Introduction:

A plate can be many things: round, square, paper, plastic, porcelain, sturdy, delicate. At first glance a dinner plate is but a singular object. Dinnerware, however, can be a lens through which one views culture.

When my grandmother was born, America was transitioning from elegant fine chinaware to economically fine chinaware. Table presentation was a window to family dynamics, individual identity, and social structure. The social norms of an era are visualized through the kinds of products used – mostly by women – to care for their families through the serving of food. Crucial to the maintenance of eating as a social ritual, of course, were the manufacturers making the dinnerware.

Founded by William H. Farrar in 1871, the Syracuse China Corporation (then Onondaga Pottery Company) surged quickly and effectively into the pottery and ceramic industry. Still a relatively new industry to the United States, in general, the company would strive in its early years to produce ware that rivaled products from European competitors. America, in essence, needed to find a way to present their social and cultural values as civilized, sophisticated, and worthy of recognition. For Syracuse China, this goal manifested itself in the quest to produce the first American made, true, vitreous fine chinaware.

The years between 1885 and 1890 were crucial to the success of Syracuse China due to the leadership of company president, James Pass. Coming into the industry at his father’s hand in 1875, Pass began experimenting with complex chemical formulas for different kinds of clay materials and glazes (used to finish off chinaware once fired). Researchers have consulted pocket diaries kept by Pass to learn about the company’s scheduled events, statistics, experiments, and Pass’ personal formulas and date codes (imprinted on the underside of chinaware). At first his diaries were considered nothing more than personal property, rather than belonging to the company. Now, the diaries can lend essential insights on how the Syracuse China Corporation functioned under James Pass’ reign.

Among one of his foremost goals, for example, was the manufacturing of true American fine chinaware, as mentioned previously. Yet to be fulfilled by any other American pottery or ceramic manufacturer, Pass claimed that the trick to successfully producing this fine china was having a precise chemical formula. This formula would produce chinaware that was translucent, durable, and adorned with proper glazes.

In 1884, more superior ware had already gone into production with emphasis placed on decoration. The goal here was to create ware that was decorative enough to offset the possible overwhelming whiteness of the ware itself. Imperative in achieving this was collaborating with Elmer Walter, decorator of Boston China Decorating Works. Originally starting up shop down the block from the Syracuse China factory, Walter hand-lined and branded the pottery with various colors, sometimes even with expensive gold accents. Walter even trained and hired young women to partake in the decorating processes.

In 1886 Walter moved into the factory permanently after a fire ruined his shop. The Onondaga Pottery Company then became the first American manufacturer to have its own in-house decorating shop. By the end of the decade, James Pass had acquired a privileged reputation for the quality of tableware being produced by Onondaga Pottery, especially, in time, the chinaware. It would be his ability to successfully manufacture the true American chinaware that would pave the way for the company to become a frontrunner in American china production for generations to come.

American Fine China is born:

A unique factor in the emergence of American pottery at the beginning of the 20th century was how closely it was allied with science. James Pass was only able to come up with Syracuse China’s true china body because he composed formulas. Pottery was about experimenting with heat and distinguishing which raw materials would contribute to the best quality chinaware. Pass made a breakthrough when he began using clay from North Carolina that was referred to as Hog Rock clay. By adjusting certain proportions within the body of the clay, Pass discovered that he could product different kinds of products.

In 1891 Imperial Geddo was born, the first true, vitreous American chinaware, developed by James Pass, to be put on the public market. With two dozen shapes, the chinaware had elegant firing and decoration. The top quality clay was only available until 1894, but Imperial Geddo shifted to live on with slightly lower quality clay. Still, during its three years on the market, Imperial Geddo contributed to six percent of Onondaga Pottery’s total production output. The chinaware was also the first to use gold decorations, which was a ridiculously expensive process.

Soon after Imperial Geddo, the pottery company became affiliated with the Yates Hotel in Syracuse. Rave reviews from the five-star establishment helped Syracuse China gain an even more refined reputation in the pottery industry, and this helped the company to surge forward to become one of the best in America.

Domestically Fine China:

The first style the company produced aimed specifically at domestic and family use was the Marmora style. Targeting women, its “historical importance rests in its priority as the first large-volume production American china dinnerware shape to arrive on the market.” By 1892 James Pass began to phase out earthenware products so the company could exclusively produce the chinaware.

The Plymouth style was produced in 1895. It had elegant curved edges and rims. Everything had pedestals to prevent scratching or sliding on tabletops, and all covers fit perfectly instead of slipping into the dishes. Popular well into the 1920s, it was with Plymouth that Onondaga Pottery came to be symbolic with high-quality standards for American made china.

Technologically Fine China:

The 1890s meant changes in technology for the Syracuse China Corporation. Pass wanted to develop and improve the machines used to produce chinaware in order to free-up that could be used for aspects of china making meant to be handmade. After experimenting with different kinds of clay, Pass eventually filled Syracuse China’s kilns exclusively with Chinaware, the first manufacturer in America to do so.

One important new technique implemented by the company was Decalomania: “a method of affixing pictures and designs printed in multiple ceramic colors on a specially prepared duplex paper to a smooth ceramic surface (Reed, 70).” This also allowed Pass to make strides in notions of labor, because he was one of the first entrepreneurs to employ women alongside men, particularly in the decoration of the company’s products.

Reforming Gendered Divisions of Labor:

This was a period where women were expected to thrive in a domestic environment. A woman’s duties were to tend to the needs of her husband and children. My grandmother and my great-grandmother, for example, did not work outside the home. Particularly, Eleanor Curbeau (my maternal grandmother) cared for four children during the way while my grandfather, Donald, ran a children’s clothing store. After a long day at work, my grandfather came home to a hot meal on the table ready to be consumed. He sat down with his family surrounding him and let the food delicately prepared by his wife clear away the stress and exhaustion of the workday.

Women were said to be responsible for caring for a husband like a guardian angel would care for a specific human being. That being said, men and women were not supposed to cross into each other’s designated spheres of sociality. Men belonged in the public world of business and relations. Women belonged in the private world of the beautifully kept, well-mannered home and family. For a man to have the means to keep traversing the outside world depended on the care he received from his wife in the evening.

Women were taught to bring men drinks and warm slippers. They were to suppress their own thoughts and desires so that their husbands could vent out their daily frustrations. Women were to be the caregivers at the expense of their own personal time, moods, and tastes. The selfless woman sacrificed on her own behalf in order to invest in her personal familial relationships, above all else. James Pass, by employing women to do some of the same jobs as men, breached previously accepted social conceptions of gendered labor, and gender roles within the family.

Reflections and Conclusions:

My grandmother would have been born near the end of the first era of American-made fine china. From the late 19th century into the early 20th, society emphasized the importance of the family as a privatized sector. The home was the arena through which masculine and feminine gender roles were enacted. Eleanor Curbeau would have been raised in the image of woman as nurturer and family matriarch. America was entrenched with beliefs that the nations hopes for continued success and survival lay in the woman’s ability to care for her family. Through a family dinner, my grandmother was taught to serve food as a way to combat the evils and stresses of the outside, public world (Rotman, 666).

Tableware from the Syracuse China Corporation would be used to produce proper, aesthetically appealing tables. In the years between the establishment of the Onondaga Pottery Company and the beginning of World War I emphasis was placed on producing American made fine china. The privatized notions of family life and a severe emphasis on women’s domestic duties led to a want for tableware that could be used in the home for regular family meals, both formally and informally. This way, the ware, as objects of material culture, will still represent ideals of high civilization. In this era, consumers wanted chinaware that was thin, light, but strong enough to be used in any dining setting. Decoractions, such as gold trims and hand painted flowers, reflected the elegance of how family meals were presented, especially in middle and upper-class society.