

# THE FLIGHT OF THE COTTON FAIRIES: THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

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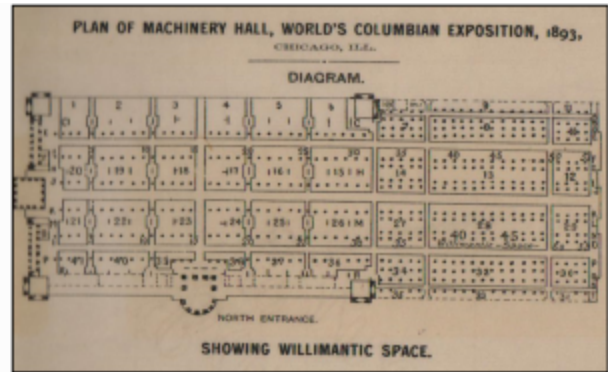
The story of Rose Terry Cooke's fairy tale, *A Fairy at School*, is itself a part of another story, the story of how the Willimantic Linen Company and its manager, Eugene S. Boss, came to participate in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and why as part of that participation they decided to commission a well-known author to write a Victorian fairy tale. Much of this larger story can be extracted from well-known published histories of both the Linen Company and the Columbian Exposition, and in an unpublished but easily accessible MA thesis that analyzes Cooke's work. But to discover the whole "story behind the story" of how Cooke came to write her industrial fairy tale also requires access to a unique document, presently in the collection of the Windham Textile and History Museum in Willimantic: Boss's 1894 scrapbook of the Exposition.



When the Willimantic Linen Company, North America's preeminent manufacturer of cotton thread, decided to do something, it usually did it in a big way. Thus in 1892 the Company donated \$5,500 – the largest contribution by any private business in Connecticut, and the equivalent of nearly \$130,000 in today's money – to the Connecticut Board of World's Fair Managers, the body that planned and organized the state's participation in the Columbian Exposition. Not stopping there, the Company also made sure that Boss, one of its

top executives, was appointed to the Board and elected vice president. (1) Then, when the Exposition opened in 1893, the Company sponsored a major booth in the fair's Machinery Hall, with an impressive array of fully functioning modern precision machines used to manufacture cotton thread, including an astounding device that wound a jaw-dropping eight spools of cotton thread at a time. (2) Fairgoers, mesmerized by the whirring gears, pumping drive shafts, and glistening steel, crowded to see the exhibit. Commented the *Chicago Tribune*, "Nothing seems to attract and hold crowds in Machinery Hall so permanently as does the exhibit of the Willimantic Linen Company." (3) Added the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, "There is nothing in all the varied exhibits in the vast machinery building that attracts more attention than does the display made by the Willimantic Linen Company, of Willimantic Conn. They have been at great expense and trouble to arrange an exhibit that is not only novel and interesting, but is at the same time instructive, and has always surrounding it a throng of curious spectators." (4)

In addition to all that, the Company also commissioned Cooke, a well-known 19th-century author of hundreds of published stories and poems, to write a moralistic Victorian fairy tale about a lazy fairy who was transformed by a combination of magic and machinery into sturdy, useful cotton thread at the Linen Company's sprawling Willimantic mills. The Company printed the story itself, in its own print shop, along with a back-up article, "In Praise of Needlework," on glossy paper, illustrated with elegant blue-green watercolors, and bound the pages between embossed cotton-white cardboard covers. Boss's scrapbook reveals that the Company offered copies to fairgoers as a premium give-away item, but also sold it at a nominal price through the mail.



Participating in a world's fair, using popular culture to advertise its products, and boasting about how well its workers were treated and how hard they worked were exactly the kinds of things the Willimantic Linen Company was used to doing. The Company was a pioneer among American manufacturers in the application of advanced technology, creating and using modern advertising techniques, and instituting benevolent management practices. Founded in 1854 to manufacture linen thread, the Company switched to cotton only three years later in 1857. It stockpiled raw cotton in advance of the Civil War (1861-65), enjoyed immense profits during the war, and in 1864 plowed its wartime windfall into the construction of a sprawling, new, granite factory building with state-of-the-art precision machines that spun thread so uniform that it could be used in that temperamental new device, the home sewing machine.



In 1876 the Linen Company had participated in earlier world's fair, the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. That fair had given the Company a golden opportunity to advertise the quality and uniformity of its thread. When the country's various sewing machine manufacturers, which were also in Philadelphia displaying their own products, decided to organize a well-advertised sewing machine "contest," the first "test" was for

each machine to be able to use Linen Company thread, available from the Company's nearby booth. All but two of the sewing machines passed the test, allowing the Linen Company to advertise truthfully, and incessantly, that its thread was so uniform that it could be used in almost any sewing machine. Sales increased. Three years later, in 1879, the Company garnered more publicity and further enhanced its reputation for state-of-the-art technology when it became the first factory in the world to install electric lights. The next year, in 1880, it gained even more attention when it erected a new, even larger factory building at its Willimantic plant, designed to be lit by electric lights and powered by steam rather than water. The new Mill Number Four was both massive (it was at the time the largest one-story building in the

world) and elegant (it boasted ornamental towers, wood paneling, and colored glass windows). With thick, fireproof stone or brick walls, the Company's buildings, like the Company itself, were built to last. (5)

The Company also invested heavily in advertising based on popular culture. It provided retailers with elegant, specially constructed wood or steel thread display cases, decorated with the Company's name and star and spool logos. And it printed hundreds of catchy trade cards – including one showing the recently completed Brooklyn Bridge suspended by Linen Company thread, and another depicting Willimantic thread pulling Jumbo, P. T. Barnum's famous circus elephant. (6)

The Linen Company was also known for its benevolent labor practices, and for its progressive activities within the Willimantic community. With great fanfare, it had opened a library for workers, their families, and other residents of Willimantic. Known as Dunham Hall, the library was named for Austin Dunham, one of the Company's founders, whose portrait hung on one wall. It offered free reading and writing classes (although it also demanded that its workers all become literate) and lectures in art and music. It operated a company store and rows and rows of company housing. It built a stone-arch bridge across the Willimantic River and deeded it to the town, created the Windham County Fairgrounds as a public park, and sponsored a new, two-story, brick, public elementary schoolhouse. It even built the Oaks, a planned suburban neighborhood of free-standing, single-family, ornate Victorian cottages, for some of its workers. The Company's benevolence, while real, nevertheless came on the Company's own terms. Company managers took a paternalistic view of their workers and their own place in society – the Company was the parent, providing for its workers and other townspeople, but in return expected the recipients of its benevolence to be grateful, dutiful, and obedient – and to adopt the middle-class values of thrift, industry, and sobriety so cherished by the Company's managers and owners. The Company's paternalistic vision is clearly visible in Cooke's fairy story, which is revealed to be both commercial advertising and social propaganda. (7)

The Columbian Exposition offered the Linen Company a great opportunity to both advertise its products and espouse its doctrine of industrial paternalism. As the 400th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 voyage loomed, Americans planned to celebrate with a gigantic world's fair in Chicago that they hoped would attract millions of spectators. The World's Columbian Exposition was to be much larger than the earlier 1876 Centennial Exposition. It would be larger even than the Great Exposition (also known as the Crystal Palace Exposition) in London in 1851, the first world's fair and an event that had come to symbolize British primacy in the Victorian Era. Even more, it was to be larger than the recent 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, with its famous Eiffel Tower. The Columbian Exposition



would show the world that America stood ready to challenge both Britain and France for bragging rights as the world's leading industrial power and cultural center.

Event planners broke ground in October, 1892, although the fairgrounds were not completed and opened to the public until May, 1893. Most of the fairgrounds, located along Lake Michigan, were designed by Connecticut's Frederick Law Olmsted, the country's preeminent landscape architect. (The designer of Central Park in New York City and Walnut Hill Park in New Britain, Connecticut, Olmsted had virtually created the new field of landscape architecture.) The actual buildings and structures were designed by the Chicago architectural firm of Burnham and Root, which had already invented the world's first skyscraper. The Columbian Exposition consisted of 200 buildings and sprawled across 600 acres. Lawns, gardens, canals, parks, and lagoons decorated the outdoor areas. Hundreds of businesses set up displays in large, cavernous pavilions. During the Exposition's six-month run more than 27 million people attended, the equivalent of half of the U. S. population at the time.

The center of the Columbian Exposition was the White City, a collection of gleaming stucco buildings erected along the Lake, just east the fairground's central artery, the Midway Plaisance, which connected to Midway Boulevard. Unlike anything the country had ever seen, the White City symbolized the can-do, over-the-top, pro-business spirit of the Gilded Age. Most visitors found it jaw-droppingly magnificent. The phrase "alabaster cities" in Katharine Lee Bates's famous poem, "America the Beautiful," for example, was an admiring reference to the White City. But others saw in the White City the fraudulence and fakery that also characterized the Gilded Age. Most of the buildings, although made to look like stone, were actually flimsy shells coated with veneers of plaster. One of the more cynical visitors was recent Chicago resident, L. Frank Baum, a traveling salesman, who was so struck with the White City – with its gleaming white plaster like a curtain masking the humbug underneath, its false surface so bright with reflected light that fairgoers frequently wore tinted glasses to protect their eyes – that it became the inspiration for the Emerald City in his 1900 children's novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. (Ironically, the temporary structures of the Exposition stood in contrast to the real granite and brick buildings of the Linen Company's Willimantic mills, most which still stand. All but a few of the White City's buildings were demolished as soon as the fair was over.)

In many ways, the Columbian Exposition reshaped American culture. Midway Plaisance, with its crowds and pavilions and restaurants from foreign countries, became so synonymous with fairs that Americans began to refer to the center of any fairgrounds as a midway. The University of Chicago's football team (the University's new campus was immediately adjacent to the fairgrounds) soon picked up the nickname "the Monsters of the Midway." When a young Walt Disney heard his father, Elias, a construction worker on the project, describe the White City, it planted the seeds for his own later creations of Disneyland, Disney World, and Epcot Center. The Westinghouse Company used the Exposition to demonstrate its new product, alternating current, and Westinghouse bulbs, superior (and cheaper) than those manufactured by its competitor, Thomas Edison's General Electric, brightly lit the entire White City. Like the Linen Company's Willimantic mills, the White City became famous for its lights. Many fairgoers experienced electricity for the first time in their lives, and the movement to electrify

America gained momentum. Several manufacturers introduced new products at the Exposition: Cracker Jack, Juicy Fruit gum, Quaker Oats, Cream of Wheat, and Shredded Wheat. Edison debuted his kinetoscope, although few people noticed. George Ferris invented a new amusement ride especially for the occasion: the original Ferris wheel, so immense that fairgoers compared it to the Eiffel Tower. For the Willimantic Linen Company to design a booth that became one of the most popular attractions at the Exposition – to go toe-to-toe with Westinghouse, Edison, and Quaker Oats – was no mean feat. For the Linen Company, participating in the fair was an advertising masterstroke. The Company's sleek modern machines and little white book announced its primacy in the textile industry and Willimantic's place in Victorian America. (8)

Like Chicago, the compact industrial city of Willimantic, Connecticut, where the Linen Company had its mills, also characterized Victorian or Gilded Age America. Located in the western part of the old colonial town of Windham, Willimantic came into being in the 1820s and 1830s as a string of five new little factory villages strung along a one-mile stretch of rapids and waterfalls in the Willimantic River. By the 1870s the five villages – Jillson Hill, Smithville, Tingleyville, Iverton, and Sodom – had merged to form the bustling textile city of Willimantic, with the Linen Company the largest of its several cotton and silk mills. Workers poured into Willimantic from the New England countryside, Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, Germany, and beyond. In 1890, fully half of Willimantic's residents were either immigrants, or the children of immigrants. A mile-long Main Street paralleled the river and connected the mills, with rows of brick stores, restaurants, tea shops, theaters, and churches. Branching side streets created parallel rows of blocks that soon covered the narrow floor of the valley. Most of the workers crowded into simple wooden tenements within walking distance of the factories, but after the Civil War the city's expanding upper and middle classes moved uphill, away from the crowded, noisy, smoke-filled valley floor, and into spacious new houses along quiet, shady, tree-named streets in the Prospect Hill and Hosmer Mountain neighborhoods. The new homes – roomy, refined, and elegant – were a combination of Victorian mansions and cottages, brightly painted, with wide porches, decorative windows, ornate roofs, and intricate gingerbread trims. Proud, self-satisfied, and well educated, Willimantic's affluent, rising middle class enthusiastically embraced Victorian culture and literature. At a time when most working-class women could not afford the cost of a home sewing machine, and upper-class women hired servants to do their sewing for them, the Willimantic Linen Company aimed its advertising at this burgeoning Victorian middle class with its black-and-gold sewing machines, a middle class whose values and aspirations the Company's managers shared.

Eugene Stowell Boss came from Willimantic's middle class, and he knew it well. Boss was born in Willimantic in 1842. His father had been an overseer in one of the city's cotton mills, and Boss enjoyed a middle-class upbringing. In 1858, at the age of 16, he took a job in the newly formed Willimantic Linen Company as a dresser tender in the finishing department. In 1860, at 18, he transferred to New York City to take a clerical position in the Company's corporate offices. He came back to Willimantic five years later, at 23, to work as paymaster and general clerk. He continued to move up, working in the Company's Hartford offices until 1879 when, at 37, the Company made him agent, the number two position at the Willimantic mills. When the



superintendent, William Barrows, left in 1883, Boss, only 41, took over as the plant's chief executive. He lived in an elegant Victorian mansion within sight of the mills. A Republican party activist, Boss served in the Connecticut legislature in 1877, 1882-83, and 1891. He acted as Commissary General of the Connecticut National Guard, president of Willimantic's Gas Light Company, president of the Willimantic Electric Light Company, and president of the Willimantic Fair Association, and he was a director in several Willimantic businesses. (9) He was a logical choice as the Company's point man on the Columbian Exposition, at 51 a trusted manager who understood both middle-class values and the importance of effective advertising. It is quite likely that it was his idea to publish a fairy tale to advertise the Company's thread

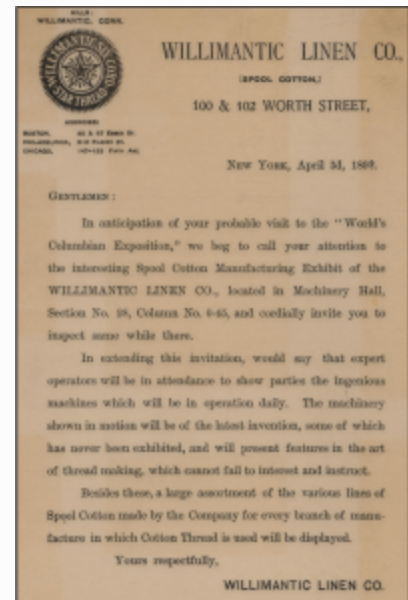
and publicize its commitment to industrial paternalism.

Among the most popular aspects of middle-class Victorian culture were fairy tales. Although most people in the 1800s imagined that fairy tales originated in medieval Europe as folk tales, they were, in fact, a modern innovation that first appeared during the 15th-century Renaissance and reached their peak during the 19th century, when they were written and popularized by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. As scholar Ruth B. Bottigheimer points out, the myth of "folk invention and transmission of fairy tales has no basis in verifiable fact." Medieval folk tales did sometimes feature fairies and other wee folk, to be sure, but only as troublesome mischief makers, not as beneficent fairy godmothers or wielders of magic wands. Fairy tales' greatest appeal was among the educated, urbanized Victorian middle class, and among those educated workers who aspired to be middle class. Victorian fairy tales, which by definition centered around fairies and magic, generally fell into two basic types: "restoration fairy tales" (in which the heroes recovered some thing or status they once had, but lost), and "rise fairy tales" (in which the protagonists rose from poverty to affluence). "This is largely so," writes Bottigheimer, "because fairy tales originated among the same kinds of urban assumptions and expectations with which city and suburban dwellers continue to live today. Fairy tales, which speak in a language well understood in the modern world, remain relevant because they allude to deep hopes for material improvement, because they present illusions of happiness to come, and because they provide social paradigms that overlap nearly perfectly with daydreams of a better life." Common literary devices found in fairy tales were fairies, magic, a mystical place called fairyland, and happy endings that reflected Victorian notions of justice. (10) Fairy tales also occasionally took the place of traditional religious faith in an increasingly secular age. As traditional religion came to seem increasingly irrelevant to the more scientifically minded Victorians – especially when some of the established

churches openly challenged several of the leading scientific discoveries of the era – fairy tales (along with spiritualism, which was also popular among the Victorian middle class) offered

something else to believe in. Fairy tales also provided a pleasant nostalgia for the pastoral past that was rapidly disappearing in the industrial era. The same forces that drove middle-class people out of the noisy, dirty industrial neighborhoods and into the new, green suburbs with wide lawns, ornamental bushes, and streets named for trees, also made the ideas of fairy magic and fairyland appealing, and explain why so many Victorians falsely believed that fairy tales were actually new versions of medieval folk tales. Middle-class hunger for fairy tales grew so strong in the 19th century that even well-educated, rational savants like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the British author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, convinced themselves that fairies really existed. (11) It is not surprising that Boss and the Linen Company's other managers, used to exploiting popular culture, should decide to create a fairy tale to advertise its products and promote its principles.

So Boss, or someone else at the Linen Company, decided to commission a fairy tale to be printed and handed out at the Columbian Exposition. Evidence that the idea was Boss's is in his scrapbook. He cut out and pasted down dozens of advertisements, reviews, and trade cards for the book. In one, the Seipsie, Ohio, *Free Press* declares, "This office has received a beautiful souvenir book issued by the Willimantic Linen Co. The exquisitely embossed cover gives it an appearance of richness rarely found.... You can obtain this book by watching the series of advertisements the company is running in this paper." (12) In another, the Wapakoueta, Ohio, *County Democrat* writes that the book "is well worth having, and readers of the Democrat who want a neat souvenir of a great establishment should read their advertisement on the fifth page of this paper and send for the booklet." (13) The *Duluth Evening Herald* adds, "The author is Rose Terry Cooke and she has written a charming story that has been beautifully illustrated. The romance deals with the manufacture of thread in Willimantic and it is so well written and couched in such graceful language that it is a pleasure to read it." (14) Getting good reviews turned out to be easy, if the Company also purchased an advertisement in the same paper. Boss's scrapbook indicates that the Company gave the book away free at the Columbian Exposition as a souvenir, and otherwise sold it via the mail at a nominal price. (15)



To write the fairy tale, the Company decided to commission a well-known and prolific author of children's stories. Born in West Hartford, Connecticut, in 1827, Rose Terry Cooke was the middle-class daughter of an unsuccessful landscape gardener who instilled in her a strong love of nature and learning. Sickly but extremely intelligent, as a child Cooke read widely. She graduated from the Hartford Female Seminary – founded by Catharine Beecher and the alma mater of Harriet Beecher Stowe – at the age of 16. She worked for several years as a governess and teacher, but became a full-time writer in the 1850s, thanks to a small inheritance. She wrote more than 300 poems of uneven quality, three forgettable novels, a play, and a large number of mostly very good short stories, usually about the everyday lives of rural New

England women. Although Cooke did not support woman suffrage, scholars like Bridget Garland today nevertheless consider her to be among the earliest American feminist writers because of her realistic portrayal of women oppressed by tyrannical men. Cooke is also considered an early local colorist, because of her focus on rural New England life. In addition, Cooke also wrote a number of children's stories. True to the times, her children's stories were didactic and moralizing, aimed more at teaching moral lessons than entertaining readers, a characteristic that made them appealing to middle-class parents, but probably bored most children. Ironically, *A Fairy at School* would be one of the last of the old, moralizing children's books. A new writer was about to invent a new style of children's book that would transform children's literature – the very same L. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, who was so much influenced by the fakery and humbug of the Columbian Exposition and the White City.

The quality of Cooke's work was uneven because she wrote for pay as well as for art. Although clearly gifted as a writer, she was also chronically short of money. She took care of her ailing sister Alice, and after Alice died, Alice's children. She remained unmarried until the age of 56, in an era when single women had few opportunities to make good money. And when she did marry Rollin Cooke (16 years her junior) in 1873, he turned out to be a ne'er-do-well, and Rose had to continue to write to support the family. By the late 1880s she was deeply in debt and begging her publisher, William Tricknor of Boston, for any kind of paying hackwork that he could send her. *A Fairy at School* was probably her last work, published a year after her death in 1892. (16)

*A Fairy at School* is a fascinating piece of Connecticut history. Although mediocre as literature, it tells a great deal about the Victorian era that produced it. It explains how cotton thread was produced at one of the country's largest and most modern factories, and provides illustrations. It also contains important insights into Victorian middle-class values, 19th-century advertising strategies, and the now almost-forgotten importance of the Columbian Exposition in shaping, and reflecting, popular culture. We also gain a link to Connecticut writer Rose Terry Cooke, celebrated in her time as an important chronicler of New England women's lives, and the Willimantic Linen Company, well known among Gilded Age Americans as a powerful and progressive company. The book itself, and the story of how it came to be written, are well worth preserving.

#### ENDNOTES

1. J. H. Vaill, *Connecticut at the World's Fair: Report of the Commissioners from Connecticut of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 at Chicago: Also Report of the Work of the Board of Lady Managers of Connecticut* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, 1898), 29, 197. The Cheney Silk Works of Manchester and the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad tied for second, with \$5,000 contributions. The Willimantic Linen Co.'s initial pledge was \$4,500, but it was later increased.

2. Rossiter Johnson, *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition Held in Chicago in 1893; By the Authority of the Board of Directors* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1897).
3. *Chicago Tribune*, 11 June 1893. Clipping from scrapbook of Eugene S. Boss, Windham Textile and History Museum, Willimantic, CT, doc-A-0849. Thanks to Beverley L. York for pointing to Boss's scrapbook as a source.
4. *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 28 May, 1893. Clipping from Boss scrapbook.
5. Thomas R. Beardsley, *Willimantic Industry and Community: The Rise and Decline of a Connecticut Textile City* (Willimantic: Windham Textile and History Museum, 1993), 4, 15-32, 44-47, 52-61.
6. A number of the thread cases and trade cards can be found in the collection of the Windham Textile and History Museum in Willimantic.
7. Beardsley, *Willimantic Industry and Community*, 33-44.
8. For more on the Columbian Exposition, see Erik Larsen, *Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Crown, 2003); Rebecca Loncraine, *The Real Wizard of Oz: The Life and Times of L. Frank Baum* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 133-146; Stanley Applebaum, *The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (New York: Dover, 1980); and David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1976).
9. Boss's biography comes from an exhibit sign at the Windham Textile and History Museum.
10. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 1-26 (quotes on pp. 1 and 13). See also Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and Anita Moss, "Mothers, Monsters, and Morals in Victorian Fairy Tales," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 12 (1988): 47-60.
11. Pierre Nordon, *Conan Doyle*, trans. Frances Partridge (London: John Murray, 1966), 139-167. Conan Doyle, who had a troubled childhood, rejected his Irish Catholic upbringing for science, but then found science hollow as a system of values and meaning. He filled the void with spiritualism and fairy tales, which he convinced himself had scientific validity.
12. Seipsie, Ohio, *Free Press*, 1 March 1894. From Boss's scrapbook.
13. Wapakoueta, Ohio, *Auglaize County Democrat*, 1 March 1894. From Boss's scrapbook.
14. *Duluth Evening Herald*, 17 March 1894. From Boss's scrapbook.
15. *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 3 August 1893 and 4 August 1893. "A free souvenir of the fair." From Boss's scrapbook.
16. Bridget R. Garland, "Trapped in Bluebeard's Chamber: Rose Terry Cooke and Nineteenth-Century 'Desperate Housewives'," MA thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2005.