra weeks and on removing them found the arm "so crooked and stiff that I thought it was ruined forever. . . . I have cried myself sick over it." Plagued by her own guilt, she wrote a year later that "besides the looks of it, I feel confident it will always be some stiff — poor child."²⁸

In falling from the corncrib rafters, Rogers Underwood struck his chin on the edge of a barrel. Although she found the five-year-old "streaming in blood," the injury was not nearly as severe as his mother feared, nor apparently as frightening as his accident of a few weeks earlier. Then, Underwood had answered his "violent screams" to discover he had been scalded on the face and neck when he ran into a servant carrying a teapot filled with hot water. She treated the burns with camphor and starch and kept the child in bed for a few days. Two weeks later all traces of the burn were gone. "He is delighted with his recovery and thinks mother is better than all the Doctors in the world," Underwood related. But the accident frightened her. "I remembered when Robert was scalded on the breast that I thought it was a blessing that his face escaped, and now that little precious Deedles [Rogers] has suffered in the face, I look upon it as a miracle of mercy that his eyes are not in the least injured and that none of the steam was inhaled down his throat."²⁹

Hot fireplaces and iron stoves also threatened the safety of little ones. One of the Means twins fell over the fireplace fender and against the hot grate, burning her leg "dreadfully." Treated with a poultice and then with a salve "of Dr. Van's manufacture" the burn eventually healed, but for two weeks Means "had to

28 Susan Grigsby to John W. Grigsby, n.d., June 1859, Grigsby Family Papers; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 12 March 1862, n.d., April 1862, 3 February 1863. Means Family Papers.

29 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 25, 31 March, 13 April 1852, Underwood Collection. Camphor might soothe a minor burn, but neither it nor starch possesses curative properties.



"True Woman's Sphere"

The Filson Club



"True Woman's Sphere"

The Filson Club

nurse her most of the time — or else let her lay in the crib." Undoubtedly many children were not as lucky as the Grigsby, Underwood, and Means youngsters. The 1850 census indicates that at least 178 Kentucky children under five years of age met accidental deaths that year.³⁰

"Health is the greatest of all blessings," wrote Elizabeth Underwood. Good health bore a direct relationship to diet and clothing, contemporary experts advised, and improving health and preventing illness was a mother's major duty. In their quest to secure health, some parents undoubtedly endangered it. During a visit to Harrodsburg Springs, one of the state's favorite resorts, Susan Yandell sought the advice of other visiting parents and physicians on how to improve the health of her delicate toddler. "We had a general consultation," and agreed "that if I would put flannel pantalets with bodies and sleeves on him, he would recover." She followed the suggestion. "I really believe they will cure him," she noted hopefully. Harriet Means also dressed her wee ones in flannel during the summer months. Although prickly heat covered the constantly "squalling" toddler, Means determined that the child would continue to wear flannel underwear "as long as she keeps well." But lest the child become too warm, Means allowed her to go without shoes, and when the "temperature has stood at 102, I have sometimes taken of[f] the flannel skirt though I still make [the babies] wear flannel shirts."³¹

In addition to warm clothing, Elizabeth Underwood advocated cold baths, exercise, a simple diet, and nature. During the summer months she and her four children started their day with cold

30 Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 12 March 1862, Means Family Papers; *Mortality Statistics of the Seventh Census of the United States, 1850* . . . (Washington, 1855), 94.

31 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 22 December 1851, Underwood Collection; Susan Yandell to Sarah Wendel, 2 August 1832, Yandell Family Papers; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 20 July 1859; Means Family Papers; John Bright, *Mother's Medical Guide* . . . (Louisville, 1844), 600-603. A number of medical advice books were available in the mid 19th century. Their recommended treatments differed, but all stressed the mother's role in preventing illness.

baths at dawn; as long as they remained well, Underwood believed their good health was "fine proof of the efficacy" of the chilly ablution. Her own "fresh and wholesome" condition she credited to a "bath, taken before sunrise, and the quiet and even tenor of my daily life." Underwood closely supervised her children's diet, limiting their evening meal to "cold bread altogether with no butter & no pork. I give them tea, milk, molasses, rice and such things as I think are most easily digested. I have also been giving them a tonic and using the salt bath."³²

Underwood professed that she "hated the sight of the [medical] fraternity" and shunned their "poisonous drugs" and "nostrums." She placed her confidence in the "great physician Nature." When her toddler appeared "delicate" and "white as a lily," Underwood massaged her, bathed her feet, "gave her a little sweet oil and sugar," and trusted that "nature aided by these simple means" would effect a cure. When the children showed signs of illness despite the baths, tonic, and easily digested foods, Underwood was mystified, observing that "health is the greatest of all blessings."³³

Mothers dispensed medications to prevent illnesses as well as to treat them. "Oh such a blessing is health! And I desire that our children shall possess it above all things earthly," Susan Grigsby penned to her husband. Consequently, she watched for

32 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 9 December 1849, 27 June 1850, 29 January, 8 May 1852, Underwood Collection; John Gunn, *Domestic Medicine or Poor Man's Friend* . . . (Philadelphia, 1840), 168-74. Contemporary medical publications suggested that cold baths in the summer months were an important means of preventing disease, particularly fevers, by lessening the heat of the body and removing from the skin its "impure and acrid contents . . . the primary source of disease." Gunn's book, which appeared in a number of editions published in Louisville during the 1850s, warned parents against foods that were difficult to digest. John King, *The American Family Physician; or Domestic Guide to Health* (Cincinnati, 1858), 35-37, included a list of favorite foods and the time required for their digestion. Fresh whole-wheat bread, it advised, remained in the stomach longer than corn bread, a hard-boiled egg required twice the digestive time as a raw egg, and boiled potatoes needed an hour longer than roasted ones.

33 Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 8 January, 7 February, 11 July 1850, 20 January 1851, Underwood Collection.

signs of coming illness. When little Alfred seemed "on the verge of a spell," she "discovered his condition in time," gave him an emetic and a dose of medicine. "He is improving but still requires a little more medicating," she diagnosed.³⁴

Susan Sillman and Harriet Means likewise practiced preventive medicine. Learning that smallpox had been diagnosed in Louisville, Sillman vaccinated her children and their nurse "by myself . . . but it has not taken." When Means heard the disease was in the Ashland area, she breathed a sigh of relief that she had earlier "persevered" and had her baby vaccinated, despite objections from her physician-brother. The vaccination "took in all three places."³⁵

Despite all efforts to preserve good health and prevent illnesses, children sickened. Respiratory infections — colds, influenza, croup, bronchitis, and other maladies affecting the lungs and chest — were particularly wearisome during cold weather. In the autumn of 1850 Frances Peters's children were so continually troubled with colds that she feared they were "developing" whooping cough. Susan Grigsby's progeny suffered with such bad colds throughout the winter of 1855 that by spring Susie needed "immediate attention" because her "palate and one tonsil seem to have grown together." Harriet Means likewise complained of her children having colds. "I get up every night about midnight, hunt up my goose grease bottle and give some of them a good greasing. . . . They cough so I can't sleep until I get them settled with the goose grease."³⁶

Two winters thereafter Harriet Means operated "a little hos-

34 Susan Grigsby to John W. Grigsby, 13 August 1860, Grigsby Family Papers.

35 Susan Sillman to Henrietta Dana, 16 November 1850, Sillman Family Papers; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 16 December 1860, 22 December 1862, Means Family Papers. Smallpox remained an occasional threat to Kentuckians throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

36 Frances Peter to Robert Peter, 16 December 1850, Evans Family Papers; Susan Grigsby to Virginia Breckinridge, 13 April 1855, Grigsby Collection; Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 9 January 1861, Means Family Papers.

pital"; all five children were stricken with what was diagnosed by one doctor as "typhoid pneumonia or something like that" and by another as "something like" diphtheria. The baby's breathing became so labored Means feared the child would die, and the twins "nearly strangled" when they coughed. The older children exhibited the dreadful cough as well as sore and swollen throats, high fever, and cold extremities. "All five of them have been coughing together for more than two weeks." The doctor prescribed "castor oil & molasses, sometimes with Godfrey's cordial and slippery elm water," but Means decided that Cherry Pectoral and hoarhound candy "seemed to help them more than any medicine." The Underwood youngsters also coughed in concert" and in "every key." Their mother became so frightened of the croup that threatened the youngest child, she asked God not to take "our little Edith home" and then chided herself for her "mother's selfishness."³⁷

The maladies associated with warm weather included a host of enteric disorders, many of which were undoubtedly caused by poor sanitation and inadequate food preservation. Relatively mild "summer complaints" as well as the more serious cholera infantum, typhoid, and dysentery, all provoked high fevers and upset the digestive tract in varying degrees. "Bowel complaints" bothered many children. Antebellum society seemed much concerned about the regularity and condition of bowel movements. Anything less than "normal" indicated a malfunctioning digestive tract in need of treatment; purges and emetics to cleanse

³⁷ Harriet Means to S. P. Hildreth, 17 February 1863, Means Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 8, 23 January, 20, 26 December 1850, Underwood Collection. A tonic of slippery elm (bark steeped in water) "cooled and soothed" the bowel and as a jelly exhibited "certain and astonishing" remedial powers for all bowel and breast complaints (Gunn, *Domestic Medicine*, 535). Ewell recommended cough syrups made by boiling tolu, syrup of ipecac, paregoric, and sweet oil or a concoction of hoarhound, catnip, tansy, hyssop, sarsaparilla, liquorice root, and hops added to a mixture of sugar, molasses, and brandy. For croup, remedies ranged from foot and hip baths, syrup of ipecac to produce vomiting, and rubbing the spine with turpentine to using leeches on the breastbone and neck (*Married Ladies Indispensable Companion and Family Physician* [New York, 1852], 11).

the system constituted favorite remedies. Susan Grigsby's "precious little Alfred" frequently suffered from "bowels quite disordered," a malady which his mother dosed with a variety of concoctions recommended by the local physician. When Harriet Means's son suffered with "bowel complaint," she attributed it to "drinking river water."³⁸

Asiatic cholera, one of the 19th century's most frightening maladies, struck Lexington in the summer of 1833. In an attempt to allay their fears, Susan Yandell assured her parents in Middle Tennessee that accounts of the disease in Lexington were exaggerated, then finally admitted that the disease was rampant and a "perfect panic prevailed." Although more than five hundred of Lexington's residents died, the Yandells remained untouched.³⁹

Cholera returned to Kentucky in 1848 for a six-year visit. Living in Maysville, one of the towns devastated by the disease in 1833, Frances Peter refused to fear contracting the malady herself but admitted that "I feel more anxious about it having a large family of children." Throughout the summer of 1850, Elizabeth Underwood undoubtedly worried more about cholera than she admitted. Relying on cold, salt-water baths, a simple diet to preserve their good health, and "using lime [in the privy] during the summer as a precaution," she reported that all were well "except little Edith who continues to be disordered by teething. . . . I diet her and give her brandy toddy with ice &

38 Susan Grigsby to Virginia Breckinridge, n.d., Grigsby Family Papers; Harriet Means to John Means, n.d. April 1859, Means Family Papers. As with other maladies, the physicians disagreed on the medications for bowel complaints but generally prescribed an emetic to remove the poisons and paregoric, laudanum, or other opiates to calm the bowel.

39 Susan Yandell to David Wendel, 7, 11 June 1833; Lunsford Yandell to David Wendel, 9 June 1833, Yandell Family Papers. Caused by water contaminated with the fecal matter of other cholera victims, Asiatic cholera is characterized by a brief incubation period, violent vomiting and diarrhea, and a high mortality rate; death can occur a few hours after onset. For a history of the cholera epidemics in Kentucky, see Nancy D. Baird, "Asiatic Cholera's First Visit to Kentucky: A Study in Panic and Fear," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 48 (1974): 228-40 and "Asiatic Cholera: Kentucky's First Public Health Instructor," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 48 (1974): 327-41.

such simple restoration but nothing fully relieves until the teeth make their appearance." Two years later cholera again plagued south-central Kentucky. Believing that ingesting green fruits caused the disease, Underwood "kept watch over the children to prevent their killing themselves on green apples, blueberries, etc. Several of them have had afflictions of the bowels already from eating these fruits but at present all are well." Everyone was "in bright-eyed health, she assured her absent husband.⁴⁰

Cholera visited occasionally; diphtheria was frequently present. In the spring of 1861 Harriet Means's parents heard rumors that the disease prevailed in Kentucky. "Oh what would you do if it should attack your children," her father asked. "It must be heart rendering [*sic*] to parents to see them suffer so much." Between mid 1859 and mid 1860 diphtheria claimed at least eighty-one Kentucky children. Two summers later, the child-killer struck central Kentucky. The Grigsby children were among its victims. Susan Grigsby's husband had left a few days earlier with a group of Confederates, and friends and neighbors who might have offered their assistance to the beleaguered mother either were busy nursing their own broods or feared they might carry "the terrible diphtheria [*sic*] . . . into the midst of a numerous collection of children." Consequently, Grigsby nursed her children virtually unaided. Hearing of the young mother's plight, a physician's daughter in Danville volunteered her services. "I have had diphtheria. . . . I feel deeply for you and hope God will bless the means used for the recovery of your dear children." But before the offer had arrived, four of the six Grigsby children were dead. A few days after burying her fourth child, Grigsby appealed to Union General J. T. Boyle for a pass through the Cumberland Gap to join her husband in Tennessee. Boyle approved the request, but a large Union army blocked her route; the grieving mother remained in Kentucky. Nevertheless, learn-

40 Frances Peter to Letitia Peter, January 1849, Evans Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 23 July, 6 August 1850, 8, 21 June 1852, Underwood Collection.

ing of Grigsby's plans to leave, several of her husband's creditors sent terse notes demanding payment. "I have been patient and forbearing . . . this matter must be attended to," commanded a Garrard County merchant.⁴¹

From friends and acquaintances Grigsby heard the usual condolences about God taking his lambs home. "Weep not! Mother, for your treasures" wrote a well-meaning friend who included a poem about the "four little songsters added to the Heavenly choir." A cousin commiserated that she had "found by experience that our necessities are God's opportunities." Colonel Grigsby did not learn of his children's deaths until nearly four months later. In a emotional letter he recounted their lost treasures and expressed admiration for his "poor dear wife" who had borne up under her "great trial" of having the little ones "torn so suddenly from you."⁴²

Unfortunately, many of Susan Grigsby's contemporaries shared the trauma of lost little ones. "The land really seems to be in mourning for children," a Lexington matron wailed in the fall of 1860. No statistics are available for the first half of the 19th century, but the 1850 census indicates that more than thirty-seven percent of Kentucky's 15,000 deaths that year were among children under five; the count for 1860 was forty-five percent. The latter enumeration probably reflects more accurate records rather than an increase in deaths. The major causes of mid-century deaths among Kentucky children under five included: cholera, 603; cholera infantum, 160; consumption, 108; convulsions, 89; croup, 565; diarrhea, 400; dysentery, 422; unspecified fever, 259; scarlet fever, 147; hives, 87; whooping cough, 251; inflammation of the bowels, 63; inflammation of the brain, 249;

41 Prescott Hildreth to Harriet Means, 5 April 1861, Means Family Papers; Robert Scott to Susan Grigsby, 3 November 1862; Susan Fishback to Susan Grigsby, 2 October 1862; Kate Pawling to Susan Grigsby, 19 October 1862; G. H. McKinney to Susan Grigsby, 3 November 1862, Grigsby Family Papers.

42 Bettie Terrell to Susan Grigsby, 1 December 1862; John W. Grigsby to Susan Grigsby, 11 February 1863, Grigsby Family Papers.

pneumonia, 138; smallpox, 49; worms, 85. Figures collected by the Kentucky State Medical Society between 1852 and 1858 bear similarities to those of the census. Despite inaccuracies in enumeration and diagnosis, the statistics prepared by the state and national governments provide heartbreaking information about infant mortality in Kentucky.⁴³

Nearly all antebellum mothers lost at least one child. Many died within the first few weeks of life. Ellen Green wrote in her diary that her babe, "the solace of my dear Hector and myself, was fast gaining on our affection when it pleased the wise Disposer of all things to take him to himself." Attempting to comfort his daughter on the death of her infant, Harriet Means's father suggested that her little son had been merely "lent for a season . . . [and] taken back to Him from whence it came." The first two years were so uncertain that Elizabeth Underwood breathed a sigh of relief when Edith passed the "critical period . . . the second summer." The frequency with which babes were "taken back" did not lessen the grief of those who bore them. "Oh! It is hard to give up what is so closely entwined in our hearts," Elizabeth Underwood remarked on hearing of a neighbor's loss. In addition to suffering a number of miscarriages, Underwood had lost a set of twins a few days after their birth and would bury two more children — Edith and Rogers — before their ninth birthdays.⁴⁴

When dysentery visited the Yandell family in 1836, Susan nearly died; her six-year-old did. "Yesterday we committed the remains of our darling little Wilson to the grave, where he rests by the side of a little sister and three infant brothers," wrote

43 Susan Fishback to Susan Grigsby, 29 September 1860, Grigsby Family Papers. *Mortality Statistics of the Seventh Census*, 94-99; *Statistics of the United States in 1860*. . . (Washington, 1860), 44-45; WPA, *Medicine and Its Development in Kentucky* (Louisville, 1939), Appendix IV.

44 Ellen Green's Journal, 10 January 1836, Green Family Papers; Susan Fishback to Susan Grigsby, 10 January 1861, Grigsby Family Papers; Prescott Hildreth to Harriet Perkins [Means], 13 August 1849, Means Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 11, 31 July 1850, Underwood Collection.

his heartbroken father; two years later the Yandells bore three-year-old Johnny to the family plot. That the death of children was commonplace did not soften the loss; although she raised four children to maturity, Susan Yandell never ceased to grieve for those who died. "The misfortunes of others does not make me think mine any the less," she wrote after hearing about the death of a friend's child. "My wounded heart is not at all healed." Nor would it — or those of her contemporaries — ever mend completely.⁴⁵

The custodial responsibilities of Kentucky mothers would witness few changes during the post Civil War years. However, according to figures gathered by the United States census, the mortality rate of their children gradually declined. By the end of the century, less than one-third of all Kentucky deaths occurred among children under five; the figure continued to drop in the early decades of the present century. Many factors helped to bring about the change, but improved sanitation measures accounted for much of the increased life span.

Motherhood has always been a long-term commitment. For women of the late antebellum era, the responsibilities encompassed both joys and sorrows. Children were "gifts of God" according to Harriet Means's mother, yet uncertainties menaced pregnancies and birth, and the fragility of life haunted the early years of childhood. Relying heavily on their own common sense and a modicum of questionable medical advice, mothers trained and disciplined their children, fed and clothed them, supervised their daily well-being, cared for them in sickness and grieved for the many who died. Although the women in this study enjoyed the advantages of domestic help, they often lacked the physical support of a spouse; those fathers who remained nearby apparently had little involvement in the day-to-day rearing of their children. Elizabeth Underwood expressed the attitude

⁴⁵ Lunsford Yandell to Sarah Wendel, 13 June 1836; Susan Yandell to Martha Burrus, 18 October 1836, Yandell Family Papers.

of the era when she explained that "a mother is the proper one to look after her children." Motherhood, she proclaimed, was "a true woman's sphere."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ S. P. Hildreth to Harriet Means, 5 March 1860, Means Family Papers; Elizabeth Underwood to Joseph Underwood, 23 February, 31 March 1852, Underwood Collection.