

# Secret Sharing

## Debutantes Coming Out in the American South

by **Cynthia Lewis**

with photography by **Susan Harbage Page**

*My husband is determined that we don't give away all the rituals.*

—*Kitty McEaddy, mother of five Charleston debutantes*

*I don't know what people would do without deb season.*

—*Margaret Lee McEaddy, one of the five*

*What leads contemporary women to draw firm social boundaries, protected by the rites of a sorority or the rituals of coming out, for the sole apparent reason of inviting some people in and excluding others? What accounts for the survival of various debutante societies throughout the South and beyond? St. Cecilia debutante, 2012.*

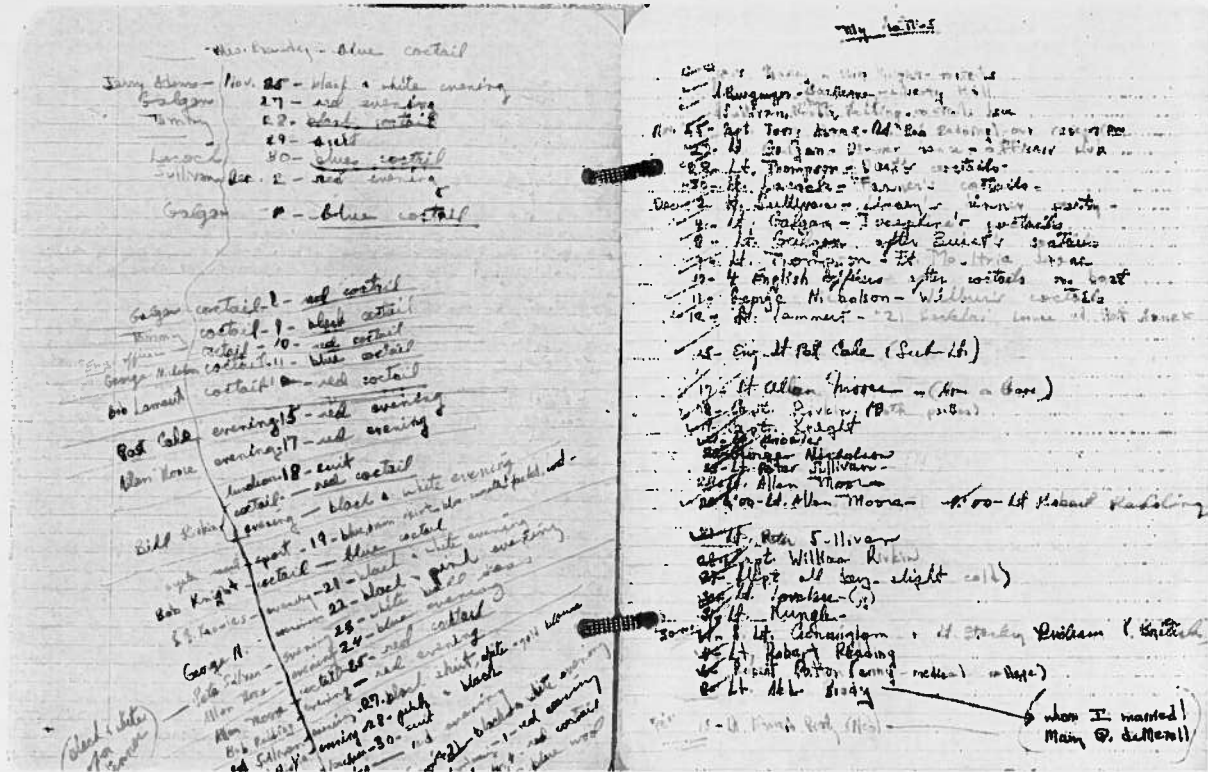


**W**he grand staircase fronting the South Carolina Historical Society in Charleston leads to large, wooden, locked double doors and instructions to ring the bell for service. The summons brings a face between the doors and, in a moment that recalls the Wizard's brushing off Dorothy through a similar aperture, the question "May I help you?" faintly discourages a reply. Inside, other assistants hustle to retrieve documents from the unseen depths where archives are stored. I pay my five-dollar non-member's fee and ask to see any documents pertaining to the St. Cecilia Society, a Charleston musical society established in 1762, which became, sometime in the nineteenth century, perhaps the most exclusive and mysterious of all debutante societies in America.

My wait is brief. A smiling assistant, having warmed to my curiosity, has unearthed a scrapbook belonging to a Miss Mary de Merrell of 129 Tradd Street, Charleston. As I respectfully leaf through the fragile pages that chronicle Miss de Merrell's coming out on 23 December 1943, I find a newspaper photo of her and her cohort of seventeen debs, dated 9 January 1944, posed elegantly for the occasion. Mary de Merrell has penciled an arrow above herself, atop which she has written "me." At last, I have burrowed through layers of secrecy to the private record of one war-time St. Cecilia debutante—an excavation that, just moments before and over long months, I'd thought was impossible.

Mary Pinckney de Merrell Brady obviously prepared this scrapbook for archival purposes, having inscribed her married name and address in the front, dated June 1999, and having added notes throughout in the same hand, with the same pen. A newspaper photo of eleven mothers—nearly all hatted and in fox furs—records their meeting in early November 1943 about the upcoming festivities. Yet the reportage is everywhere inflected with personal touches. Lined notebook pages with contact phone numbers for the other debutantes and for such helpful people as "caterers" also list "presents given me," including flowers ("mums") and jewelry ("chain topax [*sic*] necklace"). Mostly, there are traces of parties, parties, parties! Hand-written and printed invitations line the rag pages, each bearing Mary's note that it was "answered." Every newspaper clipping dutifully reports who attended the punch bowl at whose residence. Mary kept a list of days and nights already reserved for parties, a list of what she wore to each party, and a list of her dates, as well as their heights ("I was 5' 7" barefoot!" she inserts). Next to one of those dates, Lt. Ned Brady, she has added, parenthetically, "whom I married!" Here, before me, are both infectious girlish excitement over a brimming social life and twilight nostalgia for days gone by. It is the single glimpse into the inner world of St. Cecilia that, as an outsider, I have been able to catch.

Like a number of women who didn't themselves debut, I'm intrigued by women who have. Growing up in Ohio, I was never aware of debutante societies, although I partook in sororities, which thrived in my high school and at my university.



*In St. Cecilia debutante Mary Pinckney de Merrell's 1944 scrapbook, handwritten and printed invitations line the rag pages, each bearing Mary's note that it was "answered." Every newspaper clipping dutifully reports who attended the punch bowl at whose residence. Mary kept a list of days and nights already reserved for parties, a list of what she wore to each party, and a list of her dates, as well as their heights ("I was 5' 7" barefoot!" she inserts). Next to one of those dates, Lt. Ned Brady, she has added, parenthetically, "whom I married!" Courtesy of the South Carolina Historical Society.*

Later, as a graduate student in the Ivy League, I encountered some of the same elitist separatism that characterizes contemporary debutante society. Today, still no stranger to exclusivity, I teach at a highly selective private college given to occasional bouts of self-ascribed superiority. In the case of schools, selectivity can be defended at least partly on the basis of merit. But what leads contemporary women to draw firm social boundaries, protected by the rites of a sorority or the rituals of coming out, for the sole apparent reason of inviting some people in and excluding others? What accounts for the survival of various debutante societies throughout the South and beyond? Both captivated by the allure of the debutante echelon and embarrassed by its excesses, I set out to explore the motives and outlook of southern women who participate in what would seem to be an anachronism that, in the main, is perpetuated by southern men.

My twin focus on Charleston's St. Cecilia Society and Dallas's Idlewild Club, in fact, traces to their both being managed openly and solely by men. In this they

are rare exceptions—women administer nearly all debutante organizations. They are also the most exclusive debutante societies in each locale, however diverse may be the two southern cities where they reside. (Strictly speaking, St. Cecilia Society members reject the label “debutante society,” according to Charleston debutante C. W. Childress. Instead, they maintain—rather hair-splittingly—that they put on a ball for “the pleasure of the members.”) Together St. Cecilia and Idlewild foreground, through their all-male management, the manifold ways in which the secrecy encircling debutante culture has long served patrimonial concerns. The most pervasive of these is the regulation of reproduction, now perhaps more social than biological.

The prime motive for secrecy within any social group usually being control of its inner workings and its membership, debutante societies are no different. The concealment that circumscribes its members—female members in particular—generates, even constitutes, exclusivity and control. It may be outwardly justified as an attempt to spare the feelings or douse the jealousy of outsiders, as a defense of tradition (or a mode of pleasing tradition-bound parents), or as a means of practicing charity. It may be brushed off as unworthy of a second thought, or even outright denied. Still, although nearly any twenty-first-century woman or man might well balk at the suggestion, debdom’s original purpose of determining the right spouse in the right cohort remains virtually intact.

“I have a hard time with it,” Leize Gaillard told me about the mystery surrounding the St. Cecilia ball, at which she debuted in 2002. Having recently earned a graduate degree in mental health counseling at the University of Virginia, Gaillard is now a Student Services Program Coordinator for the College of Charleston. Worried that her father’s proximity in the next room might involve some monitoring of her conversation, she struggled noticeably not to reveal strictly confidential information about the St. Cecilia Society, which selects a fresh group of debutantes each year. She admitted that she couldn’t fathom the rigorous secrecy surrounding the society’s activities, about which the *New York Times* reported in 1896, “The proceedings are never given for publication.” Decades later, in 1964, the *Times* ran another article quoting a past president of the society, who explained to a newer member the absolute code of silence. “In a city as small as Charleston,” he wrote, “experience has proved that publicity concerning the society is injurious to the community as a whole because it tends to stir up jealousies and animosities that impair the goodwill normally existing between members and nonmembers.” Or more bluntly, in the words of Gastonia, North Carolina, debutante and recent Clemson University graduate Sadie Cooke, “My mother still tells me, ‘Don’t talk about it in front of other girls because, you know, it hurts their feelings.’”

Through secrecy the St. Cecilia Society powerfully reinforces endemic social hierarchy, the insulation of class through fathers’ direction of their children’s socializing. As the 1896 *Times* article reports, “The balls,” held in the stately Hiber-

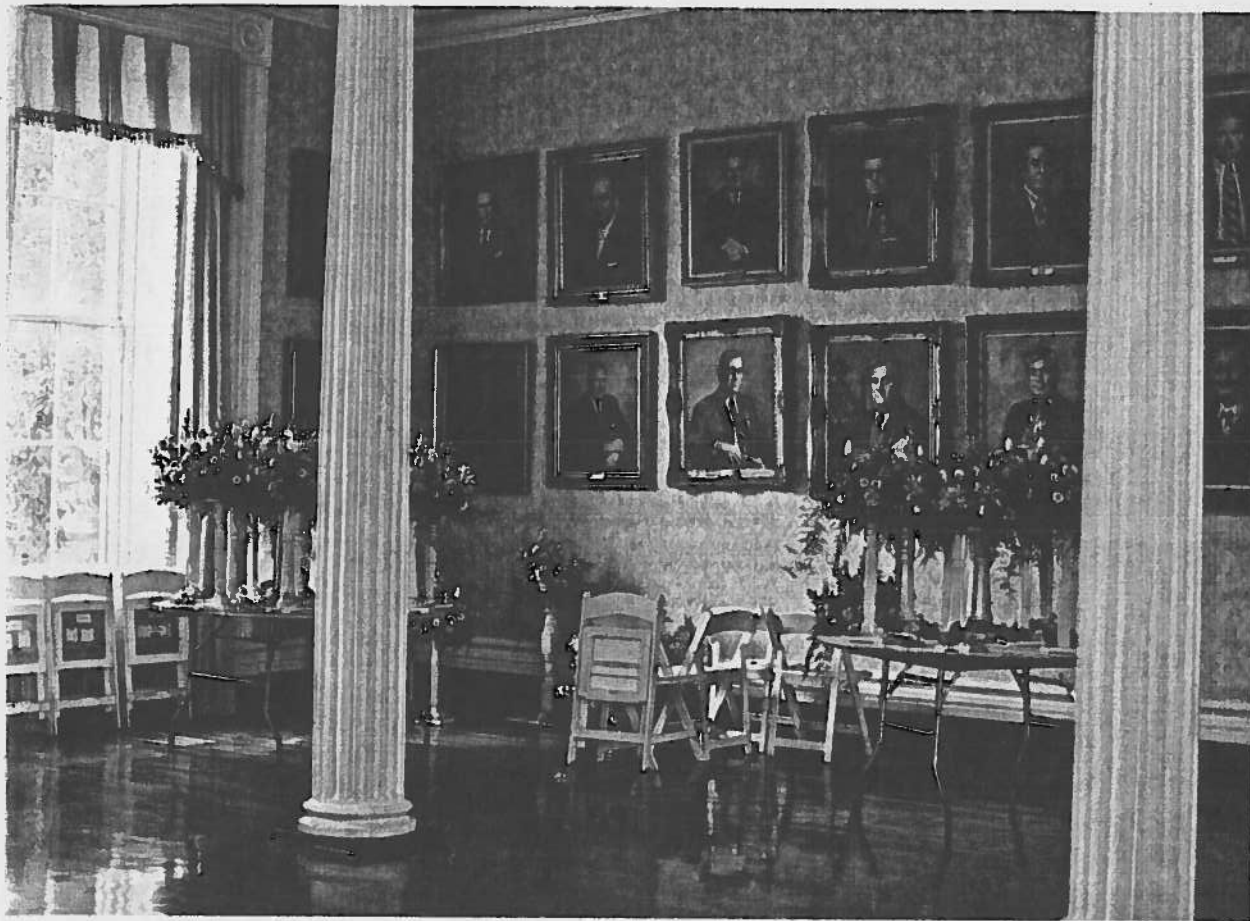
nian Hall on Meeting Street, "are informal and very delightful, for everybody knows everybody else." Although characteristically bigger and less chummy than Charleston's debutante scene, societies throughout the country cohere largely on the basis of familiarity and belonging well established by pedigree, class, or wealth. Although many debutantes told me they met wonderful new friends through the debutante circuit, coming out across the country is about underlining social boundaries and reaffirming exclusivity. It does far more to preserve connections than to create them.

In Charleston, each year's class of debutantes totals only about twenty, an elite composite representing three different societies — the Cotillion, the Assembly, and the St. Cecilia — among which some overlap occurs when certain young women attend multiple balls. Charleston deb Blakely Blackford told me that "because it's such a small community and everybody knows each other, you're debbing with a group." So much so, in fact, that, on the night before her presentation ball with the Cotillion, she wasn't sure which of the larger Charleston cohort would be debuting with her and which at the other two balls. Nevertheless, one can be sure that the members of the St. Cecilia Society knew exactly which debutantes were which.

"There is an unwritten law in the city," reads the 1896 *Times* article about St. Cecilia, "that if one does not live in the Battery or Legare Street, does not attend St. Michael's Church, and does not belong to the St. Cecilia, they are outside the exclusive high social circle." That social circle is drawn according to different factors from one city to the next. But everywhere such elitism — by which, for present purposes, I refer to historically white debutante culture — depends upon orchestrating social events that are kept veiled from the outsider's eye. Even if, in some cities, pictures of debutantes regularly appear in the local papers, the activities inside the circle remain closely guarded.

As an essayist concerned with American culture, I'm used to starting on the margins and moving inside the protected world of my subjects. I've interviewed law enforcement officers about an open case on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list and police detectives about ongoing, confidential cases of spousal murder; I've spoken with women bodybuilders about using steroids to enhance their musculature; and to professional gamblers in Las Vegas who must protect their identities in order to move freely from one casino to another. Never, however, have I encountered the diffidence that I've faced in attempting to learn more about debutante culture — what I would have thought was a relatively straightforward sliver of American society. At one point, I had so many requests from interviewees to remain anonymous that I was worried I'd have only a string of statements spoken by a "source who asked not to be named."

In the end, many of the people I interviewed, most of them women, graciously agreed to go public, providing me with generous helpings of time, information,



*Charleston's St. Cecilia Society and Dallas's Idlewild Club are managed openly and solely by men. In this they are rare exceptions. Through their all-male management, these clubs foreground the manifold ways in which the secrecy encircling debutante culture has long served patrimonial concerns. Hibernian Society members watch over the festivities, the day after the 2012 St. Cecilia Ball.*

and memorabilia. To a person, I liked each one, and I often found myself appreciating their point of view. The squeamishness of those who declined to speak with me or speak only anonymously, however, continued to surface. One Charleston mother I'd been encouraged to think would be willing, if not pleased, to meet with me proved otherwise by neglecting to return several phone calls. When I finally reached her, she declined an interview because, she said, the people in question just wanted to have fun parties with one another and deserved their privacy. I'd completed an hour-long interview with another mother, herself once a debutante in Columbia, South Carolina, whose daughters had also debuted there, when she e-mailed me requesting that I not use her name. Both women implied anxiety over how their speaking publicly would be viewed within their social circles.

Another prospective source and recent Charleston debutante wrote to me in an

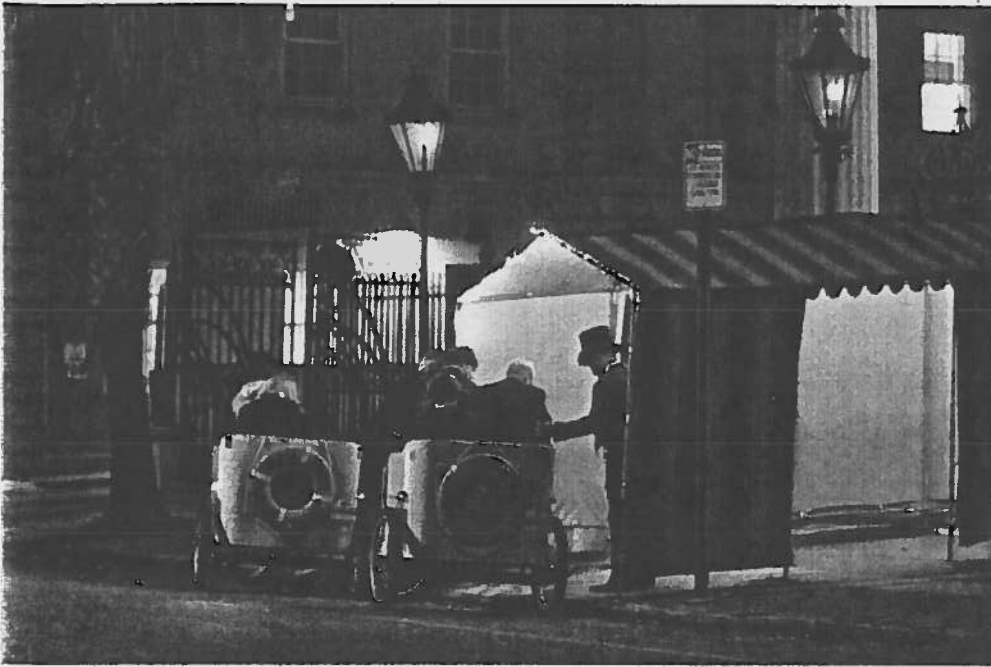
e-mail, "Today, being a debutante is not a 'loaded' issue in any way." She elaborated that

there is nothing for a young, educated self-respecting woman to rebel against today as no one expects her to meet her future husband during debutante season . . . Honestly, I never gave it much thought beforehand or afterwards. This is not to say that I did not know the original custom or was a shallow and non-reflective person; it is simply that the original meaning was as irrelevant to me then as is now the initial reason people put trees in their houses to celebrate Christmas.

When I asked this young woman if I could quote her, she responded, "Feel free to quote anything you like . . . I will just ask that you not use my name in your piece." In response, I can only wonder why, if this isn't a "loaded issue," the insistence on anonymity?

Certainly, debuting in today's America no longer constitutes quite the announcement of a young woman's availability for marriage that it originally did. But I'll have to disagree with my unnamed correspondent that debuting has lost all of its original symbolism. At its foundation, the debut is a profoundly patriarchal institution, about the father's management of property, whose rituals, to this day, mimic the wedding ceremony. If the significance of the ritual has become obscured, like that of choosing and decorating a Christmas tree, its obscurity doesn't erase its existence, but, rather, reveals inattention to it. Leize Gaillard couldn't imagine bypassing her presentation at the St. Cecilia ball because, she says, "It's just a tradition that has been in place a very long time. I really hadn't thought about it beforehand." In response to the question of why she debuted, she explains, "I would answer it the same way if you asked me why I had a fifth birthday party. That's what you do." Had she felt in the least oppressed by the patriarchal hand that manages the process, she adds, she wouldn't have followed through. Her coming out had more to do with "a respect for tradition than anything else."

Recognized or not, the tradition in question is nonetheless rooted in patriarchal control that, typically more visible in the South than in the North, is also offset in complicated, intriguing ways by organizations like the matriarchal Junior League and New York's "Infirmity Ball." The latter debutante event supports the New York Downtown Hospital, the current incarnation of the Infirmity for Indigent Women and Children, founded in 1857 by Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in the United States to earn a medical degree. Still, even if the cause at hand has strong ties to feminist history, the women who administer these organizations and events bolster traditional gendered categories that, after all, reward privileged matrons with time for such pursuits.



*As the New York Times reported about the St. Cecilia Society in 1896, "The proceedings are never given for publication." In 1964, the Times ran another article quoting a past president of the society: "In a city as small as Charleston, experience has proved that publicity concerning the society is injurious to the community as a whole because it tends to stir up jealousies and animosities that impair the goodwill normally existing between members and nonmembers." Guests arrive at Hibernian Hall for the 2012 St. Cecilia Ball.*



Moreover, even if a debutante ball is philanthropic, the question remains why a contemporary young woman would participate in this outdated ritual. Why not perform good works independent of social elitism? As Diana Kendall has written in *The Power of Good Deeds: Privileged Women and the Social Reproduction of the Upper Class*, elite women's charitable organizations "closely guard membership and participation in the organizations from which they gather their power." Whether they realize it at the time of their debut, young women of social position have not just their parents' wishes to fulfill by coming out, but their own future to protect. Their collaborative role in cultural isolation and *noblesse oblige* stands to yield considerable social rewards.

#### MEN, LINEAGE, MONEY

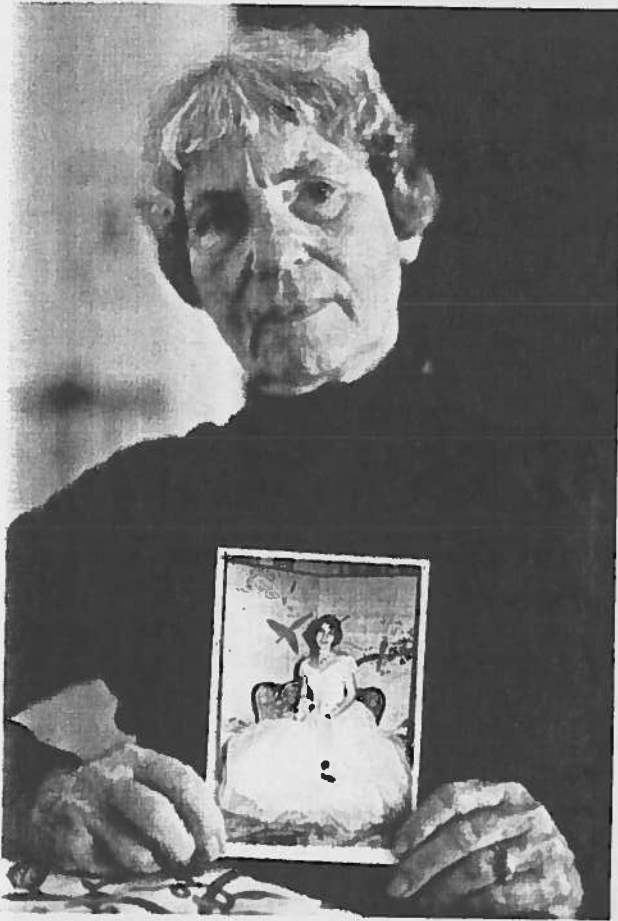
*"Money is a tacky thing to talk about in Charleston. You wanted to have a great party, but not to show how much money you spent."*

—Blakely Blackford, Charleston debutante

As Stewart G. Barrett Jr. gently guides me down the staircase of Mi Cocina, a lively Dallas Tex-Mex restaurant, he observes that the owner, a member of the exclusive Idlewild Club, is divorced from one Idlewild debutante and now married to another. Barrett (a pseudonym) is himself a member of the Idlewild Club, an all-male society that, according to the good and secret pleasure of its members, elects four to eight Dallas debutantes per year. He also belongs to the only slightly less exclusive Terpsichorean Club—"Terps," for short—and the only slightly even less exclusive Calyx Club. (In a dizzying elaboration, I learned that the overlap between Idlewild clubbers and Terps is about 85 percent, while that between Idlewild and Calyx hovers merely around 50 percent, so that Idlewild men can more easily join the other two clubs than can those other clubs' members join Idlewild.)

The three men's groups together conduct—in fact, exist to conduct—the debutante season, beginning with the Idlewild ball at Thanksgiving, progressing to the Calyx ball during the week before Christmas, and concluding with the Terpsichorean ball in late January or early February. In between, from the end of October until the final ball, the debutantes engage in a full complement of parties—sometimes several per day—and each deb's family is obligated to throw a "special party" for its special daughter. Whether or not the "special party" is expected to be extravagant, suffice it to say that little expense is spared and that, a few years ago, the term *party* replaced *ball* when spending was perceived to have exceeded rational bounds.

During a delightful lunch featuring a knock-out margarita, I asked Barrett what the Idlewild Club is about. "It is old, old Dallas money," he responded, pointing out that at least 90 percent of Idlewild members are third- or fourth-



*Strictly speaking, St. Cecilia Society members reject the label "debutante society." Instead, they maintain—rather hair-splittingly—that they put on a ball for "the pleasure of the members." Harriet Williams with her 1949 St. Cecilia debutante portrait.*

