**The Mythical Dowager Queen or the Modern, Forward-Thinker:** **Changing the Narrative of Louise Sneed Hill and Gilded Age Denver’s Sacred Thirty-Six**

**By: Shelby Carr**

A woman of short stature, high heels, and quick wit, Louise Sneed Hill ruled over

Denver’s high society for four decades with her Southern charm, societal tact, and a passion for

success. To Hill, elite society was, in part, a game that could be lost and won and she was

determined to come out on top. Much like the ideal of the self-made man that implied success in

a professional capacity, shrewdness and wit in business, and acquisition of great wealth, Hill was

a self-made woman in terms of elite societal achievement. She aided in ushering in a new era of

culture in the United States. She was one of the earliest women to publicly bring about the

transition from Victorian culture to a modern society that embraced things like alcohol and

leisure activities. Hill’s personality was, in the words of *Denver Post* reporter Helen Eastom, the

culmination of “the delicate grace and dignity of the south, and the charming vigor and

spontaneity of the west.”[[1]](#endnote-1) She combined her southern roots of a relaxed, Victorian leisure culture

with a moral, puritanical work ethic common of the North as well as the vision of liberal

individualism that the final frontier of the West provided to present a new vision of gentility.

Hill was born in a compelling time between the Victorian moralists of the preceding

generation and the flappers of the next aeon. While modernization of society is typically

attributed to movie stars/celebrities and the jazz age contemporaries of the 1920s and later,

Louise Hill’s generation were actually the earliest catalysts for change. Born in the 1860s, Hill,

with aspirations of leading high society, had to find a delicate balance between reconciling with

the older generation while bringing about new traditions to satisfy the more modern, voguish-

inclined individuals of her generation and those of the next that entered the social scene during

her reign. Oftentimes, it was this uncharted middle ground she walked that caused so many of

her decisions to appear paradoxical. While she felt much of society was too stringent, she still

harkened at times towards maintaining control and policing society – she felt the reins needed

to be loosened but also authored a book on social etiquette. She desired an essence of strictness

but with playful qualities, like the introduction of animal dances (such as the worm wiggle and

turkey trot) and the enjoyment of alcohol and frivolous activities like roller skating to the

privileged class. Throughout her tenure as the doyenne of Denver’s upper crust, she walked a

fine line between the old and the new at a time when American society was unsure of its social

direction as it entered into the first decades of the twentieth century.

In her time, high society was a “queer game.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Those outside of Hill’s inner circle

were warned by the press: if an individual was not prepared with the required skills to enter the

arena of elite society they were instructed to heed the warning and beware what they might

encounter. She used her intelligence, ambition, passion, and money to create a legitimate

aristocratic style high society in the city of Denver. She created the game, served as its master,

arbiter, and most decorated player.

Hill’s actions reflected the shift into modern society as she fashioned herself into the self-

made woman by consciously separating herself from her husband publicly to create her own

individual identity. Mr. Hill did not always attend society events with her nor was he noted as

hosting many of the events at their mansion. Much like the reality television stars of today and

the early players or actors in the movie industry who helped publicly display the change in

society, Hill used the press. She gave interviews and party invitations to newspaper reporters in

order to pull back the veil on high society. She wanted her audience to know how hard she

worked in her role as a society leader while making it look effortless. She believed it was her

duty and responsibility to lead society and the role of a society leader was not only useful and

important to the community, but it was one of the hardest kinds of work. She once stated it was a

more difficult task than those of a general of an army because “the society leader must manage

women. And to fight her battles she cannot use brute force. Tact is the only weapon she can

use…she must always be alert and planning, for one wrong move may wipe her colors from the

field.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

She believed high society required a particular set of skills (traits that she possessed) and

by which she could deem herself the ultimate leader. Based upon the example of Mrs. Caroline

Schermerhorn Astor of the “400” New York City Knickerbocker society, Hill armed herself with

the tools necessary to achieve her goals. She was featured on the society pages of the local

newspapers every day, at times emphasized drama in the upper class of society, and even paid

editors of local newspapers such as *The* *Denver Post* to follow her wishes. She also used her

words carefully to very publicly but politely set the boundaries of elite sociability.

Mrs. Hill created a society group in Denver that was dubbed the “Sacred Thirty-Six.” [[4]](#endnote-4) It

was the first internationally recognized elite social scene in Denver and resulted in the

acknowledgment of the city as a legitimate cultural and educated place to the larger world. The

citizens of Colorado are still feeling the effects of her work on the Denver social scene — how

she aided in elevating the city to an international platform and made it a desirable destination for

world figures and foreign dignitaries— as today the city continues to be well-regarded for its

abundance of cultural institutions. Louise Sneed Hill, seeking to be a dignified leader of

Denver’s elite, elevate the city of Denver from a frontier entrepot to a refined and cosmopolitan

city, and rejuvenate high society, created the Sacred Thirty-Six.

In a time where women were entering the public domain and culture was shifting to a

modern society, Hill blazed the trail for so many who came after her. During the Gilded Age, the

conventional role of bourgeois women needed to change due to the shift in industrial invention

and ensuing variations in the female’s role and purpose within the private sphere and home. Hill

was a pioneer in this social change and alteration of purpose for women of her class. Her

progressive thoughts and behaviors helped aid in the early transition for America from a

Victorian culture that was driven by work ethic, women remaining in the home, and censoring

any pleasures such as alcohol, games, or sexual desires to a contemporary society where women

could establish their own identities, drink, dance, embrace their sexuality, and enjoy leisure and

fun without being deemed fallen women. She was a critical agent of change and by studying her

actions, behaviors, and life we can better understand class formations, cultural consumption, and

gender during the Gilded Age and into the early twentieth century. Louise Hill forever altered the

path of the center of the final frontier and helped usher in the era of modern decadence,

womanhood, and leisure for leisure’s sake in the United States.

Louise Bethel Sneed was born in 1862 into the Southern aristocracy.[[5]](#endnote-5) Her parents,

William Morgan Sneed (1819-1891) and Louisa Maria Bethel (1823-1862), were lifetime

residents of North Carolina. The Sneed family was prominent in the South and strengthened their

power through marriages that connected them to former chief justices of the North Carolina

Supreme Court, statesmen, investors in the Transylvania Company, and other plantation owners.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The future Mrs. Hill grew up privileged and spent any summer seasons with close family friend

and distant relative Mrs. Jefferson Davis at The St. Elmo in Green Cove Springs, Florida.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Louise Sneed Hill was reared, in her own words, in a “very puritanical family.”[[8]](#endnote-8) As a girl she

thought it dreadfully wicked to play cards and for a woman to smoke was one of the seven

deadly sins.[[9]](#endnote-9) Perhaps it was these early feelings of repression that fueled Hill in her later years to

deem these actions not only acceptable in high society but standard and enjoyable.

The Civil War ravaged the area where Hill grew up, limiting her prospects for leading a charmed future in the post-Reconstruction South. No one in the South had enough money to provide a vessel for the highly motivated Hill to achieve her ambitions. She heard stories of great fortune in the Rocky Mountain region from relatives who lived in territorial Colorado and that prompted her decision to travel west to explore suitable marriage prospects. Louise Sneed chose to visit Denver in 1893 and stayed with her cousins, Captain William D. and Cynthia Bethel. A former Confederate army officer, Captain Bethel moved west and became a “well-known Colorado pioneer and capitalist,” according to his *Pueblo Chieftain* obituary of August 20, 1906. Bethel’s prominence in Denver’s early social scene enabled Louise to make a proper entrance and attain introductions to Colorado’s wealthiest families.

She set her sights on the most eligible bachelor in town and heir to the Hill family fortune, Crawford Hill. While it was said that “the heart and fortune of every eligible youth in town were laid at her feet” it was Mr. Crawford Hill —a successful businessman and son of Nathaniel P. Hill the founder of Colorado’s smelting industry, a U.S. Senator, and self-declared arbiter of Colorado society— that caught her eye.[[10]](#endnote-10) The respect and wealth that came with the Hill name was attractive to Louise Sneed and something she desired.

When tiny but powerful Louise Bethel Sneed arrived in Denver in 1893, she made an immediate impact. Her cousins, Captain and Mrs. Bethel, threw an opulent ball to introduce her to Denver society at their mansion on East Colfax upon her arrival. Many of Denver’s Old Guard society attended the black-tie affair including the Moffats, Cheesmans, and Hills.[[11]](#endnote-11) Crawford Hill, although rather devoid of a sparkling personality, made the acquaintance of the energetic Louise Sneed at that ball in her honor. It was the perfect match, what Crawford lacked in social presence Louise more than made up for with her ambition, tenacity, and drive to rule. Two years

after their first encounter, the couple were married in a lavish ceremony in Memphis, Tennessee.

After their wedding, Crawford and Louise Hill established their home in Denver and Mrs. Hill set out to redefine the upper echelons of the city’s social scene. She began a love affair with the society pages of Colorado’s newspapers on her wedding day that lasted to her dying day. She launched a mission to reform Denver’s social scene by positioning herself as its crowned leader and influencing culture and society to suit her ideals of modern society and genteel womanhood.

Hill began her rise to the top by seeking to, as Kristen Iversen quoted in her work *Molly*

*Brown*, “captivate all of Denver with her charm, wit, and beauty.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Hill used the press to emphasize amusement and aid in her mission to transform society from Victorian morality to unabashed fun. In 1908, a newspaper article in the *Denver Post* published a story of Hill’s roller-skating escapades. It stated that Hill was roller skating around the ballroom of her home.[[13]](#endnote-13) Instead of acting as a Victorian reformer, Hill sought to loosen the reins of the elite and emphasize lively, amusing activities of a modern era.

The Hills resided in a twenty-two-room French Renaissance mansion that was completed in 1906 at the southwest corner of 10th Avenue and Sherman Street. Although the front door faced 10th Avenue, the Hills preferred to use the address 969 Sherman Street. Sherman Street led directly to the state capitol building and having a home on that street implied a sense of political and social stature within the community.[[14]](#endnote-14) Hill began hosting bridge parties in her stately home and, like Mrs. Astor’s New York ballroom that could only fit 400 people, Mrs. Hill’s society was named directly from the capacity of her tables. Hill’s bridge parties were exclusive and consisted of nine tables of four players each, hence the thirty-six was born.[[15]](#endnote-15) Local newspaper outlets featured stories of the innovative ideas and parties Mrs. Hill held for her exclusive club. Hill was responsible for many firsts in Denver society like breakfast balls, private banquets where an orchestra played during the meal, and an afternoon dance where guests frolicked to the “turkey trot” and the “worm wiggle.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Like the flappers of a later decade, Hill pushed the boundaries of what was socially

acceptable when it came to alcohol consumption and dance styles. Truly, the flappers were

merely following in the footsteps of the generation before them of which Louise Hill was a

headline making member. One of the dance styles Hill debuted in the Denver social scene was

deemed so controversial and wild that it was banned by the White House. In 1910, one of the

most popular ‘animal dances’, the turkey trot, was considered so outrageous that doctors warned

of the harm it could bring. It was not only banned in multiple cities but “denounced by President

Woodrow Wilson.”[[17]](#endnote-17) It was considered to be “absolutely vulgar” and those individuals who

dared to dance its suggestive steps (or participated in as New York’s former mayor William Jay

Gaynor referred to it, the “lascivious orgy”) were at risk of being arrested.[[18]](#endnote-18)

While Louise Hill was contradictory in some or even most of her behaviors her

participation in frivolous acts such as roller skating and the introduction of a nationally

inappropriate dance such as the turkey trot cement her place as a forward-thinking woman intent

on aiding in revolutionizing local and national society and ushering America into a more modern

era of thinking and behavior.

While she did find great success with the Denver community in the beginning of her societal reign, she was not nationally or internationally recognized as a modern society queen. In 1908, Hill made history in the pioneer city when she authored her first and only social register. Much like the Social Register published in New York City that defined the list of the 400 and “establish[ed] the border separating the aristocrat from the parvenu,” Hill’s book *Who’s Who in Denver Society* sought to serve the same purpose.[[19]](#endnote-19) Seeking to be legitimized on a global scale, Hill used her intelligence, tenacity, and wealth to help make the leap into the international smart set. In an article entitled “Denver Society Woman to Enter Palace, Mrs. Crawford Hill Will Be ‘Presented’” a journalist described the event that marked her place in history as the first Denverite to be presented in English court. The article stated that:

The importance of being presented at court may be judged correctly only when you consider a society woman from any of the lesser cities of America is absolutely unknown outside of her own home. She has no acquaintance worth speaking of among New York’s “400” and in the capitals of Europe there is for her no possibility of recognition. But let her be presented at court and her whole social status is changed.[[20]](#endnote-20)

After her presentation at court, the notoriety and popularity of the Thirty-Six only

continued to grow as did her features in the society pages. From that point forward, Hill was

acquainted with numerous members of various nobility including lords, ladies, and Princess and

Prince Henry XXXIII of Reuss, a former principality in what is now East Germany.[[21]](#endnote-21) She was

also the only woman in Denver permitted to entertain President William Howard Taft socially

during his 1911 trip to Denver.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Hill’s national and international presence was cemented further in 1909 when Elizabeth Gordon, the head editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*, sent Hill a letter requesting that she write an article for the magazine. Hill was recruited to compose and piece that represented Denver on the subject of Eastern v. Western society. Her article was to be a piece in a series that included compositions by both Lady Randolph Churchill on London society and Mrs. Julia Ward Howe on Boston’s exclusive set.[[23]](#endnote-23) Hill’s reign over high society and her national and international travel continued through the 1920s and 30s. By 1944, Hill had shut down her mansion for parties and social gatherings due to the ravages of WWII. In her later years, the upkeep of her home became too much for her and she suffered from a stroke around 1947. She and her staff moved into the Skyline Apartments at the Brown Palace and her sons sold her mansion to the newly established Jewish Town Club. [[24]](#endnote-24) She spent her remaining years in her Brown Palace apartment and died there of pneumonia in 1955 at the age of ninety-one leaving an estate worth just over $5,000,000.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Hill led, by high society terms, a fabulous life. Noted in the papers for her sensational

personality, she also appeared to possess an insatiable thirst for wealth and public recognition of

her power and success. Though tragedy signaled the beginning of her life and despair fraught the

end, Louise Sneed Hill strived to consistently display her genteel breeding and poise. Defined by

local papers as an animated conversationalist and a thorough sophisticate, Denver society’s

dowager queen was a force to be reckoned with, her high society contest carried high risk and

individuals who dared enter the arena had to constantly be alert and mind their steps. For Hill,

high risk resulted in high reward as she effectively put the mile-high city on the map. With its

vastly different population and geography, Louise Hill had to work from the bottom up and

modernize the culture of the hub of the pioneer west in order to create an aristocratic-style

society and usher in a contemporary era.

Hill pushed the boundaries of what was appropriate. As a Southerner, she did not have

the same suspicion of leisure that ran rampant in the Puritanical north. Though she consistently

aligned herself in interviews with the Puritan ideal of work, she made every effort, especially in her later years, to distinguish her leisure as hard work. She felt the “training the society woman receives on the social battlefield is as excellent as the training of a soldier” because often times society women were “called upon to lead movements important to the community.” She admitted that society leaders “have the leisure other women lack” but they were also “doing really big things in the world.” They were “trained to be alert, to be interested in the big vital problems and, above all, to be thoughtful of others.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

The Sacred Thirty-Six was the first establishment of an internationally recognized elite

social scene in Denver and resulted in the acknowledgment of the city as a legitimate cultural

and educated place to the world at-large. Her creation of an aristocratic social scene in pioneer

Colorado forever altered the epicenter of the pioneer Rocky Mountain West. She was a

revolutionary spirit during a transitional time when American society began looking towards the

future of the country’s culture. Hill was an agent of change working to advocate for the

acceptance of leisure as work and not simply for leisure’s sake. In a time when Victorian culture

was suspicious of luxury and leisure, she emphasized the labor of her efforts to appease the

masses and ease the transition into a contemporary school of thought. By putting an emphasis on

amusement and an independent identity for women, Hill was a trailblazer that helped usher in the

phenomena of mass and celebrity culture. By using the press to pull back the veil on high society

she allowed the rest of the class system to indulge in the drama of the bourgeoisie. She presented

herself as the foremost authority on all things fun and fashionable in the press and created

intimate relationships with those writing about her. She defined high society for Gilded Age

Denver and with the end of her life, as American society began to worship Hollywood actors as

celebrities, came the end of that era of the fashionably wealthy reigning supreme in that

capacity.

Women like Louise Hill have been written out of the narrative, grossly misrepresented or

have ended up as merely a chapter or a footnote of American history. These women were high

society leaders but they were so much more than that. They were also philanthropists,

preservationists, and advocates of change who held themselves to a high standard of genteel

breeding and accomplished amazing feats. It is hard to imagine what the city of Denver would be

like today if it were not for the influence of the tiny but powerful Louise Sneed Hill.

1. Helen Eastom, “Hospitality of Mrs. Hill World Famed,” *The Denver Post.* 12 Sept 1926. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Untitled article, Louise Hill scrapbook, undated, Carton 35, Stephen H. Hart Library and Research Center, History Colorado Center. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mildred Morris, “Society Defended by Mrs. Hill: Not Immoral, Leader Declares,” *Rocky Mountain News,* 15 April 1914, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Biographical Sketch,” Guide to the Hill Collection, Hart Research Library at the *History Colorado Center.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There is some dispute about her date of birth. While many sources cite her birthday in March, a diary of her aunt (Mary Jeffreys Bethell) states Louisa Sneed (Louise’s mother) died on the 11th of July 1862 “leaving an infant 11 days old.” Mary Jeffreys Bethell, “July 27th Sunday” in “Diary January 1st – December 1865” *Documenting the American South,* Southern Historical Collection at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. An undated newspaper article — clipped and placed in a scrapbook that now resides within the larger Louise Hill collection at History Colorado Center — entitled “Society Forecasts” claimed that Mrs. Crawford Hill was born on June 28th “in the sign of Cancer.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Sneed Plantation” *NCGenweb Project* & *North Carolina* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Correspondence (Letter) Crawford Hill, James A. Rose, Esq., 27 March 1900, Crawford Hill collection, Volume I, Western History Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library & “Brochure: Hotel St. Elmo, Green Cove Springs, Florida.” *University of North Florida.* Special Collections and University Archives. Tourism. Paper 4. http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/tourism/4 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mildred Morris, “Society Defended by Mrs. Hill: Not Immoral, Leader Declares,” *Rocky Mountain News,* 15 April 1914, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mildred Morris, “Society Defended by Mrs. Hill: Not Immoral, Leader Declares,” *Rocky Mountain News,* 15 April 1914, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Denver’s Most Exclusive Set Ruled by One” Louise Hill scrapbook, undated, Carton 35, Stephen H. Hart Library and Research Center, History Colorado Center. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “Louise Hill,” manuscript, pg 2, Marilyn Griggs Riley papers, Box 2, FF32, Western History Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Kristen Iversen, *Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth* (Boulder: Big Earth Publishing, 1999), 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “Mrs. Crawford Hill Fractures Her Wrist” *The Denver Post*. 19 Jan 1908. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Renee McReynolds, interviewed by Shelby Carr, Personal inquiry, Denver, October 19, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. “Biographical Sketch,” Guide to the Hill Collection. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Frances Melrose, “Mrs. Crawford Hill: Dowager Queen of Denver Society,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 4 May 1947. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Greg Daugherty, “The ‘Animal Dances So Wild They Were Banned from the White House,” *History.com*. 20 Nov 2018. (https://www.history.com/news/banned-animal-dance-turkey-trot-woodrow-wilson) (Accessed 10 Jan 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Greg Daugherty, “The ‘Animal Dances So Wild They Were Banned from the White House,” *History.com*. 20 Nov 2018. (https://www.history.com/news/banned-animal-dance-turkey-trot-woodrow-wilson) (Accessed 10 Jan 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York,* 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. “Denver Society Woman to Enter Palace, Mrs. Crawford Hill Will Be ‘Presented,’” Louise Hill scrapbook, undated, Carton 35, Stephen H. Hart Library and Research Center, History Colorado Center. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. “Denver Society Leader to Give Party March 13” and “Sacred Thirty-six of Denver Welcome Lord and Lady Decies,” Louise Hill scrapbook, undated, Carton 35, Stephen H. Hart Library and Research Center, History Colorado Center. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 Oct. 1911. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Correspondence (letter), Elizabeth Gordon, Louise Hill, 22 July 1909, Stephen H. Hart Library and Research Center, History Colorado Center. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. “Agreement of Sale for 969 Sherman Street,” 28 Mar. 1947, Jack Weil Collection, Box 1, Western History Genealogy Department, *Denver Public Library.* [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. “Last Will and Testament of Louise Sneed Hill,” Jack Weil Collection, Box 1, Western History Genealogy Department, *Denver Public Library.* [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Mildred Morris, “Society Defended by Mrs. Hill: Not Immoral, Leader Declares,” *Rocky Mountain News,* 15 April 1914, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)