

## Women's wear of yesteryear She's stitching history into colorful costumes

By Anna Marie Lux  
Gazette Staff

[Bev Wassam] of rural Delavan believes you can learn about women's history by looking at what women wore.

Consider female of the 1860's, for example. If they didn't wear hoops under their dresses, they surely had on several petticoats.

"Imagine trying to get into a carriage with a hoop or all those yards and yards of fabric. Or just sitting in a chair. One doesn't sit in a chair wearing a hoop. One perches on the edge."

And if hoops and petticoats weren't enough, think about the all-confining corset.

Some could trim a waist to 18 inches.

"Women lost babies because they wore corsets too long. Part of it was the French influence. The French put corsets on little girls when they were 5 years old to mold their rib cages."

Only a "loose" woman went without one.

"It's a real education to know what people wore," said [Bev], a professional seamstress who re-creates mostly 19<sup>th</sup> century dresses and undergarments.

She sews dresses for herself and other who are interested in re-enacting. Revolutionary and Civil War periods. Using historically authentic patterns, [Bev] has made costumes dating from the 1770s to the 1870s. But the Civil War era is her favorite.



**Picture 1: [Bev Wassam] left, and Kathleen Ernst show off Civil War fashions sewn by [Bev], who re-creates historical costumes at her rural Delavan home.**

“It’s the most colorful. The women were quite elegant and revered. Costumes were very feminine. Maybe ‘Gone with the Wind’ has something to do with it. It’s fun to make someone look beautiful in a costume,” she said.

[Bev] dresses in costume and attends historical re-enactments.

“It’s sort of a subculture. When everyone is dressed in costume like that, people tend to play-act and it’s fun. The men are more chivalrous and the women more demure.”

Earlier this year, she organized a style show at The Abbey in Fontana that featured six dresses from 1770 to 1870. Later this month, she is taking a larger fashion show to Waukesha.

“Style shows are something I really enjoy. I want to let people see the evolution of costumes.”

For eight years, [Bev] has sewn historical dresses, including outfits for men. Sometimes her 1852 farmhouse, complete with a white picket fence, is filled with Civil War music performed by Wisconsin’s First Brigade Band.

“It really gets you in the mood,” she explained.

[Bev] began her eighth season as a historical interpreter at Old World Wisconsin near Eagle this month. Normally, she works in the Norwegian or Finnish homesteads. OWW is a living museum that portrays the ethnic backgrounds of the people who settled Wisconsin.

“I’ve always been a seamstress. I’ve done custom sewing for square dancers and customer sewing since I was about 15. Working at the museum has given me an appreciation of the historic beauty of costumes.”

During the Civil War, people didn’t have much clothing. Cotton cloth was scarce because the Yankees burned cotton fields. So women had to be able to change the few dresses they had.

[Bev] demonstrated how with a 1860s day dress, sewn from a small floral print and decorated with mauve ribbon.

“A woman could put a crocheted collar around the neck to change the appearance or she could wear a fichu – a long collar – to change the neckline.”

Waistlines during the Civil War were high to accommodate up to seven petticoats under a dress or a large, billowy hoop. Sloping shoulders were considered very feminine, she said.

For women who had any work to do, the outfits, of course, were not practical, and at least one early feminist tried to do something about it.

“During the 1860s, a woman invented the bloomer dress. She was quite an activist,” [Bev] said.

The woman was Amelia Jenks Bloomer, an advocate of temperance and women’s rights, who started her own newspaper – the first to be published by a female.

Allied to her other crusades was the wish to emancipate women from the difficulties of wearing long, dust-sweeping skirts. So, she designed billowy pants, which came to be known as “bloomers.”

“She invented the dress for practical reasons. If a woman was doing farm work, she could climb the fence without getting her skirt ripped.

“It was practical, but never took off. It was the Victorian Era and it just wasn’t ladylike to have appendages showing. If a man saw an ankle, well, that was wonderful,” [Bev] said.

She learned how to make 19<sup>th</sup> century underwear at the corset-sewing seminar.

“Undergarments were very restrictive. Women didn’t have bras then as we know them today. Instead, they wore one piece – the corset – that tucked them in at the waist and lifted out the chest.”

A normal corset usually was made out of drill, heavy cotton, and was worn over a chemise to keep it clean. The corset was laced up the back and the woman wearing it “tended to breathe off the top of her lungs,” [Bev] said.

So, what is left for a seamstress who has created everything from corsets to pantaloons?

“I’d like to sew a period wedding dress, but I’m not sure if it will be from the 1860s or something later.”



**Picture 2: [Bev Wassam] wears a ‘working corset’ made of drill, heavy cotton, worn over a chemise to keep it clean.**