

No Ordinary Housewife: Catherine Howard Brummall

By Cassy Nicolay



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The 1940s and 1950s, women found themselves actually seeking husbands, not careers. Marriage classes were added to high school and college curriculums due to more and more women choosing to marry at a younger age. The proportion of women attending college in comparison to men “dropped from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958” (Friedan 362). Women gloried in their occupation as housewives, and women in the small town of Salisbury, Missouri were no exception. They were content with housewifery, except one woman: Catherine Howard Brummall.

Salisbury was booming in the 40s and 50s. It lay on Highway 24, attracting many travelers through spacious Chariton County. The downtown area was alive with saloons, newspapers, and restaurants. One family dominated the economic flow of the small town: the Brummalls. They had been in Salisbury since its founding in 1882 and had established a wealth unknown to many residents. To be a Brummall was like being a Lord in a rural, British community. Maurice D. Brummall had made himself well-known by building a new drug store, becoming Head of Missouri's Pharmaceutical Association, and being the mayor of the town for over 30 years, but there was one person who equally prominent: his wife, Catherine.

Catherine Howard Brummall was not a typical housewife of the era. She was the daughter Thomas Howard Sr., the founder of Howard County (around the area of Fayette, Missouri), and his wife

Elizabeth. Elizabeth never left the county in her 91 years of residency. She found notoriety as the mother of twelve children and being the sister-in law to the first territorial governor.

Although Catherine respected and admired her mother, Elizabeth in many ways, Catherine's dream was to become more than a housewife and a mother. She attended Howard-Payne musical college in Fayette, Missouri, throwing herself into her vocal and piano studies. She became a well-known pianist and vocalist in the area and eventually received a scholarship to attend Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. While there, she presented many performances, one was the Annual Feast of Carols in 1922, where she performed a song titled "Jehovah" (Cincinnati Conservatory of Music). She was also a participant in the National Regional Music Festival, where she received a 1- for her piano performance. The judges' sheets commented that she had a beautiful voice with a phenomenal range and vibrato.

At the conservatory, Catherine had the opportunity to travel across the United States, becoming well acquainted with the vast country. Upon graduation from the conservatory, she had a brief career at Central Missouri Teachers' college in Warrensburg, Missouri, where she taught piano and gave vocal lessons. Catherine enjoyed teaching, but longed to travel again. When her teaching contract came up for renewal, she decided to opt out to become a "lyceum and Chautauqua entertainer" and was "well-known throughout the state as a concert pianist" (*The Kansas City Times* 2).

As she traveled alone throughout the state, she longed to have someone with whom to share her life. Her sister had moved to Salisbury and wrote to Catherine, enticing her to move there. Catherine completed her travels, and then settled in Salisbury. She enjoyed the life of Salisbury and could see herself living out the rest of her days in the town. In the spring of 1932, after one of her recital performances, she met a prosperous gentleman. Maurice Brummall seemed to almost tame the independent and "widely known musician" (*The Kansas City Times* 2), and on Sunday, May 21, 1933, the two married at the First Baptist Church of Salisbury.

Catherine settled into her wifely duties of cooking and cleaning, having remodeled the kitchen of her new home as soon as she moved in but she was restless. She wanted more than a big house and a wealthy husband; she sought a career. There was nothing she loved more than playing the piano and

singing, so she decided to take her love of music and make it a career. She was given a position at the high school to teach children piano and give them voice lessons. She also gave private lessons in her home. Along with teaching, Catherine gave local performances at the theater, drawing in crowds from all over Chariton County. Her musical influence was one of the reasons Salisbury became such a tourist location for travelers in the 1930s.

Catherine not only occupied herself with teaching music, but she also became politically involved along with her husband. Maurice's drug store was flourishing and he became a well-known pharmacist. He decided to make a political move in the pharmaceutical world, and ran for president of the Pharmaceutical Association, and his wife was right beside—not behind—him. While Maurice was running for President of the association, Catherine was running for President of the Ladies' Auxiliary. On April 30, 1937, the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, announced on the front page that, "Husband and Wife Head Missouri Pharmacists." Maurice and Catherine were elected "presidents of the association and its women's auxiliary...for the first time in its 59 years of existence" (Associated Press 2). To head the association, the Brummalls had to take a test over their knowledge of first aid and pharmaceutical uses of drugs. Maurice received a 94.5, while Catherine made 94. The test asked for each one to fill out their occupations. Maurice wrote "pharmacist", and Catherine was delegated to write "housewife."

In the years that followed, Maurice decided to run for mayor of Salisbury. Catherine must have been extremely proud; she kept all of the newspaper clippings of his campaign in a carefully detailed scrap book. Maurice was confident he would win the coveted position of mayor of the town; he barely interviewed and campaigned slightly. In January of 1941, Maurice "was elected mayor over his opponent, Dr. F.M. Shull, by a vote of 743 to 105" (*Salisbury Press-Spectator* 1). Catherine kept a large amount of letters congratulating him, and also gave much support for her husband, but she was rarely mentioned in the letters. When she was, she was never named, only called Mrs. Maurice or Mrs. Brummall.

As Maurice was running the town of Salisbury in the 40s, World War II raged on in Europe, and Catherine deemed it fit to fight for the cause. She and Maurice were proud democrats and she told a

friend in a letter that, “I [Catherine] have discussed with Maurice and we have decided to head a committee for the war” (Brummall). Committees were appointed in each town of the county for work which civilians could volunteer. Catherine carried around a flyer with check marks by the committees she headed. Maurice and Catherine headed a committee on February 9, 1942, to discuss the civilian defense registration. Catherine started a movement in Salisbury to help the war effort, giving notice to many of the officials of the town that she was not the typical housewife.

After the war, Catherine and Maurice’s life slowed down. They had one son, Monte Bo Brummall. She continued teaching piano and giving vocal lessons in the family home on 504 South Broadway for the rest of her days. To the larger world, Catherine may have only been seen as a housewife, but she was much more; she was a teacher and lover of music. She had a political mind, set on doing what was best for the small, bustling town of Salisbury. Catherine did not follow in her mother’s footsteps that never left the county nor did she have twelve children. She was not as influential as her father, who was the founder of a county, but she made a name for herself. Although she was mostly referred to as Mrs. Maurice D. Brummall after her marriage in 1933, she was very much her own person: Catherine Howard Brummall.

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