Old-Time New England

THE BULLETIN OF

The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

DEVOTED TO THE ANCIENT BUILDINGS, HOUSEHOLD FURNISHINGS, DOMESTIC ARTS, MANNERS AND CUSTOMS, AND MINOR ANTIQUITIES OF THE NEW ENGLAND PEOPLE

Volume XL APRIL, 1950 *Number* 4

Sewing-birds viewed by a Naturalist

BY MANTON COPELAND

Bowdoin College

TO the dealer in antiques a sewing-bird may be almost anything that clamps to a table and shows some relation to sewing. When he writes he is sending me one, I wonder if it will prove to be a pincushion or a primitive clamp, a rug braider or a goffering iron, a dolphin or a fish, a butterfly, dog, frog, stag, cupid, a box, or even a bird. One thing, and only one, is certain; the anticipation is delightful.

If Mr. Webster ever saw a sewing-bird, he fails to mention it in the particular dictionary I have on my desk.

Turning to the *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* I find in coarse print that a sewing-bird is "A clamp used by women to hold fabrics in position for stitching by hand." Somewhat encouraged, I read in finer print that "the bird is screwed to the edge of a table or the like; and its beak, which closes by a spring and can be opened by a lever actuated by the tail, holds the material. It is now little used."

It is not so much that I am disturbed by the facts that some sewing-birds do not open their beaks when their tails are pinched; that a few do not clamp to a table; and that they are used today more frequently than is generally believed; but rather, that anyone should call a dog, or a butterfly, a bird.

It all may be due to the narrowed mind of a biologist, but having explained to my students for forty years that a bat is not a bird, nor a whale a fish, it is far too late for me to regard cupids as birds, although I am forced to admit they are not without biological significance. In view of my training, therefore, it was to be expected that when I became interested in these sewing aids, about ten years ago, I began classifying them.

First of all, the sewing-clamps, including the primitives, cushion-clamps, and other items, were separated from the sewing-animals. The latter in turn were divided *uncompromisingly* into sewing-birds, sewing-butterflies, sewing-dogs, and several additional zoological groups. The birds of course are the most common, and as my collection grew I found, without undue stretching of the imagination, they could be classified into orders, families, genera, species (called types), and varieties, much as one may arrange living things.

My classification was first accepted by

a pioneer in this field, Mrs. Nathan I. Bijur,[1] of Long Branch, New Jersey, and later by a few other enthusiastic collectors, who are attempting not only to acquire sewing-birds but also to bring together information on their origin and subsequent history. Thus it happened that I became confronted with the problem of terminology.

I resolved not to lead the followers of sewing-birds into the entanglements now encountered by naturalists struggling with their Linnaean system. Sewing-bird "nomenclature" would be simple, devoid of a "law of priority," and with Roman numerals the nearest approach to Latin. Particularly, I would have it always informative to the initiated.

The scheme devised appears to be successful, as is testified by the following excerpt from a letter recently received from a collector: "After working the formula on the two former [sewing-birds] I reached the conclusion that one is a IC3-3 var. 1 and the other is a IC3-16 var. 1."

Let us examine what we have here. Both birds belong to genus 3 of family C of order I. Order I contains the Bill Graspers, or those birds that hold the sewing material *in* their bills. A member of family IC is "feathered" above *and* below, and genus IC3 includes a long series of birds with spread wings on which one finds "Patented Feb. 15 1853." That is the date on which Charles Waterman, of Meriden, Connecticut, patented the design found on an ancestor of this group belonging to family IB (birds feathered above but *not* below, although the under parts may be painted to represent feathers). The IC3 birds appear to be made of brass and, with the exception of recent ones still being sold in Meriden,[2] they are plated.

Turning to Waterman's specification of his 1853 bird one reads: "The burden borne upon the back of the bird is in fact the emery ball. . . ." This emery ball, with one known exception, is still to be found on the birds of IC3, although careful inspection of many has failed to reveal the presence of emery.

Another characteristic of the genus is a cushion, larger than the emery ball, glued in an ornamented metal cup soldered to a small post on the upper corner of the clamp. It, as well as the emery ball, often breaks away and is lost. When this happens the post becomes clearly visible. However, now and then a sewing-bird is found without this lower cushion, as we call it, and with its support removed. When the first ones appeared I thought the elimination of the post was the result of homework by father when mother lost the cushion and disliked the appearance of the projecting metal. Later I learned that these birds were made and sold with and without the lower cushion. One lacking the post never possessed a cushion and is designated in our classification as variety 1.

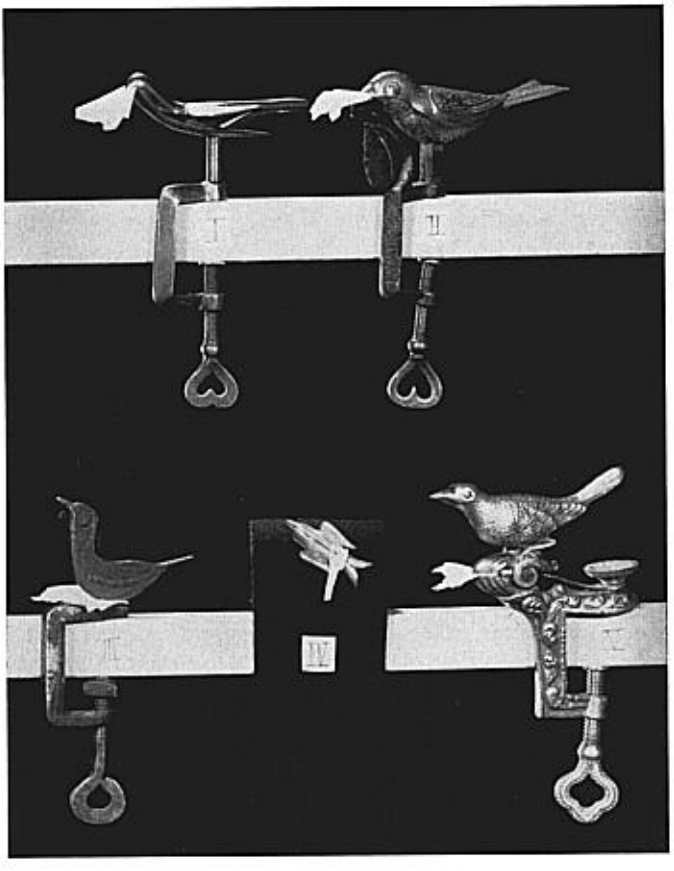
Reviewing the quotation from my friend's letter it will be noted that the numbers 3 and 16 following IC3 have not been explained. They denote the types[3] or units of the system—what the naturalist terms species.

To determine a IC3 type the details of the several parts making up the complete sewing-bird must be known. Both dies and patterns were used in their production, and since they were changed from time to time, the feather arrangements, and other designs, underwent modification producing new types. In this group

[1] See *McCall Needlework*, Winter 1949-1950, p. 54.

[2] Eagle Products, P. O. Box 84A, Meriden, Connecticut.

[3] "Type," as used in biology, has a different meaning.



Types of five orders of sewing-birds

I BILL GRASPERS: BAILEY BIRD

II SUB-BILL GRASPERS: GEROULD-WARD BIRD

III BODY GRASPERS: DECOVEN BIRD. MADE BY JOSEPH F. DECOVEN, BRUNSWICK, ME.

IV PIN BIRDS: LEAST SEWING-BIRD

V SUPERIOR BIRDS (ABOVE WORK): NORTH BIRD. DESIGNED BY JOHN NORTH, MIDDLETOWN, CONN. (LETTERS PATENT DATED 1855). CUSHION MISSING

three feather distributions of the upper or dorsal (D) portion of the bird, and four of the separate lower or ventral (V) part, indicate the use of seven dies. The stand (S), or clamp and pillar supporting the bird, shows a series of eight designs; the lower cushion cup (LC) five; and the thumbscrew (TS) twelve. These thirty-two designs have been numbered, and accordingly the "formula" for any bird that comes to hand may be written and the type determined.

That is what my friend did before the appearance of IC3-3 and IC3-16 was reported to me. An analysis of the first one reads as follows: D-1: V-1: S-7: LC-3: TS-5 = IC3-3. Such a combination of parts must produce type 3. It can be nothing else. As a matter of fact the bird was not type 3 because a mistake was made in identifying the stand. Although closely similar to S-7, it proved to be S-7-9, and accordingly the bird becomes IC3-4.

If species in nature were as well defined as types of sewing-birds, many difficulties of the naturalist would disappear.

At this time twenty-six types of IC3 have been found, and the order of succession, for the most part, has been determined. Perhaps of more interest, however, is the fact that we are able to predict, with considerable assurance, the future discovery and exact make-up of a few birds which thus far have never been recorded. That imparts a flavor of science to the hobby!

Other genera of this family are well known, but the members of IC3 are the most abundant. Of five hundred birds found, almost exactly two-thirds belong here.

Reference has been made to families IC and IB, but IA has not been mentioned. Possibly it has been surmised that in IA are placed the birds that are feathered not at all. Here are found several groups of early plain birds, for the most part cast in iron. The more common ones belong to IA3, a genus of many types. Some of them, in any case, were made by A. P. Bailey of Middletown, Connecticut, who was manufacturing them in 1854,[4] and probably earlier. Unencumbered by emery ball and cushion, the Bailey Bird has a clean-cut appearance which makes it popular with the collector.

Of the four remaining orders of sewing-birds only one, order II, contains types which may be regarded as at all common. Since the orders are based on the way the material is held, we find a different mechanism here. The birds of order II do not open their bills to receive the cloth. Instead, it is held *beneath* the bill, which, however, plays a part in gripping it. These birds, therefore, may be called the Sub-bill Graspers. Thus far three families of American birds belonging to this group have come to light. The most interesting ones fall into genus IIB1. By pressing the tail of one of these the entire bird tips, and the bill is raised from a small cup beneath it. A spring, concealed within the bird, causes the material to be held firmly between bill and cup when pressure on the tail is released. The bird is feathered, and a cushion occurs on the stand. It was patented by Allen Gerould and John H. Ward, Middletown, Connecticut, in 1853. Five types are known.

To make a long story short, order III includes a homemade, swinging bird gripping the cloth by the under part of its *body*. Probably it was used chiefly in rug braiding.

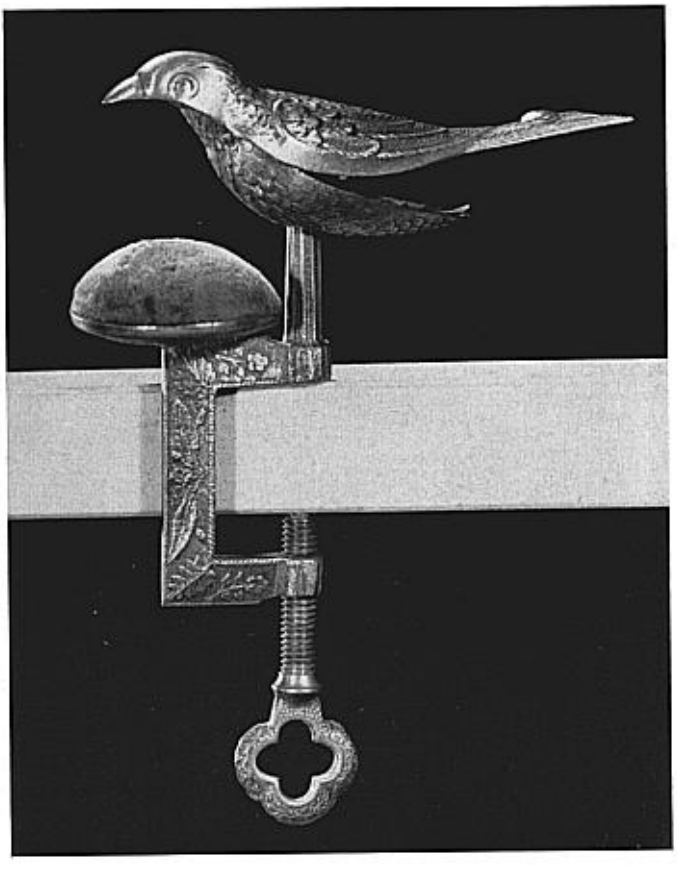
In order IV are found the smallest

[4] From information received from the late William G. Snow, International Silver Company, Meriden, Connecticut.

known sewing-birds,[5] about an inch and a half long, which fasten to the dress and hold the work by a curved *pin* projecting from the back. An avian stickleback, it would appear!

Finally, in order V are placed the birds which never come in contact with sewing material at all. If through their intimate relation to human needs the birds

[5] Also advertised as "skein holder" and "napkin-holder at the table" (*Harper's Weekly*, 1862).

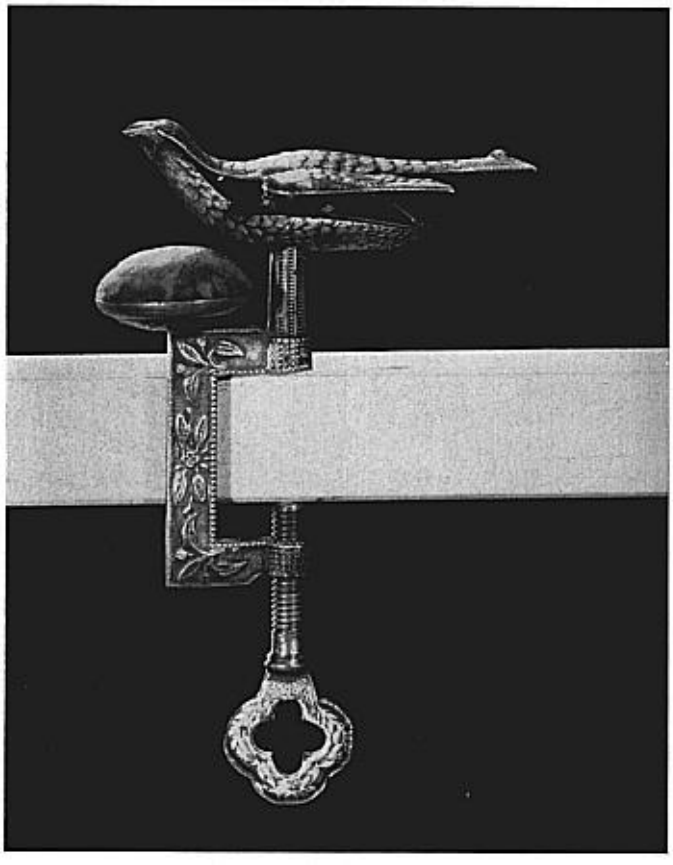


Hybrid
(IIB1 x IC3)

A SUB-BILL GRASPER WAS TURNED INTO A BILL GRASPER BY INSERTING A SPRING BETWEEN SEPARATED UPPER AND LOWER PARTS OF THE BIRD. CUTTING OFF "A. GEROULD & CO PATENT" FROM BENEATH THE TAIL SHORTENED THE UNDER PORTION. THE STAND, THUMBSCREW, CUSHION CUP, AND CUSHION WERE MADE FOR IC3 BIRDS. KNOWN FROM SIX EXAMPLES. COMPARE WITH OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

described may be likened to hens, the members of order V are the Birds of Paradise, primarily ornamental and not belonging to the working class.

The fundamental purpose in classifying organisms is to bring out relationship. The classification of sewing-birds, only incompletely outlined here, is not so artificial as it may first appear. A *kind* of relationship certainly is indicated. For example, we know the birds of IC1 are closely similar in form and structure, and in all probability were made by the same manufacturer. Moreover, through examining



Miniature
(IC2)

SMALL, AND WITHOUT EMERY BALL. A CONNECTION BETWEEN IC2 AND IC3, AT ONE PERIOD IN THEIR HISTORY IN ANY CASE, IS INDICATED BY THEIR THUMBSCREWS. TS-8 SHOWN HERE, FOR EXAMPLE, IS ALSO FOUND ON CERTAIN TYPES OF IC3

details of the products of dies and patterns, it can be proved that they had their origin in the earlier and more simple birds of IB1; and that from them descended the long line of elaborated IC3 types culminating in the modern bird, which, in truth, is still undergoing slight modification. IC2 may be an offshoot from the main line, now extinct—a genus of small, attractive birds called Miniatures.

At this time nothing conclusive can be reported concerning the first sewing-birds. The evidence indicates they were of foreign origin, and that they go back at least into the eighteenth century.

Connecticut is the birthplace of most if not all ordinary American birds, and I am told that some of them probably migrated as far away as the Orient. They were made and sold by the thousands in the middle fifties, and their use, although of course greatly reduced in this century, has by no means been abandoned.

Space does not permit an account of the many factors which have influenced the production of sewing-birds, resulting in diversity difficult to appreciate fully without access to a large collection. I have seen over one hundred and sixty types and varieties, and new ones are constantly being discovered.

True to my conviction that neither a butterfly, nor a boy and girl on a dolphin, are birds, I am resisting the temptation to wander into other divisions of the animal kingdom, where occur some of the most interesting and fantastic of the cloth-graspers.

By this time the reader, perhaps, understands why a naturalist, who does not know enough about sewing to fasten a dangling button, might become fascinated by these sewing-animals.[6] But not half of it has been told.

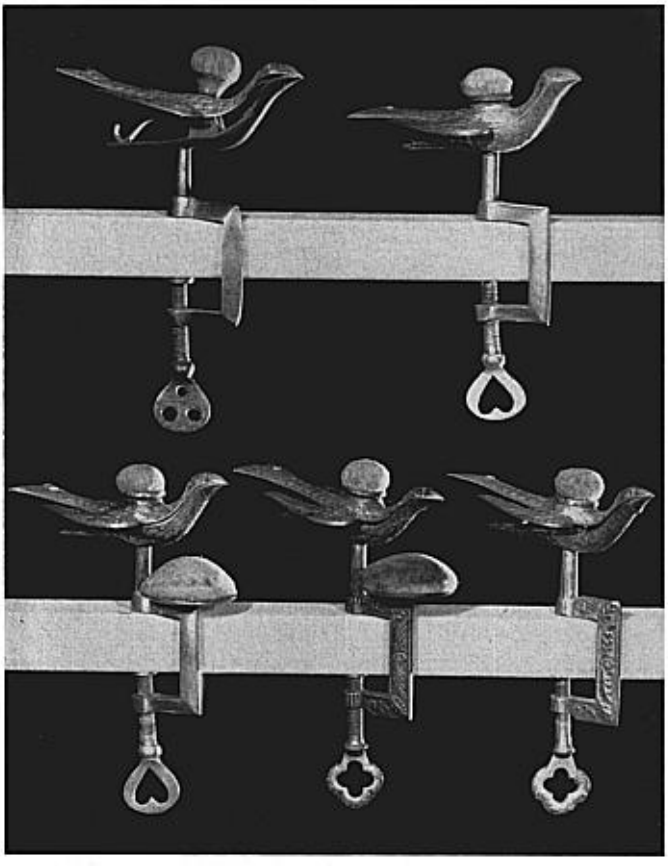
I recall placing a small collection of sewing-birds on the lecture table before my class in organic evolution, and equally well the expressions of the students when I showed them how clearly the birds illustrated not merely evolution and adaptation, but also the results of inheritance, the survival of the fittest, the appearance of mutations, parallelism in development, "acquired" characters and, in a late type, a vestigial structure. The demonstration was concluded by introducing what to me is perhaps the most remarkable of all sewing-birds: an actual combination of a modified Gerould-Ward Bird and a Waterman descendant—an indisputable hybrid!

No--- sewing-birds do *not* lay eggs.

[6] The author is not the only biologist who has hunted the rarer sewing-birds which, forced to change their former habitats, have now more restricted ranges, where they may become limited to a few localities—Charles Street and Lowell Street in Boston, for example.

Anyone wishing to correspond about sewing-birds or who has additional information to impart on this subject is invited to write to the author at the following address:

MANTON COPELAND, 88 Federal Street, Brunswick, Maine.



Representatives of three genera in the Waterman descent line

FIG. 1 IB1 SIMILAR TO THE BIRD PATENTED BY CHARLES WATERMAN. FEATHERED ABOVE BUT NOT BELOW

FIG. 2 IC1 BIRD COMPLETELY FEATHERED. STAND AND THUMBSCREW REMAIN PLAIN

FIG. 3 IC1 VARIETY OF THE SAME TYPE SHOWING INTRODUCTION OF THE LOWER CUSHION, WHICH CAN BE REMOVED BY UNSCREWING THE CUP

FIG. 4 IC3 ORNAMENTED STAND, CUSHION CUP AND THUMBSCREW. CUSHION HOLDER FASTENED TO CONCEALED POST

FIG. 5 IC3 VARIETY 1, LACKING POST AND LOWER CUSHION. PRESENCE AND ABSENCE OF CUSHION NOW REQUIRE TWO SEWING-BIRDS. VARIETY 1 WAS DISCONTINUED TOWARD THE END OF THE DESCENT LINE

APPENDIX

Key to Most of the Genera of American Sewing-birds

Procedure: Determine the order to which the bird belongs; then the family under the order; and finally, the genus of the family.

THE ORDERS

I Bird grasps cloth *in* bill. It opens bill.

II Bird grasps cloth *beneath* bill. It does not open bill.

III Bird grasps cloth beneath *body*. (Known from one example.)

IV Bird holds cloth by *pin* on back. Small. Fastens to dress.

V Cloth *not* held by the bird.

FAMILIES OF ORDER I

Family IA Bird without feathers. Plain above and below.

Family IB Bird feathered above only. Plain below.

Family IC Bird feathered above and below.

(Painted imitations of feathers are disregarded here.)

Genera of Family IA

Pillar supporting bird curved. *IA7*

Pillar supporting bird not curved.

- Emery ball cup on back of bird.
  - Bird without wings. *IA1*
  - Bird with wings spread. *IA4*
- No emery ball cup on back of bird.
  - Bird with wings closed. *IA2*
  - Bird with wings spread horizontally. *IA3*
  - Bird with wings raised. *IA5*

Genera of Family IB

Emery ball cup on back of bird. No lower cushion.

- Emery ball cup deep. Patent date, if present, on cup. *IB1*
- Emery ball cup shallow. Patent date on wing margin. *IB2*

No emery ball cup. Pillar supporting bird passes through lower cushion. Feathers indicated by crossed lines, stars, or rarely by a few raised lines on front border of wings only. *IB4*

Genera of Family IC

Wings spread.

- Pillar passes through lower cushion. Feathered by stars. *IC4*
- Pillar does not pass through lower cushion, which may, or may not, be present. Not feathered by stars.
  - Bird less than three inches in length. *IC2*
  - Bird more than three inches in length.
    - Clamp plain. *IC1*
    - Clamp ornamented. *IC3*

Wings closed.

- Wing tips crossed on back of bird. *IC5*
- Wing tips not crossed on back of bird. (Hybrid) *IIB1xIC3*

FAMILIES AND GENERA OF ORDER II

Family IIA Head of bird only. Exposed coiled spring. *IIA1*

Family IIB Bird complete. No exposed spring. *IIB1*

Family IIC Upper part of bird only. Exposed coiled spring. *IIC1*

FAMILIES AND GENERA OF ORDERS III, IV AND V

Each order contains one family and one genus.

(Use characteristics of orders here.)

Family IIIA *IIIA1*

Family IVA *IVA1*

Family VA *VA1*