DRESSING LIKE LAURA:

RECONSTRUCTING WOMEN'S DRESS ON THE GREAT PLAINS FRONTIER THROUGH THE NATIONAL COWBOY AND WESTERN HERITAGE MUSEUM'S DRESS 2829

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Bachelor of Arts in History

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, OK

2021

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 2023

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MUSEUM'S DRESS 2829

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing and acknowledgments sections offers the author a moment of reflection at the end of a long and laborious project. I have greatly enjoyed this project from the sewing to the final editing and I am both sad and relieved to see this project through to its completion. While writing, I spent a great number of hours banging my head against the table, hoping for the words to come. A number of people made this project more bearable. Some even made this project harder, though ultimately, better.

First, I must thank those at the National Cowboy and Western History Museum. Even after working there, I still enjoy walking through those glass doors and seeing what the museum has in store for me. I am particularly grateful to Melissa Owners and Nathan Jones who allowed me to tag along and cause trouble during the Summer of 2022. Thank you for finding projects for me to do, kindly offering up information and critiques, and showing me the ropes of working in a museum setting. You both took an immense interest in my project and seemed more than willing to help me out.

I suppose I must also thank my committee members. You spent hours answering my questions and reading over drafts, but you also prompted me to throw myself at my computer with great wearing and gnashing of teeth upon numerous occasions. Though, I suppose that is your job. ;) So, thank you. All three of you have pushed me to be a better writer, a better scholar, and be very careful and nuanced in my arguments. Dr. Karibo, you are greatly feared by the graduate students, which is why so many of us have you on our committees. Your bluntness cuts to the point, but you care deeply about your students. I admire you deeply, and if I can be half as intelligent as you someday, I will be content with my lot. Dr. Flynt, you are one of the gentlest people I have ever met and this, combined with your extreme precision and encyclopedic knowledge, made you the first person I went to with my scholarly issues. Dr. Arata, you always had crazy ideas and were willing to encourage mine. Thank you for every moment of your time over these past six years. You have made me a better scholar and you are the sole reason I was able to graduate in the allotted amount of time.

Though not on my committee, I must also thank Dr. Brandy Thomas-Wells, for whom I worked as a research assistant. Dr. Wells was meticulous and expected an extreme amount of dedication. I am thankful for her feedback and high expectations. Numerous faculty members also deserve thanks for their help on coursework, their personal interest, and their kindness. Drs. Miller, Murray, Hosmer, Foss, Boles, Kosc, Schauer, Prince, Beltran, Carlson, Graham, Griswold, Kaplan, and Kinder were all wonderful. I would also like to thank our department secretaries, Diana and Susan. You were so kind to all of us and I loved getting to stop and chat with you.

Acknowledgements reflect the views of the author and are not endorsed by committee members or Oklahoma State University.

No graduate student experience is complete without their cohort. I want to specifically signal out Sam, Nathan, and Teagan. Your witty banter, honest feedback, willingness to goof off, and commiseration will be some of my fondest grad school memories.

I would also like to thank my parents for always encouraging my love of history. Thank you to my mother who spent countless hours reading books to me and allowing me to make a million messes around the house while pursing my crazy history craft ideas. Because of that, I could turn a harebrained idea like this into a Master's thesis. Thank you to my father who encouraged me to choose a degree many said I shouldn't, but spent time making sure I understood how to be successful in my chosen profession.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Titus. Grad school is an experience unto itself, and no one understood what I was going through better than you. Both of us being in advanced degree programs created a chaotic storm that few understood, but you have never let anyone look down on you for what you knew were right decisions. You have encouraged me to stand for truth and righteousness, even when I was alone on perilously unstable ground. Your critical eye, sharp mind, precision, and honesty gave me the confidence in this project to actually finish it. I choose you again, and again, and again, and again.

Acknowledgements reflect the views of the author and are not endorsed by committee members or Oklahoma State University.

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Date of Degree: MAY, 2023

Title of Study: DRESSING LIKE LAURA: RECONSTRUCTING WOMEN'S DRESS ON THE GREAT PLAINS FRONTIER THROUGH THE NATIONAL COWBOY AND WESTERN HERITAGE MUSEUM'S DRESS 2829

Major Field: HISTORY

Abstract: This project explores why women on the 19th century Northern Great Plains frontier continued to follow Euro-American modesty and fashion conventions and purposefully sought out fashionable clothing. In the popular imagination, the frontier was an egalitarian space with minimal cultural constraints; theoretically, it was a place where women could wear clothing that did not align with overall Victorian norms. Yet women from Dakota Territory, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Montana from 1875 to 1885 continued to wear corsets, wrist length sleeves, and ankle-length skirts and even spend their families' hard-earned money on decorative clothing.

In the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum there is a silk dress which this project recreates. The most recent historiography of experimental archeology defines the practice as "the reconstruction of past buildings, technologies, things, and environmental contexts, based on archaeological evidence, and their use, testing, recording, and experience. Through these we are better able to understand the character and role of materiality and material culture in peoples' lives." This project continues the field's turn towards phenomenology and embodied history.

Practicality would dictate that settlers eschew fashion norms and dress conventions, but fashion is far more than practicality. Clothing is a physical manifestation of culture and a symbol of the wearer's morality, class, gender, race, and respectability. This reality was no different on the frontier. Women expressed a desire to return to the lifestyle they had before arriving there. By wearing normative Euro-American clothing, a woman signaled to herself and others that she was still respectable and adhering to societal norms; she had not become uncivilized in the West, and the realities of frontier had not overcome her. Through continuing to follow Euro-American modesty conventions in their everyday clothing and wearing fashionable clothing that served no practical purpose, women were signaling a desire for Euro-American culture to continue and thrive in a frontier space. Clothing was an expression of the hope that one's burdens were temporary, and a declaration that the supposed wildness of frontier had not consumed the women.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It stands in a case on the South wall. In a room filled with guns, saddles, and military accoutrements, the silk dress is eye catching and vibrant. This object, accession number 91.1.2829, is located in the Joe Grandee History Galleries at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (NCWHM).[1] The overdress is made of a cream brocade, with a red floral motif on a cream base (Figures One and Two). The overdress comes to mid-thigh on the mannequin with three-quarter length sleeves. Across the front is a red, pleated, and gathered front with pearl buttons. The front of the overdress appears to be cut from one piece with two darts for fitting. The back is not visible, but most garments of the era have multiple seams there. The dress does have a small bustle with the edges sewn up into the side seam. The sleeves end in red cuffs with a copious amount of lace and matching lace on the sides of the red front piece. The final detail of the overdress is a red collar overlaid with lace. This dress was most likely created between the years 1875 and 1885, a period of great importance to the American frontier. The skirt is made from deep red satin and quilted with large squares. It reaches to the floor and at the bottom of the skirt is a line of thin feathers. While the underskirt is not accurate to

[1] 91.1.2829, "The Joe Grandee History Galleries," at The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

the same period as the overdress, it nonetheless contributes to the display of female accoutrements.

Figures 1 and 2

Dress 91.01.2829, Joe Grandee Collection, Joe Grandee Galleries, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

In a museum about the West, the idea of women on the frontier tends to elicit a few stereotypes: refined lady, helpmate, and bad woman.[2] The room's display does little to dissuade viewers from such opinions. Dress 2829, contributing to the first sterotype, is displayed with a hat and shoes, a carpet bag, and a copy of Elizabeth Custer's memoir, *Boots and Saddles*, which

[2] *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 7.

discusses her time on the Great Plains with her husband, General George Custer, during the Indian Wars. On the opposite side of the case is a green gingham dress and a black sunbonnet, which perpetuate the “helpmate” stereotype. When visitors step back from the dress, they realize that this case is the only bit of femininity in a room filled with leather, metal, and dark colored garments of the Military History Gallery. Few visitors will realize that this singular case is the one of two mentions of women in the history galleries; the only other location in which women appear is in relation to Native women. The rest of the cases hold saddles, bits, bridles, a Gatling gun, muskets, revolvers, Army uniforms, and camp objects. Within this context, this red and cream dress stands out as different, special. The three history galleries contribute to the idea of “the Wild West” and the frontier as a masculine space. This presence of this dress does argue that women were in this space, but only minimally, and without any clear role to play.

Yet, the mere presence of Dress 2829 pricks a small hole in visitor’s knowledge about women in the West and on the frontier. If the popular cultural memory of this space is one of hardship and poverty, then the gingham dress adjudicates that idea. But Dress 2829 does not. Why, in this space of supposed deprivation and financial insecurity, would Dress 2829 be present? The hole that Dress 2829 makes may be small and the average visitor may not think twice about the meaning of this dress, but the hole is there.

Laura Ingalls-Wilder’s story is much like Dress 2829 and a second glance at her life begins to bore into the hole made by Dress 2829. Laura Ingalls-Wilder did not own this dress. Dress 2829 lacks provenance, so there is no way to know who wore it, for that matter. But, Laura Ingalls-Wilder was born in 1867, and thus was between the ages of seven and seventeen when Dress 2829 was made. She came of age in a space that could be harsh and unkind, irrespective of gender. The frontier, to many, symbolizes hardship, starvation, disease, and financial troubles. From this land, however, Ingalls-Wilder reached adolescence. Her memoir and novels tell a story of difficulties and deprivation, but those documents also tell another story: one where the Ingalls

girls did wear silk dresses, hoops, bonnets, and more. At the age of twelve she eschewed her girl's clothes for women's garb.[3] While she grew up rather poor, by the time her family reached some financial stability she was coming of age, and the longer her family had resided in De Smet and the older she became, her original memoir and other documents do record the sisters participating in fashionable endeavors. While Laura did not wear Dress 2829, she could very well have worn such a dress much like it. Fashion, it seems, was not absent on the frontier.

Yet it seems unlikely that in the context of the frontier Ingalls-Wilder and women like her could tell a story of hardship, but also one in which they wore clothing like Dress 2829. In modern myths of the west, the frontier was an egalitarian space where cultural norms could be bent, foregone, or shifted with relative ease. Theoretically, twenty-first century viewers think, women could wear whatever they wanted. Life on the frontier could be, and was often, difficult. Women completed intense physical labor that seemed to go on without end. Why not wear clothing that made life and work easier? But these modern ideas about the West say more about the role that the *idea* of the frontier, and here the role of the homesteader, play in the cultural imaginary than the reality of the frontier.[4]

Women adamantly continued to wear corsets, long sleeves, long skirts, and spend their hard-earned money on fashionable goods. "Dressing Like Laura" seeks to square the two seemingly opposing realities of hardship and the presence of fashion. But more than this: what did this clothing mean in the larger context of Victorian and Western America? How did it reflect trends within culture? How did it reflect the wearer's beliefs and ideas about herself, her body, and her role in society? The answers to these questions revise understandings about the role of

[3] Laura Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, ed. Pamela Smith-Hill (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society, 2014), 174.

[4] For books on the subject of the West in the cultural imagination, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), and Joy Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

clothing in general, but also the idea that fashion has no purpose aside from beauty and frivolity. Rather, clothing is an important tool for the people who wear it and in the context of the frontier it signaled a woman's respectability and that the hardships of the frontier had not decimated her station in society.

While this work is not about Ingalls-Wilder, her instant recognizability actually connects well to this study of frontier fashions. Ingalls-Wilder's works, including the *Little House* series, remain intensely popular to this day and likewise, museums have found that fashion exhibitions attract large swaths of visitors and media attention.[5] Both are similar in this respect. Ingalls-Wilder's novels also contain numerous vibrant descriptions of garments, and her memoir, *Pioneer Girl*, gives more concrete details. This project did not set out to discuss Ingalls-Wilder and Dress 2829 together, but the temporal and geographical span dovetailed so perfectly that is seemed a serendipitous match. The dress was created between 1875 and 1885, right when Ingalls-Wilder was coming of age on the Northern Great Plains Frontier and might have worn a dress like this when she reached maturity around the age of twelve or thirteen. And though later research and lack of provenance indicated that Dress 2829 might not be an authentic frontier dress, the display that it was a part of took place on the Northern Great Plains frontier, where Ingalls-Wilder lived. As such, Ingalls-Wilder is a framing device, and this project shamelessly borrows her popularity. That said, her works and analysis of images from her life pepper this study because Ingalls-Wilder was just as much a pioneer girl as any of the other women on the frontier.

If the Northern Great Plains was the frontier from 1875 to 1885, and Dress 2829 was created during that time period, it would be difficult to explain why I would not use Ingalls-Wilder as a framing tool. Moreover, Dress 2829 and Ingalls-Wilder's life are ripe for people to

[5] Marie Riegels Melchior, "Introduction," in *Fashions and Museums: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marie Riegels Melchior and Birgitta Svensson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 4-5.

project their ideas about the frontier onto. People are not blank slates when they walk into a museum or read *The Little House on the Prairie* books. Humans have a habit of imposing myths (here defined as what people think is true about something, even though it may not be; ex. "Cowboys and Indians") onto the objects they see. I transfer the substantial body of work on how people perceive Ingalls-Wilder and the frontier and how her novels are telling an ideological story about the frontier to argue against the New Deal.[6] Both Dress 2829 and Laura Ingalls-Wilder's life are subjected to myth making without a second thought. And indeed, the temporal and geographical period solidified the marriage between the two ideas.

Dress 2829's History

The known history of Dress 2829 began with Joe Grandee, a western artist who donated his extensive collection to the NCWHM in 1991. Joe Ruiz Grandee Jr. was born in 1929 in Dallas, Texas, and his family's history seemed to fate him to becoming an Western artist.[7] His family history included Spanish Conquistadors and family members who settled Texas and "fought Indians." Grandee's parents, Joe and Violet, encouraged his artistic ability, and he fell in love with the West from a young age.[8] Grandee began painting illustrations for Western magazines in 1958 and soon became a well-known artist.[9] During his life time he was noted for

[6] Michael Patrick Hearn, "Little Myths on the Prairie," in *Pioneer Girl Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Tystand Koupal (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2017), 103 and Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 85.

[7] "Obituary of Joe Ruiz Grandee Jr.," Dignity Memorial, 4 November 2021, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/arlington-tx/joe-grandee-10434628, accessed 19 October 2022.

[8] "Grandee to State One-Man Art Show Here on Weekend," *The Daily Iberian*, New Iberia: Louisiana, May 11, 1960, 7.

[9] "From Brush to Canvas, Joe Grandee brings life to western paintings," *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 28 November 1984, 125.

his intense realism, supposedly brought on by an early rejection of a piece which was lacking in sufficient accurate detail.[10] Grandee staged reenactments of the scenes he hoped to paint, and as a part of that goal he and his wife, Maureen, collected historical objects.[11] Grandee grew up and painted during the golden age of westerns, and these ideas and myths are readily apparent in both his work and the collection.[12]

With the Grandee collection, the NCWHM created the Joe Grandee History Galleries in 2000.[13] The three history galleries discuss mountain men and Plains Natives, late 19th century military in the West, and hunting in the West. In these galleries, the case which holds Dress 2829 is the only place to discuss women in the West, aside from a brief mention or two in the Plains Natives section. The interpretative signage discusses female army dependents: officer's wives and laundresses who followed the army. In doing so, the exhibits inadvertently give the idea that these were the only women in the West. These reflect the biases of the Grandee collection, which predominantly focus on military and firearm history. Grandee, collecting and painting during the height of the golden age of westerns during the middle of the 20th century, naturally collected items that reflected those ideas of a masculine, white, West. To make matters worse, Dress 2829 at the very least has been on display for many years. I distinctly remember viewing it well before the age of thirteen; at the time of this writing I am twenty-three. I can say with certainty that this dress has remained on display for well over a decade at least. This extreme prolonged exposure to light, even low, artificial light, and the stress on the object irrevocably weakens the object and diminishes its color. Curators and staff recognize these issues, and though change is slow, there is hope for the future.

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[10] "Western artist put accuracy into artworks," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23 April 2000, 87.

[11] "Businesswoman was her husband's best art critic," *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 29 August 2008, 9B.

[12] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 347-349.

[13] "Western artist put accuracy into artworks," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23 April 2000, 87.

Experimental Archeology

There are a number of approaches for getting at the answers to the question I posed earlier: what was the role of clothing on the frontier? “Dressing Like Laura” does use traditional methodologies through looking at primary source material such as diaries, letters, memoirs, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and more. First, this project relies on written text, primarily copies of *The Delineator*, which provides in-depth descriptions of style, materials, and dress decorations. Archival research has also provided diaries and letters of real women who described their clothing. Online archival collections have provided incredibly useful images of women wearing a wide variety of clothing. Images can tell just as rich a story as words do, and often fill in the gaps where the written record is silent.

But this project deviates greatly is in its main mode of understanding: experimental archeology. This mode, “can be defined as the reconstruction of past buildings, technologies, things, and environmental contexts, based on archaeological evidence, and their use, testing, recording, and experience. Through these we are better able to understand the character and role of materiality and material culture in peoples’ lives.”[14] This project sought to recreate Dress 2829 using period-correct materials and sewing techniques to understand the role and meaning of clothing on the frontier.

To do so, I used the methods outlined in Jules Prown and curators Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim’s book *The Dress Detective*.[15] I began by sketching the dress and spending time

[14] Aiden O’Sullivan and Christina Souyoudzoglou-Haywood, *Experimental Archeology,* Aidan (Archaeopress, 2019), 1.

[15] E. McClung Fleming, “Artifact Study: A Proposed Model,” in *Winterthur Portfolio*, 9 (1974),, 153-173; Jules David Prown, “Style as Evidence,” in *Winterthur Portfolio*, (15) 3 (1980), 197-210; Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” in *Winterthur Portfolio* (17) 1, 1982, 1-19; and Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

sitting and understanding the details of it, which allowed me to know what I needed to put into the final product. I was unable to examine the interior of Dress 2829 because of busy museum schedules and issues pertaining to permanent exhibitions. However, I was able to survey around ten garments in the NCWHM which were roughly analogous to Dress 2829. In conjunction with a period sewing manual as well as information from other primary sources, these items served as the basis for this reconstruction project and understanding how to make Dress 2829.

Here, these garments serve as a primary source. The field of fashion history is turning towards combining analysis of textual sources with analysis of made sources to better understand the past. Serena Dyer's work *Material Lives: Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the 18th Century* shows how the objects that upper-class women created show just as much, if not more, about their lives that written texts do. She writes that these objects, "firmly revealed the emotional, cultural, political, economic and social agency which can be deciphered through things."[16]

Likewise, Jennifer Thigpen writes on the value of studying objects in her article, "Desperately Seeking Mary: Materializing Mary Richardson Walker, Missionary." Tasked with creating an exhibit about Walker, Thigpen went out in search of Walker's objects lost in the depths of the Washington State University Library's Special Collections archives.[17] Walker's writings revealed a woman with conflicted feelings: ambitious, opinionated, religious, and adventurous.[18] But upon finding Walker's belongings, Thigpen found a far different person, one who was also intensely tradition-bound. The Walker collection contained the accoutrements needed to be a proper lady: a silk dress, ribbons, gloves, a fan, and a hat. The excellent condition

[16] Serena Dyer, *Material Lives: Women Makers and Consumer Cultures in the 18th Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 3.

[17] Jennifer Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary: Materializing Mary Richardson Walker," *The Public Historian* 34(3), 68-81, 69.

[18] Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary," 73.

of these objects indicates, as textual sources corroborate, that Walker rarely wore these items.[19] Why take up valuable space in the wagon to bring them with her? Despite her new life as a missionary, Walker was still an active participant in the culture she came from. She was a proper lady, even on the frontier, and her clothing needed to reflect that.[20] Dreyer and Thigpen show the value of studying clothing in conjunction with written texts. While objects may suggest a story that we can never corroborate, material goods are a tangible gift from the past, something that makes history come to life and connects us with the story of who came before.

On the value of experimental archeology, scholar Alan K. Outram writes, "An experimental, positivist approach can escape the shackles of simple historicism and empiricism, because it allows one to move beyond the limited range of options made available by records of the currently known world. It allows investigations of the counter-intuitive and for the possibility of deductive leaps, rather than simply relying upon probalistic and inductive extrapolations of existing knowledge."[21] Experimental archeology, then, allows for a wide range of data not typically available through traditional research methods.

This methodology is typically closely associated with the hard sciences, as both are centered on a hypothesis, scientific data, and a rigorous experimental process. Rather than being simplistic and hobby-oriented, experimental archeology a valid method of inquiry. Yet, the format requires care if it is to keep from becoming so. Scholar P.J. Reynolds laid out a number of tenets for best practice of experimental archeology.[22] The first is a 1:1 construction ratio; ostensibly making the object as close to the original as possible based upon evidence. Secondly, scholars must understand how people of the past constructed that item. The tools we use and how we use them contribute to our understanding of the past just as much as the final product. Third, it

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[19] Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary," 75.
[20] Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary," 76.
[21] Alan K. Outram, "Introduction to Experimental Archeology," in *World Archeology* 40 (1), March 2008, pg. 1-6, 1.
[22] Outram, "Introduction to Experimental Archeology," 3.

is important to know how time has impacted the object we see today. How is the archeological record formed? What has happened in the environment, both natural and built, to make this object appear as it does today?

This project must take each of these tenets in stride. The inability to examine Dress 2829 and the end goal of wanting to learn how this object feels on the body are a bit prohibitive to making a 1:1 ratio of the dress, but in hopes of learning how garments of the past felt on the body, having a dress which actually fits one's body is a necessity. The second tenet is perhaps the most important to this project. According to this principle I have sought to reconstruct this dress in the same manner as closely as possible and any deviations are discussed when necessary. The third tenet shall be discussed in the final chapter of this project and relates to issues of hobbyist collectors, provenance, and museum collection policies.

As Outram discusses, one of the greatest reasons for failed experimental archeology projects is lack of proper academic context.[23] To this, I whole-heartedly agree. This thesis seeks to show why the small details, like seam allowances, buttons, lace, etc., are meaningful to the past and what they say about the lives of women on the frontier. *Costume Close Up: Clothing Construction and Pattern, 1750-1790* by curators Linda Baumgarten, Florine Carr, and John Watson and published by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is one such excellent example of the kind of work this thesis hopes to accomplish.

Perhaps an ideal example of this work's value is the discussion of stitch lengths. While seemingly inane, the stitch lengths rather tell us how much colonial peoples valued preserving their garments. Clothing in the colonial period was expensive, and wearers saw their clothing as an investment. Their seams reflected that makers wanted to preserve their garments for continued use and later remaking garments. Makers used a stronger stitch if that area of the garment would

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[23] Outram, "Introduction to Experimental Archeology," 4.

receive stress, such as sleeves. This saved them repair time, and possibly protected the fabric. Seams which received little stress, like skirt seams, were made with long running stitches, which were easy to take out when they went to remake the dress, and saved them time when creating the garment. In garments such as shifts, the seams were finished and raw edges encased to preserve the fabric and increase the garment's strength over many wearings and rough washing.[24] While seam allowances may seem an arbitrary detail, they are amazing ways to understand the realities of personal finances, consumerism, and capitalism. Wearers wanted to preserve their investment, and the seam stitches they employed across the garment helped to do so.

One potential flaw of some experimental archeology work is an apparent extreme disgust in regards to reenactors, deriving from the idea that experimental archeology is not "re" creation. What experimental archeology practitioners mean by this is that because we do not know everything about the past, one often must make guesses in the experiment, and as such the project is not one-hundred percent historically accurate. Reenactors, on the other hand, are more concerned with replicating the past and seeing what it was like to live and operate in that time and place.[25] Academic experimental archeologists claim this is impossible. This distinction, though, is illogical. The whole point of experimental archeology is that we are trying to recreate something so that we can discover what it was. And, if we knew everything about the past, there would be no need for experimental archeology. No matter how much experimental archeology scholars try to argue otherwise, they are still "re" creating something. As such, I use the word "recreating" to avoid confusion for the reader and because at its core, all experimental archeology projects are recreations.

[24] Linda Baumgarten, Florine Carr, and John Watson, *Costume Close Up: Clothing Construction and Pattern, 1750-1790* (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999), 9.

[25] Outram, "Introduction to Experimental Archeology," 2.

Recent academic literature also shows a profound shift towards experiential and embodied understandings of this methodology, which allows much more room for clothing and reenacting. This method could possibly be used to help scholars *interpret* archeological evidence as opposed to simply explaining it.[26] Of particular interest to this project is a 2022 edited collection with a chapter on the connection between Neolithic decorative arts and textiles by Kalliope Sarri and Ulrikka Mokdad. While very far and away from the temporal and geographical span of "Dressing Like Laura," it is still an instructive example. What is fascinating about this chapter is that there are no surviving Neolithic textiles. The absence of historical record leaves much, quite literally, up to the imagination. Through examining pottery shards and other decorative art remnants and then experimenting with transferring these patterns to woven designs, the authors conclude that with the tools Neolithic people most likely had, the same styles found in decorative arts were used in textiles.[27]

For hardline scientists, projects like Sarri and Mokdad's or my own, are understandably a difficult reality to accept. Why write an entire chapter or do an entire project on something you cannot prove, and for which there is no "actual" evidence? Though scholars and artists like Sarri and Mokdad may never be able to know if their work is truly correct, this is no different than the more traditional historical profession. Traditional historians who work with written documents can never be completely certain that their assertions are true. There is always the possibility that new evidence will come to light, that their evidence was somehow skewed, and of course the nagging doubt that they could have always "done more research." Scholars who use written texts can make reasonable assumptions with the data that they have. Sarri and Mokdad are also making reasonable assumptions, just with material goods rather than written documents. There are many similarities between decorative arts and clothing in other areas of history and the designs which

[26] O'Sullivan and Souyoudzoglou-Haywood, *Experimental Archeology,* 1.
[27] O'Sullivan and Haywood, *Experimental Archeology*, 89.

are popular in decoration are usually reflected some way in clothing. Written texts and material goods are both highly valuable sources of information and one is not better than the other. When written texts and material goods are taken together, scholars can create a more-well rounded and through view of the past.

Experimental Archeology and the Recreation of Dress 2829

Why does this dress matter? Why should people care about Dress 2829? The answer is perhaps a bit disappointing: there is no real reason to care about Dress 2829 by itself. There's no provenance. There's not a special story behind it. But the dress did inspire this project. Walking the halls of NCWHM, I remember seeing this dress from the time I was a young girl. I was enamored with it then, and I am still. It is objectively beautiful and eye-catching. As I sat down to begin this work, I wanted to go past the myths of the frontier and understand the reality of women's roles in that place. Dress 2829 offered that opportunity. Working through the details of this dress enriched my understanding in ways nearly impossible to get at through traditional methodologies alone. In addition, this dress, whether intentionally or not, is made a symbol of what many think about the West. For the average visitor, seeing this dress in the military context with little information about women elsewhere reinforces mythic ideas of the West as a masculine, white space. For many scholars, the dress is beautiful, but a part of a history that previous scholars have studied, as I outline in my historiography section.

Perhaps the greatest deficit of the recreation process is that I was not able to examine the interior of Dress 2829. Busy museum schedules prevented me from doing so, much to my great disappointment. Two more issues crop up. Dress 2829 is most likely not a frontier dress (though, its lack of provenance prevents curators and researchers from knowing where the dress came from at all). The emphasis of this work is also on lower class women rather than the middle to

upper-class women who would have likely worn Dress 2829. Yet, these issues do not detract from the value of the recreation project to understand the past.

In lieu of examining the interior of Dress 2829, I examined the interiors of other garments from the same time period in the collection to make an accurate reconstruction. However, I hope to use this as a strength rather than a detriment. In encountering similar issues to Sarri and Mokdad, I had to find ways to work around these problems to create an idea of what might have happened. Experimental archeology focuses on the process as the primary source, seeking to understand how the process of recreation influences our interpretation of the end result. Through not having all of the answers handed to me, I had to search out answers to my reconstruction questions through other material goods, sewing manuals, memoirs, and photographs. This research provided a fuller picture and a deeper understanding of what was "normal," why people used a certain technique, and what those construction methods meant to them than I could have ever gleaned through simply "copying" Dress 2829. Comparing Dress 2829 to textual material and images also fleshed out differences and similarities. I had to find reasonable solutions myself and like scholars using traditional textual resources, combine a multiplicity of voices to make a cohesive story.

Another potential issue is in the source of the materials. The thread, fabric, scissors, and other notions I used were thoroughly modern. However, this should not be seen as an issue. For instance, there would have been no conceivable way to make historically accurate thread or fabric. There would have been no way to harvest the silk from the silk worms as "they did back then," no way to process that silk in a historically accurate manner, and no way to weave the fabric on a historic machine loom. This is the same issue with "more traditional" experimental archeology projects that recreate something from the pre-modern period. Researchers could create a lovely architectural feature, but at the end of the day, the limestone probably was not hand-hewn with historically accurate tools and carted in a donkey or ox-drawn wooden wagon across

the country. There are limits to what experimental archeology can accomplish, if only because we do not live in the past.

The failure of this project that I will readily concede is that I was not able to use a historically accurate machine. I was unable to find someone with a sewing machine from this period and did not have the funds to purchase one myself. I think this project would have been better for the use of an accurate machine, but in its absence I have attempted to fill in the research gaps surrounding that in Chapter Three. Regardless, for these reasons, I see little issue in calling this recreation an experimental archeology project, and I am reasonably confident in my methodologies.

In the end, the greatest reason that Dress 2829 matters is because it is not special. The lack of provenance, as well as my inability to examine the interior, allowed me to get past my initial ideas about this dress and to dive deeper into the meaning of clothing on the frontier. The lack of provenance forced me to dig into my reasons for why Laura Ingalls-Wilder and others like her could wear this dress on the in such a seemingly incongruous place. Not seeing the interior of Dress 2829 encouraged me to discern the way that makers constructed most other dresses. Dress 2829 is subjected to a host of projections about the past which may or may not be true, my own projections among them. Without provenance, this dress has little history of its own. But, perhaps that makes it all the more valuable.

Clothing Historiography

There are few histories about clothing on the frontier. *The Calico Chronical* by Betty J. Mills, published in 1985, is one of the first books to discuss pioneer clothing. The book lacks a

significant introduction and thesis and does not sufficiently use primary source research. The first chapter of the book discusses original garments held at Texas Tech University dating to the 1830s and 1840s. Though the work does eventually move on to the end of the century, the primary focus is on this period. The book fails to make any class distinctions found between fancy clothing and utilitarian clothing and only somewhat mentions the idea of respectability.[28]

"'No Seamstresses, No Ready Made Clothing:' Clothing Consumption on the American Frontier, 1850-1890," by Julie A. Campell and Brenda Brandt, explores clothing consumption for U.S. Army dependents, particularly army wives with the purpose of understanding how a transition to the frontier impacted clothing. This study examined how much clothing women brought with them and how they maintained it once at the army outpost; it did not study the length of time that the garments were worn, the amount of money spent on these garments, or the types of clothing.[29] The article argues that the women brought as much clothing with them as possible, sometimes even enough for two years.[30] This study looks at army women alone, who were ultimately of a higher class than the typical pioneer woman in the public memory.

Deborah Meyer and Laurel Wilson's work, "Bringing Civilization to the Frontier: The Role of Men's Coats in 1865 Virginia City, Montana Territory," argues likewise, but rather focuses on men's coats. Their primary source base is a shipment of men's coats, recently discovered in a steamboat which sank in Omaha.[31] The authors examine the coats and written primary source documents to argue that men sought out goods and services that signaled a desire for culture and civilized life.

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[28] Betty J. Mills, *The Calico Chronicle: Texas Women and Their Fashions 1830-1910* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1985).

[29] Julie Campell and Brenda Brandt, "'No Seamstresses, No Ready Made Clothing:' Clothing Consumption on the American Frontier, 1850-1890," in *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 12 (3), 16.

[30] Campell and Brandt, 16.

[31] Deborah J.C. Meyer and Laurel E. Wilson, "Bringing Civilization to the Frontier: The Role of Men's Coats in 1865 Virginia City, Montana Territory," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 16(1), 19-26, 19.

More recently, Julie Campell contributed to an edited volume entitled, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption, and Home Dressmaking*. Her chapter, titled "Wearily Moving Her Needle: Army Officer's Wives and Sewing in the Nineteenth-Century American West" takes up her previous article, but focuses more on Army officer's wives, such as Eliza Custer.[32] Also of note is Peter Boag's book *Redressing the American Frontier* about gender and cross-dressing in the West from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. In many ways, this work argues the opposite of what I do, as it challenges ideas about the frontier as a traditional space and shows the prevalence of homosexuality and cross-dressing. Yet, both Boag's argument and mine can coexist in the same space. Some saw the frontier as a freeing space where they could eschew gender and sexual norms, while others sought to preserve those same ideas.[33]

While the aforementioned studies provide a firm footing on which to build this project, this project primarily hopes to draw out class and gender issues via a fresh analysis of these sources and an experimental archeology project. This study also utilizes the frameworks laid out in documents about material culture, dress history, and fashion study methodological works. Each of these areas seems a bit pedantic, yet historians of these methods insist that there is indeed difference. Material culture studies work from the idea of studying the significance of an object to a culture. Dress history, or the study of dress, emphasizes the object as the subject, rather than cultural perception. It starts with observation of the object, then uses those observations to discuss how the dress was made, and usually focuses on fitting that item into a timeline.[34] Finally, fashion studies focus more on the theoretical, draw initial statements and interpretations from that, then use an object to confirm that interpretation.[35]

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[32] Julie A. Campbell, "Wearily Moving Her Needle: Army Officer's Wives and Sewing in the Nineteenth-Century American West," in *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking,* ed. Barbara Burman (New York: Berg, 1999).

[33] Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Oakland: University of California, 2011).

[34] Giorgio Riello, "The Object of Fashion: Methodological Approaches to the History of Fashion," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture,* 3(1), 2.

[35] Riello, "The Object of Fashion," 2.

In this study, I hope to marry material culture studies and dress history, using evidence from the reconstructed Dress 2829 to understand how some women on the American frontier thought about clothing in the late 19th century. Historians tend to veer towards material culture studies or fashion studies and ignore the details of a dress as dress history methodologies lay out. Scholars who work in public history fields but still produce scholarly work have a penchant for the details of an object found in dress history. The details of a dress and knowing where an object fits on a timeline are also crucial to helping viewers understand how a society viewed that garment, how the wearer viewed herself, and how museum visitors view the past.

Temporal and Geographical Span

In 1862, the U.S. Congress passed the Homesteading Act which gave out free land to male citizens, widows and single women, female heads of household, and immigrants who indicated an intention to become citizens. After five years of "proving up," homesteaders earned the title to their land.[36] Homesteading, as recent scholarships has indicated, did indeed serve as a cornerstone of American history. Homesteading served as a dominant means of settling the West, defined as land west of the Missouri river, and as such scholars should turn once again to studying the importance of homesteading in this area.[37] In "Dressing Like Laura," the geographical span focuses on the upper Great Plains, specifically Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana. These states are often considered the northern Great Plains states and were relatively similar in their settlement dates. In addition, they were in the top ten states with the highest percentage of land claimed by settlers. Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota, and

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[36] Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains Towards a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), Homesteading the Plains, 1-2.

[37] Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains,* 7.

Nebraska were the top four, with Kansas coming in at ninth place.[38] Homesteaders moved to Kansas and Nebraska from the late 1860s to the mid 1890s, while homesteaders moved to the other states listed here later in the century.[39]

It is also worth noting that there was an intense regionalism born from living in this place. The land was not some amalgamous feature; the land shaped regional identity and how these settlers thought about themselves and their experience. Living in the Northern Great Plains, and to some extent Kansas as well, created a distinctive identity centered on their agrarian nature. Other central parts of this identity included the outsized influence that the land and agriculture had on their thinking, the role of the Homestead Act and its importance in history, the value of small towns, and creating values based off these tenets.[40] Of course, this regional identity did not crop up immediately. Rather it was the product of time, but that time created a powerful identity distinctive from other places in the United States.

In addition, the frontier is often cast as the opposite of "the East." Though, that geography is a bit difficult to discern where it begins and where it ends. Here, the frontier is an defined as a rural space bereft of large community and commerce structures found in other parts of the United States that had been settled long earlier. There was no dividing line between East and West, understanding it as a gradient is useful, but there was a distinct difference between the two.

This work discusses the years 1875 to 1885, which I have determined to be the date of creation for Dress 2829. An explanation for this decision will be included in Chapter Two. These

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[38] Richard Edwards, Jacob K Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains Towards a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 11.

[39] Edwards, et. al. *Homesteading the Plains*, 12.

[40] John E. Miller, "Laura Ingalls Wilder as a Midwestern Pioneer Girl," in *Pioneer Girl Perspectives: Exploring Laura Ingalls Wilder,* ed. Nancy Tystad Koupal (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2017), 155 and Molly P. Rozum, *Grasslands Grown: Creating Place on the U.S. Northern Plains and Canadian Prairies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 5-6.

dates also proved to be important in respects not related to when this dress was made. The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed settlers to enter the northern Great Plains en masse and many of the period considered the frontier "closed" by 1893. During that same year the historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared it so with his speech, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."[41] There, he argued that the frontier and settling it was what made America "American" and created strong individuals distinct from European traditions.[42] Historians would greatly debate this point in subsequent years, but Gilded Age fears in America were connected to the idea that the frontier was vanishing and the place which had made America the country that it was had disappeared.[43] What would happen to America with that absence?

Turner's legacy, begun well over one hundred years ago, still looms large in the field of history, not to mention Western history. His idea captures almost perfectly what scholars today would call "myths" of the West: idealized ideas about this location and the idea that America's identity was forged in this place. Turner's ideas remain because they reflect what Americans think about themselves and about their nation.[44]

Scholars since the 1970s have been pushing for a different kind of Western history, one that includes women, people of color, urbanization, and more nuanced understandings of the West as an ecologically diverse region.[45] Similar pushes are found across historiographies in other fields of history. This field is called New Western History, and early historians in this field, such as Julie Roy Jeffrey, Sandra Myres, and Glenda Riley, reassessed pioneer women's

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[41] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893.

[42] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893.

[43] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 13, 53, 87, 102-103, 114, and 149.

[44] Nancy Reagin, *Re-living the American Frontier: Western Fandoms, Reenactment, and Historical Hobbyists in Germany and America Since 1900* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 20-21.

[45] Michael P. Malone, "The 'New Western History,' An Assessment," in *Trails: Towards a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 98.

histories. Yet since then, few studies, especially in the past decade, have discussed these "pioneer women." Scholars Richard Edwards, Jacob Friefeld, and Rebecca Wingo have argued that the dearth of recent scholarship about homesteading is a result of academics thinking that previous studies had sufficiently covered the subject and that it was really not that integral to western history.[46] If scholars feel this way about the verb homesteading, then they likely feel the same way about the noun homesteader.

For instance, it has been inordinately difficult to discern the typical financial status of pioneers during this period and in this location. The general consensus is that the average pioneer was poor, yet there is no substantive research to corroborate this statement. Some books do claim that the pioneers were impoverished, but books like Everett Dick's *The Sod House Frontier* were originally published in the 1930s and are frustratingly vague. This book also does not look at how region and change over time affected certain areas, making it difficult to parse out the reality of finances on the Great Plains from 1875 to 1885, admittedly a rather specific request when considering the larger history of western expansion. Willard W. Cochrane's book *The Development of American Agriculture* argues the same briefly. Some works obliquely interact with this idea, such as Charles Postel's *The Populist Vision*, which discusses the financial struggles of agriculturalists.[47] Both Cochrane and Postel argue that lack of money, issues regarding crop prices, and the cost of farming were integral to the growth of the Populist movement.[48]

Class and finances play an integral role to this story, making this lack of information a significant hurdle. For the sources I primarily rely on in "Dressing Like Laura," the families did

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[46] Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains Towards a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 5 and 13.

[47] Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), see chapter four.

[48] Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 93-95.

lack money, which I expound on in chapter one. Yet, as Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo caution, any study that relies primarily on evidence from diaries, letters, and memoirs does not present a quantifiable dataset and can be heavily biased. They write, "…When analysis is solely dependent upon personal stories, as for so long the scholarship of homesteading has been, we have little way of knowing how representative such stories are."[49] Tabulating data, as the above authors do for their study on the significance of homesteading, can give a clearer, more accurate picture. In no way is this to suggest that other information is not valuable, but rather that both sets of information allows for a more accurate and well-rounded picture of history. For "Dressing Like Laura" I was unable to find or create a data set like this. I hope that future scholars will realize anew the importance of homesteaders to American history and seek to study their finances. In lieu of this, I do use the source base I have to argue that many of these families experienced poverty upon their initial arrival on the frontier.

The women in this story, Luna Kellie, Augusta Khors, Armilda Benning, and Laura Ingalls-Wilder, were women who made their living through farming or ranching in the Great Plains. This story does not focus on women who primarily lived in towns or were business owners. These were rural farm women who earned their living by working the land, the quintessential pioneer woman. At times I will discuss upper-class women who came with the U.S. Army to draw a distinction and illuminate differences. Class, then, does become an important factor in this study. These women were also the first in their families to arrive on the frontier. Studying these specific women, rather than those who were born and raised on the Great Plains, shows how the frontier changed clothing. Living in this area shaped one's identity, and clothing is very much a part of identity creation.[50] The areas in this study were settled in this period and as

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[49] Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains,* 19.

[50] Molly P. Rozum, *Grasslands Grown: Creating Place on the U.S. Northern Plains and Canadian Prairies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 6 and 9.

such provide a relatively neat picture that showcases how clothing changed from the period of initial settlement to clothing in a mostly settled environment.

This specific time period and geographical space are also important because it is what the public thinks of when they think about the frontier. Though the frontier and the West are different based on the time, the place, and the participants, the words "pioneers" and "homesteaders" conveys the image of Laura Ingalls Wilder and her cohorts traipsing about in the prairie grass. In some sense, the public is not wrong. Homesteading, and the pioneers who went there, were highly active between 1863 when The Homesteading Act was passed and until the late 1890s with the Land Runs in Oklahoma. Though homesteading would continue into the 1920s, this time period was the zenith of homesteading.[51] As for the years 1875 to 1885 specifically, I hope to focus more on Dress 2829 and the likely time period in which it was created to better understand it in a way that expanding the dates would allow for.

Chapter Outlines

The first of the following chapters begins to explore the role that clothing played on the frontier. That chapter takes up the task of proving that fashionable clothing was present on the frontier and understanding why women continued to wear such seemingly impractical clothing. There, I argue that through continuing to wear this kind of clothing, women maintained that though they were geographically far away from the East, they were still respectable women, and hoped that someday, they would have community as they had left it back home. Here, the cult of domesticity and the pressures of respectable womanhood played nearly as large a role as it did in the East.[52] The cult of domesticity sought to outline not just how a proper woman acted, but also

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[51] Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains,* 12.

[52] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18, no. 2, (1966): 151-172.

how a proper woman looked. Women carried these notions and their clothing with them to the frontier, and this is perhaps the largest reason that women continued to wear the clothing that they did.

Chapter two is a conglomeration of ideas under the title of "Gathering the Dress." This section takes up a discussion of the preparation and materials involved in recreating Dress 2829. As Reynolds establishes, for successful archeology projects the tools one uses are as important as the final project.[53] This chapter lays out the arguments for why Dress 2829 was made between 1875 to 1885 and argues that the bias of garments with provenance, the ideals of fashion plates and the maker's personal tastes when applying stylistic benchmarks can make it difficult to date garments. The chapter discusses the silhouette necessary to make this dress and the purpose of each undergarment. It then delves into the constituent parts that went into the recreation of Dress 2829 and explores how people signaled a connection to fashion and their respectability through the purchase and utilization of fashionable goods. Shopping and its results also showcased the inner workings of a family and the purchaser's race, class, and gender.

Chapter Three discusses the recreation project. It begins with the idea of the cult of domesticity and the role of hand sewing therein. When sewing machines began to become commonplace in American homelife during the late 19th century, though they did not preclude hand sewing, they signaled financial stability and allowed women to create more clothing that they enjoyed. The overall project also argues that the sewing techniques women utilized worked to preserve their financial investment in the fabric and protect it for future reuse. The decorations that women employed signaled to others that they had the time and money to make and maintain them.

This source and other books which discuss this idea do not capitalize "the cult of domestic;" this work follows that convention.

[53] Outram, "Introduction to Experimental Archeology," 3.

Finally, Chapter Four discusses issues related to collections and women's history in western museums. The chapter explores the history of the National Cowboy and Western History (NCWHM) museum and how desires for increased diversity in museum spaces can sometimes keep staff from actually making the changes that are needed. The collection that Dress 2829 is a part of contains several other garments from the same time period which range widely from excellent to poor condition. The NCWHM collections generally lack many items related to women, inclining staff to keep all female-related objects. I argue that keeping all the objects, simply for the sake of keeping female-related objects, can prohibit care for the best female-related objects they have and directs resources away from collections or purchases which do contribute to the museum's mission.

Terms

A number of terms will crop up repeatedly throughout: frontier, culture, community, fashion, and dress. Each have their own important distinctions. The frontier is perhaps the most contested term not just in its own field of history, but in the American ethos writ large. The frontier was in a different place, in a different time, and meant different things to different people at any given moment. "Dressing Like Laura" uses the word frontier to mean the land which the United States government and military divested of Native peoples and which settlers were allowed to populate during the years and in the space mentioned above. The frontier is both a place and a process, one that is highly subject to change over time. The frontier, in some respects, did have urban spaces, such as Wichita or Lincoln. But overall the frontier was characterized by the rural living of the settlers and the lack of technology that connected the frontier a to the more culturally and economically connected East or parts of the West which migrants had already settled. Inherently, then, the location of the frontier changed over time as people on the frontier

established communities and railroads and telegraph wires connected the frontier and the rest of the country. The frontier was a process defined by the goal of making it disappear. People went to the frontier for many reasons, but where they went, they created communities and cities. There was no escaping the reality that those cities, those towns, and that culture would come with them. They may have gone to the frontier, but the frontier began to disappear as soon as they stepped foot on it.

There is also make a distinction between this frontier and the frontier in popular memory. Needless to say, most in the public do not realize the many nuances of what the frontier was, when it was, and where it was. Yet, this does not preclude the frontier being a highly revered symbol in movies, political speeches, and the like.[54] Memory is a powerful tool. Chapter Four will deal with these realities more so than the other chapters, and show how Dress 2829 is not immune from popular thought.

Culture and community are often used together in this project. Culture is defined as a set of practices, ideas, morals, values, and goals held in common by a certain group of people. Ideas about modesty, religion, gender roles, and hopes for the future were part of the culture of those who settled on the frontier. There are many cultures in this story. First, the culture of America as a whole, which shared ideas about the role of the frontier and, in the Gilded Age, came to have many fears about industrialization and urbanization. A smaller culture, one that was American but also distinct from that larger culture, were those who resided on the frontier. They formed their own culture that the hardships of that life directly shaped. Community, often used in tandem with culture here, means both the people who live in a certain geographical area but more specifically, the people that one freely chooses to spend their time with. These communities often share a

[54] Reagin, *Re-living the American Frontier,* 20-21 and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*.

culture. Instances of these communities would be those who lived in the same area, attended the same church together, or worked together to accomplish the tasks that came with settlement.

Fashion and dress are used differently by different historians and there is very little consensus with how the terms ought to be used. Fashion tends to, and does here, mean the high fashion of haute couture or idealizations showcased in magazines such as *The Delineator* or G*odey's Lady's Book*. Generally, the idea is that fashion is impractical. This work holds to that definition. Dress is more commonly used to refer to the everyday clothing that a person wears or the general trends found in a given culture.

Respectability is another important term. Historian John Kasson writes in Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America that, "…Manners are [not] empty formalities. On the contrary, I contend that they are inextricably tied to larger political, social, and culture contexts and their ramifications extend deep into human relations and the individual personality."[55] He later contends that these manners offered ways to assess other people, especially in large city centers where it was difficult to discern who was a good, trustworthy person and who was not.[56] Clothing was part and parcel of this. Through dressing well and being clean, people achieved respect from those around them.

A brief note on conventions. In the hopes of maintaining the utmost professionalism, this work avoids the use of personal pronouns and passive voice whenever possible. However, at times, particularly when discussing the recreation of Dress 2829, it is impossible to avoid this without causing confusion.

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[55] John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 3.

[56] Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 7.

Conclusion and Thesis

Dress 2829 provides an opportunity to better understand the reality of expectations for females on the frontier and how ideals of domesticity, beauty, and culture developed in the context of a frontier. On the frontier, clothing was a visible reminder of the "civilization" women had come from and which they hoped to establish in the West, serving as a mooring to Eastern culture, respectability, and virtue. At its very core, this project asks why women continued to wear the clothing that they did in this space. "Dressing Like Laura" argues that that wearing clothing was a way to preserve one's dignity and morality, proving to the wearer and the world who saw her that she was a respectable woman.

It is a brave hope for this work that it will assist readers in understanding the meaning of clothing in one's life, the role that the most basic act of wearing clothing can have on a culture, and shift our understandings of how people build and continue community. Herein, I delve into the most basic and somewhat banal details of this dress, but at its core, this is not a story about clothing as a study of fashion. This study is a tale of what it means to create and continue a culture, what it means to achieve and maintain respectability, and how people exhibit hope for the future. It is my sincere belief, in my personal as well as my academic life, that what a person wears speaks volumes about who they are. And so, in this work, I hope to find *who frontier women were*, and in studying how we remember those women, *who we are* as well.

CHAPTER II

THE FRONTIER LOOK AND THE ROLE OF CLOTHING ON THE PRAIRIE

Mary was beautiful in that beautiful dress. Her hair was silkier and more golden than the golden silk threads in the plaid. Her blind eyes were bluer than the blue in it. Her cheeks were pink and her figure was so stylish. "Oh Mary," Laura said, "you look exactly as if you'd stepped out of a fashion plate. There won't be, there just can't be, one single girl in college who can hold a candle to you.[57]

This quotation comes from a significant moment in the *Little House on the Prairie* series. Mary's blindness and eventual move to a college for the blind in Iowa is well known. Laura has become a seamstress for a rather intolerable woman and uses her money to help buy the fabric for her sister's dress.[58] Though the family was financially better off than in previous years, as farmers, money was still tight.[59] For the Ingalls family, then, spending money on fashionable clothing was a significant investment and sacrifice; particularly in terms of fashionable clothing, it was impractical and seemingly a waste of money. As the scene continues, Laura rails against wearing corsets, a common theme in the latter books.[60] This scene is important in the Ingalls' story because of the symbolic importance of clothing which serves as a key marker of Laura's

[57] Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1941), 95-96.

[58] Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 58.

[59] Pamela Smith-Hill, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2007), 31 and 35.

[60] Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 93.

tomboy personality, in contrast with the lady-like Mary. That idea shifts in this scene. Laura becomes an adult through wage work and her full-time transition into wearing women's clothing rather than girl's clothing, and through offering up her wages, Laura and Mary have finally reconciled their long sisterly feud. Clothing was not just important to the Ingalls family, but to the frontier as a whole. The Ingalls are just a single representation of how people wore clothing on the frontier. But as Laura complains about corsets, or describes another dress, readers may find themselves asking, "Why does Laura wear these clothes?" Why, in the context of the frontier, did women continue to wear long sleeves, long skirts, and corsets?

In this space, women continued to wear corsets, wrist length sleeves, and ankle-length skirts and even spend their family's hard earned money on decorative clothing. This chapter explores why women on the frontier continued to follow Euro-American modesty conventions and purposefully sought out fashionable clothing. It argues that clothing signaled an adherence to societal norms; the wearer had not become uncivilized in the West and the realities frontier had not overcome her. As Jennifer Thigpen argues in her essay "Desperately Seeking Mary," textual sources can only get historians so far. Seeing and understanding material objects brings new depth and complications to our understandings of the people we study.[61]

In the late nineteenth century there were two forms of clothing: fashionable and utilitarian or daily-wear clothing. Fashionable clothing refers to a garment or object which was not intended for daily use and was typically made from silk, with lace, rouching, pleats, or other forms of decoration which required money and time to produce and maintain. Mary's school dress or Dress 91.1.2829 are examples of this. Utilitarian clothing, on the other hand, was mostly plain and sturdy, useful for everyday activities that required manual labor. Such garments are easier to launder and care for, and typically made from cotton or wool. Women did not

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[61] Jennifer Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary: Materializing Mary Richardson Walker, Missionary," in *The Public Historian*, 34(3), 2012, 68-81.

necessarily use these terms for their clothing and they often differentiated between work clothing and their "Sunday best." However, clothing rarely falls neatly into one of these categories. The images found throughout this project show that to some extent women could pick and choose elements from these two categories. A woman's dress and how much it fell into one type or the other depended on her class or how long she had resided in a place.

Primarily, this chapter relies on visual analysis of photographs and the descriptions of clothing found in diaries, letters, and memoirs. This project engages with a number of books and articles covering women's clothing on the frontier, all of which were written over twenty years ago.[62] Frontier women still sought to follow their home customs. Clothing represented the arrival of civilization. Of the most use to this study is Deborah Meyer and Laurel Wilson's work, "Bringing Civilization to the Frontier: The Role of Men's Coats in 1865 Virginia City, Montana Territory," which uses object analysis as the bulk of its source base.[63] This project more fully fleshes out the ideas of class and community than previous works to understand why women continued to follow Euro-American customs.

Still, questions remain: why continue to wear this form of clothing, either fashionable or utilitarian, in this frontier space? Historians and anthropologists have long debated why people wear clothing that does not serve a practical purposes.[64] Utilitarian ideals would suggest that people ought to wear only the most basic of clothing, that which is comfortable and protects them

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[62] Betty J. Mills, *The Calico Chronicle: Texas Women and Their Fashions 1830-1910* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1985) and Julie Campell and Brenda Brandt, "'No Seamstresses, No Ready Made Clothing,' Clothing Consumption on the American Frontier, 1850-1890," in *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 12 (3), 16-21.

[63] Deborah J.C. Meyer and Laurel E. Wilson, "Bringing Civilization to the Frontier: The Role of Men's Coats in 1865 Virginia City, Montana Territory," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 16(1), 19-26, 19. I am indebted to Laurel Wilson for her feedback and advice in the early stages of this project. She herself is familiar with Dress 91.1.2829, having appraised the Joe Grandee Collection in the early 2000s.

[64] Marilyn J. Horn. *The Second Skin: An Interdisciplinary Study of Clothing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968). Elizabeth Wilson. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1985). Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

from the elements. Practicality would dictate that settlers should have eschewed fashion and dress conventions. There have been few answers that satisfy the curious, as fashion is seemingly illogical. The 1985 text *Fashion and Modernity* by feminist scholar Elizabeth Wilson offers the most convincing answer, arguing that people are always "putting on" an identity to the public. In essence, the wearer is concerned with how others perceive them and dresses to convey the identity they wish others to think they have.[65] Curators and historians Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim write: "Garments incorporate…symbolic and aesthetic qualities that echo the cultural norms of a particular time and place."[66] Clothing was and is a physical manifestation of culture and a symbol of the wearer's morality, class, gender, race, and respectability.

This reality was no different on the frontier. In their first few years of settlement, women often expressed a desire to return to "normalcy," or life as it had been before arriving on the frontier. The work of the frontier also challenged gender norms, and the duties that women fulfilled upended their sense of propriety, decency, and modesty. Through wearing clothing, a woman signaled to herself and others that she was still respectable and adhering to societal norms; she had not become uncivilized in the West. Especially so for well-to-do woman who came to the West, fashionable clothing was a necessity. When women followed fashion conventions, they sought to preserve their modesty as Euro-American culture defined it. Clothing reflected a desire for the continuation of culture; a desire for beauty in one's clothing reflected a desire for non-utilitarian garments that whisp the wearer away from the difficulties of frontier life. Thus, clothing was a visible reminder of the "civilization" in which these women had come from and which they hoped to establish in the Northern Great Plains. Through continuing to follow both modesty conventions in their everyday clothing and wearing fashionable clothing that served no practical purpose, women were signaling a desire for Euro-American culture to

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[65] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 2 and 3.

[66] Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 16.

continue and thrive in a frontier space. Clothing was an expression of the hope that one's burdens were temporary and a declaration that the frontier had not consumed them.

Purveyors of Culture: The Role of Women in the Northern Great Plains

Theoretically, at least, Euro-Americans saw the frontier as a land of new opportunity and second chances, and this holds true for the characters studied here.[67] The case studies of several families who moved west show that the frontier gave new opportunities, even as the families did not have to forgo their culture and traditions for success. For the Kohrs family, the frontier gave them riches. Nebraska pioneer Luna Kellie arrived on the frontier with her family after failing to pay off a mortgage.[68] The Ingalls had a series of failures; they settled in Kansas only to be three miles over the border into the Osage Reservation. They had lost their crops to grasshoppers in Minnesota, and then failed to make a go of joint ownership of a hotel in Burr Oak, Iowa. Dakota Territory was another chance for the Ingalls after multiple failures.[69] For the Bennings, a Black family who settled in Kansas, the West offered a life outside of the South, along with a community of people like them.[70] Three of the Wilder siblings, better off than the Kellies and Ingalls, arrived in De Smet, and the two brothers and their sister filed adjoining claims.[71] A number of similarities arise from these varied groups. First, they hoped for a new life. Secondly, they all homesteaded. Thirdly and finally, each person carried the culture that they came from.

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[67] Julie Roy Jeffery, *Frontier Women: 'Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 40-41.

[68] Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 172.

[69] Smith-Hill, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life*, 12, 21, and 32.

[70] De Leon, *Racial Frontiers*, 20.

[71] Smith-Hill, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life*, 52.

One such example was the cultural tradition of the cult of domesticity.[72] The Victorian era heavily emphasized the role of women as the homemaker full of virtue, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity.[73] Known as the cult of domesticity or the cult of true womanhood, women were seen as the moral compass of society. Magazines, literature, and religious material of the period argued that a woman's proper place was in the home and that she must be a "better Eve."[74] In her role, she would curb men's sin; while Eve had offered Adam the fruit and cast the world into sin, the Victorian woman would bring heaven to earth by serving as the male species' moral compass.[75] Part and parcel of this morality was one's work in the home, cooking, housekeeping, and child-rearing. Even clothing reflected a woman's worth as a good wife in Victorian society. A clean house, fashionable and well-kempt clothing, delicious cooking, and obedient children marked out a woman who was truly dedicated to the home and her role therein. A woman who did not follow these conventions was in danger of being a "fallen woman," a woman who did not live up to her full potential and did not fulfil her natural duty.[76]

Historians have debated the overall role of women on the frontier and how much the cult of domesticity applied to them.[77] While popular notions of the frontier describe a tale of isolation and eschewing culture, arriving on the frontier did not signal the wholesale dismissal of Euro-American culture. Scholars who initially covered pioneer women such as Sandra Myres, Glenda Riley, and Julie Roy Jeffrey agree that women's experiences were diverse. More modern scholarship continues this thread and focuses more specifically on these nuances.[78] However, they

[72] Secondary sources do not capitalize "cult of domesticity" or "cult of true womanhood." This paper follows that convention.

[73] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18, no. 2, (1966): 151-172, 152.

[74] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 151-152.

[75] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 162.

[76] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 154.

[77] See Jeffery, *Frontier Women* and Myres *Westering Women.*

[78] There are many recent examples of work that focus specifically on women in the west. A brief perusal of recent publications include Connie Cronley, *A Life on Fire: Oklahoma's Kate Barnard* (Norman: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2021); Patricia Laughland and Sarah Eppler Janda, *This Land is Her Land: Gendered Activism in Oklahoma From the 1870s to the 2010s*, (Norman: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press,

do not agree whether or not the frontier was a liberating space for women. Indeed many women, married and unmarried, made their own homestead claims and farmed the land themselves.[79] There is also evidence that frontier women "modified existing norms and adopted flexible attitudes and experimental behavior patterns."[80] In contrast, the role of women did not change; they still worked in the home writ large and did not forego cultural convention. Women who homesteaded or ranched their own land still worked within the bounds of the cult of domesticity as they were connected closely enough to the home, and as such society did not see them as an improper women.[81]

This debate is perhaps a bit of a false dichotomy. Historical actors would not necessarily have thought of the frontier in these terms. They may have seen it as a place for new opportunity that they could not necessarily have back East or in their home country, but not liberating in the sense of personal liberation that modern people think of. What modern readers desire is for a "liberating space" that completely eschewed Victorian moral conventions, including gender roles and Victorian clothing. These readers have a bad habit of comparing the period of study to their ideals; this will only leave the reader disappointed. Rather, historians ought to take these women on their own terms. Sandra Myres words continue to ring true, "What has perhaps confused the various interpretations of women's place and the westering experience is that the reality of women's lives changed dramatically as a result of adaption to frontier conditions while the public

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2021); Julia Brickland, *America's Best Female Sharpshooter: The Rise and Fall of Lillian Frances Smith*, (Norman: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2020); Mary F. Ehrlander and Hild M. Peters, *Hospital and Haven: The Life and Work of Grafton and Clara Burke in Northern Alaska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2023), Richard Edwards and Jacob Friefield, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteader's Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2023). However, as stated in the introduction, there is very minimal recent scholarly work on pioneer women.

[79] Myres, *Westering Women*, 257 and 258.

[80] Myres, *Westering Women*, 269.

[81] Myres, *Westering Women*, 261 and Jeffrey, *Frontier Women,* 91.

image remained relatively static."[82] In the end, for many women, the frontier was not a wholly liberating place, but it was slightly different than life in the East.

The initial years as a homesteader were often difficult. Farming and ranching were typically difficult enterprises; lack of rain, disease, natural disasters, and volatile markets provided a maze of crises to work through. Often, those who arrived on the frontier had come from difficult conditions. As mentioned earlier, the Kellies, Ingalls, and Bennings fit well into this category. For women, there was an immense amount of work to accomplish. While the cult of domesticity celebrated women who stayed at home, on the frontier a woman's contributions were vital to familial survival. Kellie wrote in her memoir that her work raising eggs ensured the family could purchase the necessities at the general store.[83] Ingalls' wage work provided clothing for her sister.[84] Danish immigrant Bertha Anderson ran the entirety of the family's butter and cheese production and traveled twenty-fives miles to Fort Benning in Montana to sell these goods. Life on the frontier was no easy life.[85]

What most women desired was a restoration of the community and culture as they had known it before their arrival.[86] So, women set out to do just that: visiting was common, people often hosted working parties where they completed large tasks together, and women established schools and churches which hosted a variety of community events.[87] These occurred relatively quickly after the settler's arrival. As such, historians distinguish between women's loneliness and actual isolation, arguing that women were indeed lonely because they left behind their old, familiar home and culture, even though women were not necessarily physically isolated.[88] For

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[82] Myres, Westering Women, 269.
[83] Kellie, 74.
[84] Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, 237.
[85] Bertha Josephson-Anderson, "Excerpted Material from the Handwritten Autobiography of Mrs. Peter Anderson, Sr., Sidney, Montana." Montana Historical Society, 15.
[86] C. Robert. Haywood, *Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 82.
[87] Myres, *Westering Women*, 178 and 181.
[88] Myres, *Westering Women*, 174 and Jeffery, *Frontier Women*, 94.

example, Luna Kellie recalled attending a Centennial party shortly after her arrival. The Kellies and the neighbors were too far from a town to travel there for the celebration, but they all decided to have a picnic at the nearby school house instead.[89]

These activities can certainly be deemed "civilizing" acts, or women trying to recreate the world that they had come from. Though this stemmed more from a natural desire for community and friendship than an explicit desire to recreate the East ad hominin, nonetheless, women were trying to maintain culture. C. Robert Haywood writes that, "Only the conviction that life would become more complex, more as it was in "the civilized East," made those early years in Dodge City bearable."[90] Domesticity was part and parcel of normalcy and in the difficulties of settlement, "Domesticity, with its comfortable definition of woman's place, helped women bear what they hoped were temporary burdens and reestablished their sense of identity and self-respect. It served as a link with the past."[91]

Frontier Chic: The Look of the Frontier

Americans certainly noticed a distinctive "frontier" look. This look essentially consisted of clothing which was horribly out of fashion. The frontier look was an Eastern notion, partially true, that claimed women on the frontier were unfashionable due to their distance from fashion centers. To some extent, women on the frontier did lag behind, but one's clothing had more to do with her class and when she arrived on the frontier. The frontier did indeed influence how women looked, and subsequent sections will detail how women worked around these issues. The frontier,

[89] Kellie, The Memoirs of Luna Kellie, 11.
[90] Haywood, *Victorian West*, 80.
[91] Jeffery, *Frontier Women*, 92.

to some extent, did shape the way that women looked, but as time went on and urbanization and connections to railroads increased, this "look" became less and less common.

Women connected to the U.S. Army in the west between 1850 through the 1890s were some of the first non-native women to arrive on the Great Plains. These women were often officer's wives who had the financial means to have highly fashionable clothing. They arrived before trains and so brought their entire clothing supply with them. Upon returning to the East, they quickly realized that though they had been in touch with the latest fashions when they left, they were now hopelessly out of style.[92] These women, albeit unintentionally, created the first "frontier" look. There were no stores or railroads to bring them the latest fashions.[93] Martha Summerhayes, on her way to Arizona in 1874, met a band of army women returning home. She wrote, "The women's clothes looked ridiculously old-fashioned, and I wondered if I should look that way when my time came to leave."[94]

As the U.S. Army subdued Native peoples, more settlers arrived and trains and telegraph lines connecting the area to the rest of the U.S. soon followed. Railroads brought numerous supplies to towns, connecting the frontier to the East with the items necessary to be fashionable. Now, the latest fashions and fashionable materials were only a train ride away and the ability to be fashionable increased the closer one was geographically or temporally to a railroad. As trains reached various places at different times, the "look" of the frontier changed. Though towns were still solidly a part of the American West, they were connected to the East. There was never a hard and fast dividing line between East and West, but rather a gradient dependent upon one's distance from town centers and rail lines.

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[92] Campell and Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 135.

[93] *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking,* ed. Barbara Burman, (New York: Berg, 1999), 134-135.

[94] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 135.

After the army wives, the initial years settlement involved rough living conditions and for many, these years were characterized by a lack of goods, isolation, and hardship.[95] Class was the biggest indicator of how a woman looked, and for farmers and ranchers connected to the land, their funds were often tight. These lack of funds required abjuring overtly fashionable clothing and limiting unneeded purchases. As such there was indeed a distinctive frontier look. However, while the frontier did indeed influence what one wore, it is inaccurate to suggest that these women lived completely unconnected from culture. Towns were present on the frontier and as telegraph lines and railroads reached across the United States, so did settlers' access to goods and information. Though they did not replicate the east, and their culture was certainly influenced by farming and ranching culture, settlers tried to maintain aspects of the culture that they came from.[96] Over time, fashion could and would find its way into this space. Fashion represented connections to more familiar norms, and as fashion trickled into the frontier, it symbolized the change from a wild to a civilized space.

To understand the way that women looked, one must understand the constituent parts that made up a woman's wardrobe. On most occasions, women wore five layers. First, they wore stockings made from cotton, wool, or silk, depending on the weather and occasion. The first layer that touched the skin was a chemise and split drawers. These protected the skin from the chafing of the corset and outer garments, but also protected those garments from sweat and body oils that destroyed fabrics.[97] These were usually made of cotton. Over this base layer women wore a corset. Depending on the occasion, women would also wear a petticoat and small wire or horsehair bustle. Finally, women would wear a dress or shirtwaist and skirt, made from cotton, wool, or silk.

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[95] Myres, *Westering Women*, 22 and Elizabeth York Enstam, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998) 3-5.

[96] Haywood, *Victorian West*, 2, 3, 5.

[97] Anita Stamper and Jill Condra, *Clothing Through American History: The Civil War through the Gilded Age, 1861-1899* (Denver: Greenwood Press, 2011), 113-115.

Augusta Grant-Khors is an example of a financially well-to do woman. She was the wife of Conrad Kohrs, a cattle baron and owner of a ranch which is now a part of the National Parks Service.[98] Even nearly one-hundred and fifty years later, Augusta is a striking woman. An 1882 photo captures Augusta from the ribcage up and she looks off into the distance. Her clothes are clean and refined. She wears an overdress with pleats at the front with a brocade bodice. There is lace and a large necklace around her neck. She wears dangling earrings and her hair is parted down the middle but it is built up on the sides of the part, indicating that it took time to adjust her hair.[99] Another image of Loa Snyder, for which there is no specific date, also shows the immensity of fashion on the frontier. Loa Snyder was the sister-in-law of F.J. Haynes, the official photographer for Yellowstone National Park and the Northern Pacific Railroad.[100] Snyder's father was a farmer, as listed in the 1870 census, but in 1885 Loa was listed as living with her sister and brother-in-law, F.J. and Lillie Haynes, in Fargo, Dakota Territory, as well as a single servant.[101] This full length portrait offers a chance to see the way an entire dress looked. Her skirt flares out a bit at the bottom and is amply decorated with pleats and bows. There is an overskirt with rouching and the bodice has lots of fabric at the sleeves and many large bows. Like Augusta, Loa wears a thick necklace and her hair is crimped with a large bun.[102]

Augusta's clean and well-kempt appearance shows that she cared for her looks and had the funds to maintain fashionable clothing. By 1900, the family at least had two female servants, indicating that Augusta did had to do minimal physical labor.[103] Likewise, the Snyder-Haynes family also had a servant. Both women were immensely fashionable and obviously were not

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[98] Larry Gill, "From Butcher Boy to Beef King: The Gold Camp Days of Conrad Kohrs," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 8 (2), 1958, 40-55.

[99] *Augusta Kohrs portrait, ca. 1882*. Photograph. 1882. Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*, 15891.

[100] *F. Jay Haynes Photographer* (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 1981), 7.

[101] U.S. Census Bureau, 1870 Census, using Ancestory.com, 22 November 2022 and U.S. Census Bureau, 1885 Territorial and State Census, using Ancestory.com, 22 November 2022.

[102] *Portrait of Loa Snyder.* Photograph. Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*. Haynes Foundation Photograph, H-00253.

[103] U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 Census, using Ancestory.com, 22 November 2022.

planning on working in these garments. The clothing in these photographs shows that the Kohrs and Snyder-Haynes families were relatively well off. Even though they were "on the frontier," their high class allowed them to wear such garments. As stated earlier, class played the largest role in how much a woman could participate in fashionable trends. These women also show that while the idea of the "frontier look" remained strong, it did not apply equally to all women who lived in these spaces.

Figure 3, Augusta Grant-Khors

Augusta Kohrs portrait, ca. 1882. Photograph. 1882. Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*, 15891.

Figure 4, Loa Snyder

Portrait of Loa Snyder. Photograph. Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*. Haynes Foundation Photograph, H-00253.

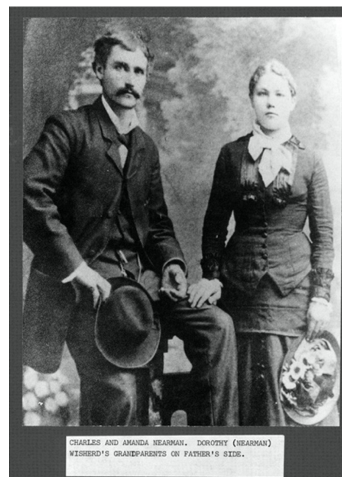
Not all were nearly as fashionable as Kohrs and Snyder. One image from South Dakota shows two young women dressed in winter gear looking at a street advertisement.[104] Both wear long coats and the right girl's coat covers her entire dress; their coats and skirts come to the ankle and they wear gloves and hats with ribbons. Though these young women are not at the height of fashion like Kohrs and Snyder, they still made an effort to look somewhat in tune with the popular styles and appear presentable.

Figure 5, Young Women in South Dakota

No. 377 View of 3d street looking west from Walnut, 1881. Photograph. Yankton, Dakota Territory. Stanley J Morrow Stereograph Collection (ST 003), Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*, ST 003.58.

[104] *No. 377 View of 3d street looking west from Walnut, 1881.* Photograph. Yankton, Dakota Territory. Stanley J Morrow Stereograph Collection (ST 003), Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*, ST 003.58.

An image of Charles and Amanda Nearman, married in 1882, shows her wearing a skirt with an overskirt and a bodice. The skirt, aside from the overskirt, is rather plain. Her bodice is simple but still has silk lappets ending in small babuls. At her wrist is lace and pleated cuffs. She wears a large white neckerchief and she holds a flat hat with many flowers on it.[105] Amanda's clothing is far from high fashion, but practical for her life. Her clothing does not belie a sense of prestige or wealth but rather an understanding of what a life laboring on the frontier would be like. The two married in 1882 and the 1900 census lists Charles's occupation as a farmer and the two had eight children. Before his marriage in 1880, Charles had worked as a laborer in Minnesota and cared for his ailing mother. Twenty years later, Charles owned his own land in Montana, undoubtably a more secure position than wage labor.[106] Nonetheless, she still wears decorative clothing, showing that she did indeed have opportunity for and a desire to dress up and have some pieces of beautiful clothing. These photographs, unlike the photographs of Grant-Khors and Snyder, show why people spoke of the frontier look. While women of the East may have looked down on the frontier look, these images exemplified the practicality that life on the frontier and the class of these women felt their clothing necessitated.



[105] *Charles and Amanda Nearman*. University of Montana- Missoula, Mansfield Library. *Montana Memory Project*. Photoboard #180.

[106] Charles Nearman, 1870 and 1900 Censuses, Ancestory.com.

Figure 6, Charles and Amanda Nearman

Charles and Amanda Nearman. University of Montana- Missoula, Mansfield Library. *Montana Memory Project*. Photoboard #180.

Respectability was important for the Ingalls sisters as well. An image of the three oldest Ingalls sisters show Mary and Laura wearing identical gingham dresses.[107] The dresses are simple, but have two ruffles on the bottom and darts in the bodice. The dresses appear to be cut in the princess style, a popular style of the time. The necks are high with a bit of lace and a silk ribbon. Carrie is the most fashionable with what is possibly a silk dress that has numerous buttons and plaid edging on the skirt's ruffles and cuffs. It is unclear when Carrie's dress was created, but considering the pervasive nature of remaking clothing, it is likely that this was originally Mary or Laura's dress, who were born in 1865 and 1867, respectively. This would make the dress a bit older, perhaps from the early 1870s, and was probably highly fashionable when the two older daughters wore it. While the Ingalls' fortunes rose and fell throughout the years, the parents potentially had the funds to purchase material for a nicer garment during the early 1870s. The possibility of the dress being silk meant that it would not have been worn out like an everyday dress and could be passed down. Since it was a child's garment, it would also likely not have been cut down or have a chance to wear out. If this is true, then this image shows how one's class and fortunes influenced what one could wear across a family's children. The more important point of this photograph is that while Mary and Laura are not fashionable, they are clean and presentable.

[107] "Image of three oldest Ingalls sisters," 1879, *Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum*, Mansfield, Missouri.

Figure 7, Ingalls Sisters

"Image of three oldest Ingalls sisters," 1879, *Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum*, Mansfield, Missouri.

But are these images accurate? This is one question that fashion scholars who utilize paintings or photographs must reckon with. Photography played an important role in the west and also in people's personal lives. For western expansion, photography really began to catch people's attention in the 1850s and captured the "disappearing" west.[108] Photography also served as a personal memory and the purpose was not to share those photographs with the world.[109] The images listed here served the latter purpose.

[108] Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 13.

[109] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, "For the Record: Popular music and photography as technologies of memory," in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2: 149-165, 152.

The pictures here were planned out and most likely were to serve as mementos. This goal would likely influence the clothing they wore. Writing on the Nearman's photo does indicate that it was their wedding picture, and logic would suggest that they would seek to wear their best clothes for that photograph.[110] Likewise, the Augusta Kohrs photo was clearly planned and in a studio, also indicated that she dressed up for the occasion. The Ingalls sisters are also in a studio. It is much harder to tell if the Solomon Smith family were dressed up, though. Their photograph was on their farm and there was a wide variety of clothing; some wore nicer clothes while others wore comparatively drab clothing.[111] Regardless, the fashions these people wore, even if it was their Sunday best, still reflect the influence of the frontier.

Figure 8, Solomon Smith Residence

"Solomon Smith Residence, Saline, Kansas," Photograph. 1884. *Kansas Memory Project*, Topeka: Kansas, 312992, FK2.S1.75.S. and *A Family in front of their sod house, Thomas County, Kansas, 1885.* Photograph. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Memory*. 442417.

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[110] *Charles and Amanda Nearman*. University of Montana- Missoula, Mansfield Library. *Montana Memory Project*. Photoboard #180.

[111] "Solomon Smith Residence, Saline, Kansas," Photograph. 1884. *Kansas Memory Project*, Topeka: Kansas, 312992, FK2.S1.75.S. and *A Family in front of their sod house, Thomas County, Kansas, 1885.* Photograph. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Memory*. 442417.

Femininity and Respectability: A Reason for Clothing

The "frontier look" was an inescapable reality during the early years of settlement when there were few towns or railroads nearby to bring in the latest goods. But, as suggested in the previous section, respectability played an equally important role to fashion. Shortly after Luna Kellie arrive at her new home in Nebraska, she was invited to a community party. In her memoirs, Kellie recalled telling her friend that she worried what others would think of her as she did not have fashionable clothing. The friend replied that Kellie had no need to worry, as she was the most recent arrival and thus was the most up-to-date on fashion. Upon her arrival, Kellie was relieved to see that no one else at the party was particularly fashionable, allowing her to fit in.[112] Rather, she was struck by their cleanliness and presentability.[113] Kellie recalled meeting the woman who would become one of her closest friends, arriving with her four daughters dressed in pink muslin with tucks and ruffles. Though muslin was certainly not the most fashionable fabric, the women had still taken the time to incorporate fashionable elements such as ruffles and tucks. Another couple arrived in clothes that were starched thick, also indicating a desire to look presentable.[114] These people cared about how they looked in public and wanted to present their best face to the community. Though they might not have the most current clothing, they took time out of their busy, never-ending work schedules to clean themselves, starch their clothes, and make sure they looked their best. This pursuit denotes that respectability and presentability were highly valued in the community.

The late 19th century saw profound change which necessitated the symbology that clothing denoted. During the 1870s and 1880s, towns grew and developed across the United States. Though the frontier held a central role in American identity, it was augmented by the

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[112] Luna Kellie, *Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, RG3914.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. 11-12.
[113] Kellie, 13.
[114] Kellie, 13-14.

explosive growth of cities such as Chicago and New York. In the 1880s, the bulk of labor began to shift from farming to industry in cities and thus massive numbers of people moved from the countryside into the city.[115] Industrialization and shifts from rural to city living created a deeply rooted fear in many Americans about the future of the country and its morality.[116] Tradition had cast the city and the country in opposition to one another, and some feared what would become of a civilization who lived in the city and had no frontier.[117] Frederick Jackson Turner argued for the centrality of the frontier in the making and maintaining of American culture and in 1893, he followed the U.S. Census Bureau and declared the frontier closed.[118] What would happen to America without the trait that had made them unique? In this turmoil, proper dressing indicated who one was: a lady or gentleman, a respectable person, or other.

The demographic shift to cities increased anonymity in public spaces. The profound changes in American culture created a need for a visual shorthand to assess the morality and social class of those who found themselves interacting with it.[119] Historian John F. Kasson writes that manners are not empty formalities, but rather are products of the society in which they were created.[120] Kasson argues that manners, and this chapter argues that clothing did the same – showed viewers at a glance who the wearer claimed to be.[121] One's garments also reflected an understanding of manners and how one should operate in society. Paying careful attention to the many details of one's garb, from the amount of perfume to the edges of the skirt, signified a respectable and well-kept woman.[122]

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[115] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 53, 87 and 114.
[116] Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 149.
[117] Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 102-103.
[118] Fredrick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893.
[119] John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 7.
[120] Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 3.
[121] Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 114.
[122] Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 121.

For pioneers, cleanliness often proved to be what was most important. While the women in the photos above might not be strictly fashionable, each one was clean, tidy, and presentable. While they did not always have access to fashionable clothing, cleanliness, presentability, modesty, and decorum *were* within their reach; this was their way of paying attention to the details of their garments. In her memoirs, pioneer Luna Kellie of Nebraska recalled the work that went into making sure that her husband had a clean and ironed white shirt every day. The difficulties of washing and laundering clothing in general only increased by the early years of living far away from water, engaging in intense manual labor, and sometimes living in dugouts and sod houses. A laborer, Mr. Kellie worked out in the sun, and it would be reasonable to assume that the expectations for his cleanliness to be low, however, Mrs. Kellie worked hard to ensure that her husband was respectable, even to the other workers, by having a clean white shirt. The work that this required was evident to those around them; Mrs. Kellie cared for her husband enough to haul the water, boil and scrub the shirts, and iron a new shirt for each day of the week. She was, according to the cult of domesticity, a virtuous and excellent wife. Sometime after Mr. Kellie's death, the women of the community told Mrs. Kellie that their prevailing memory of him were his clean white shirts.[123]

Mrs. Kellie's memoir provides another anecdote about cleanliness. In the aforementioned story about the party which occurred not long after her arrival, Kellie noted the fashions of the residents. In addition to the fashionable ruffles and tucks which they incorporated into their garb, the community members ensured that their clothing was clean and thickly starched. This anecdote indicates the value of cleanliness to the community. The pioneers may not have been the most fashionable, but their cleanliness and attention to detail indicated that they were respectable people. Clean clothing indicated the hard work that women had to put into clothing and the dedication they had to their families. For these people, there were more pressing matters than

[123] Kellie, 68-69.

fashion, but respectability was an absolute necessity to their standing in the community and their own self-respect. Being respectable meant that the frontier had not destroyed their civility and decency.

Respectability was represented through clothing, but also in the most basic element of actually continuing to wear Euro-American clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry. As stated earlier, even seemingly utilitarian clothing did not always make sense on the frontier. Long skirts, corsets, and long sleeves initially do not appear to serve a purpose. Long sleeves, at least, protect from sun and dirt. Yet, women across the Great Plains indeed wore these garments every day and there is little evidence that they did otherwise. Even for the women who worked their own homesteads, this held true. Jennifer Thigpen in her discussion of rediscovering missionary Mary Richardson-Walker's garments also noted the presence of fashionable clothing in the collection. Thigpen explains that while Richardson-Walker's writings were filled with domestic labor, the material collection complicated this picture when Thigpen discovered fashionable goods such as gloves, dresses, hats, and ribbons. Like women on the frontier, Richardson-Walker brought her cultural baggage with her across the continent. Though there was little practical use for those things there, they were still necessary accoutrements of a lady.[124] Women of the frontier valued modesty and Victorian culture on the frontier just as much as they had back home and as such they continued to wear the clothing they had always worn.

Clothing's primary role was to show who was a man and who was a woman.[125] If the proper ordering and stability of society as outlined in the cult of true womanhood was dependent on people following proper gender conventions, then clothing was absolutely vital to denote gender. It was especially so on the frontier, as farming and ranching called for some measure of

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[124] Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary," 78 and 81.

[125] Rob Schorman, *Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 46.

androgyny in gender roles. Typically, women did work inside the home. Cooking and cleaning were difficult forms of work that took up a significant amount of time and physical labor. In this respect, they were still working in the home as the cult of domesticity called for. Lack of help or a son meant that women occasionally helped with the male chores or vice versa.[126] The frontier threatened the moral order of society and blurred gender boundaries.[127] Therefore, clothing was one way of maintaining a gender distinction. Peter Boag delineates a number of examples of cross dressers from 1880 to 1920 and the immense shock people felt upon discovering this. In this sense, clothing was a means of existing or becoming. Garments were supposed to reflect one's gender, but through wearing the opposite gender's clothing, some people found a way to be something else.

Clothing also served a practical function, but the next logical question is why women wore clothing that primarily included long skirts and long sleeves. One of the first, and most important, reasons for wearing long clothing and skirts was protection from the elements. There was no sunscreen in the 1870s and 1880s and as such people had to rely on long sleeves and hats. Men also wore these items. On one woman's journey to her husband's army station, she changed from her fashionable clothing into a waterproof cloak and one of her husband's broad-brimmed hats as she rode her horse across the plains. When she came close to civilization, she switched back to her fashionable clothing, resulting in a horrible sunburn on her face and neck.[128] In this sense, desire for respectability outweighed her desire for practicality. Additionally, there is a modern misconception that skirts are warmer and more confining than pants. Rather, skirts, especially fabrics with a stiff hand made from natural fibers like calico or gingham, do not cling to the legs like pants and allowed for some airflow around the legs. Women wore split drawers in this period, which were essentially pants but split down the middle, allowing the woman to

[126] Myres, *Westering Women*, 171.
[127] Myres, *Westering Women*, 7 and Jeffery 79.
[128] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 136.

urinate without removing her clothing.[129] This also served the purpose, albeit possibly unintentionally, of leaving the lower parts of the body open to any breeze which might go under the skirt. Sunbonnets, long sleeves, and long skirts, then, could be highly utilitarian.

On Her Own Terms: Corsetry

Corsetry was, of course, the most obvious of these fashionable trends that remains highly debated. An overtly intimate object, historians have disagreed on the role of corsetry: if it was a tool of oppression, if it was comfortable, and if women actually wore it of their own free will. This is not to mention the extensive contemporary literature surrounding the practice. This debate has two prongs. First is the debate about the role of corsets. The majority of scholars, especially those using feminist and sexuality theories, argue that corsets were part and parcel of patriarchal norms, such as in *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* by Leigh Summers. Many previous works "trivializes or sensationalize the corset," according to Summers, and her book works to show how corsetry and sexuality became linked during the 19th century it was a successful tool of heteropatriarchal norms.[130]

Useful to this study, Summers discusses both a variety of British experiences based on class and geography. Some women in the Victorian period travelled to India with their husbands, who were a part of the ruling class, much like the army women who travelled with their husbands to the North American west during the Indian Wars. While in India, these women continued to wear corsets as a reminder of "civilization" and their supposed superiority to those who were

[129] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History,* 282-283.
[130] For other core texts about the corset, see Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 71; Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2001), 2 and 7-8.

around them.[131] Additionally, Summers discusses corset wearing practices throughout various classes. Summers argues that working class women did indeed wear corsets in hopes of showing off their morality and in the search to marry a man from a higher class.[132] In the end, Summers argues that women wore corsets because they were "cultural dupes" and if they wanted anything in life, they had to acquiesce.[133] For women on the whole, corsets were necessary to be considered a good, moral person. Not wearing corsets was automatically associated with sexual looseness.[134]

Another a body of other works that suggests that framing corsetry as a dichotomy between oppressive, patriarchal fashion and healthful freedom is reductive. Head curator at Fashion Institute of Technology Valerie Steele wrote several books on the subject. She notes that, "Corsetry was not one monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women experienced before being liberated by feminism."[135] Many works ignore the complexities of corsetry's meaning. Types of corsets and debates about their benefits or detriments ebbed and flowed depending on the events in the culture, such as the Enlightenment.[136] While some have said that fashion is a result of capitalism, Steele points out that fashion has long preceded that economic system.[137] Moreover, many men, in addition to dress reformers, were vehemently against corsetry, believing that it was harmful to women's health.[138] In the end, corsets were required for modesty's sake but, as Steele writes, "'Fashion' cannot be reified as a magic power that causes women to behave in ways contrary to their own best interest."[139]

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[131] Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2003), 19.
[132] Summers, *Bound to Please*, 9-10.
[133] Summers, *Bound to Please*, 9.
[134] Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 30.
[135] Steele, *The Corset*, 1.
[136] Steele, *The Corset*, 29.
[137] Steele, *The Corset*, 2.
[138] Steele, *The Corset*, 35.
[139] Steele, *The Corset*, 35.

Modern theorists and historians, including popular historian Kathy Peiss and British feminist theorist Elizabeth Wilson, disagree with Summers on the role of clothing and makeup in society. In her 1985 book, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity,* Wilson comments on the apparent contradictions between feminism and clothing:

> Fashion has been a source of concern to feminists…Within feminism, fashionable dress and the beautification of the self are conventionally perceived as expressions of subordination fashion and cosmetics fixing women visibly in their oppression. However, not only is it important to recognize that men have been as much implicated in fashion, as much 'fashion victims' as women; we must also recognize that to discuss fashion as simply a feminist moral problem is to miss the richness of its cultural and political meanings. The political subordination of women is an inappropriate point of departure if, as I believe, the most important thing about fashion is *not* that it oppresses women.[140]

Commenters with a feminist bent feel that because women wore fashionable clothing and clothing such as corsets that this is somehow at odds with a woman's ability to make her own choices, that she fell into the trap of patriarchy. Because they believe that a woman could not make her own choices in other areas of life, then she could not make her own decisions regarding her wardrobe. Fashion and clothing are equally powerful tools of self-expression and conformity, but casting it as such a simple binary is to ignore the uniqueness of every individual.

Costume historians have done extensive research arguing otherwise and many experimental archeology projects by non-historians have argued the complete opposite of Summer's work.[141] Bernadette Banner and Abby Cox are two YouTubers who have such videos.

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[140] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1985), 13.

[141] Steele, *The Corset*, 71; Bernadette Banner, "I Wore a (Medical Corset) for Five Years. How do Victorian Corsets Compare?" *Youtube*, 7 November 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1y25Go12sUg; Abby Cox, "I Wore 18th-Century Clothing *Every Day

Bernadette Banner's video "I Wore a (Medical Corset) for Five Years. How Do Victorian Corsets Compare?" compares her medical corset which she wore for scoliosis with a reproduction late-Victorian period corset. When Banner wore her medical corset while undergoing treatment, she did so for nearly the entire day except when she was changing clothes or showering, meaning she slept in the corset, wore it in the heat, and wore it while performing strenuous activity. She compares this to a corset she made, patterned off a corset in the Symington Corset Collection, an English company that mass produced corsets for women in the nineteenth-century. Their most famous corset was the House Maid corset, which was marketed specifically to women in domestic service. Banner has two videos discussing her reproduction process. She notes that both corsets molded to her body, and while she was unable to bend at the waist, it rarely restricted movement or prevented her from exercising.

Abby Cox's video is similar, but focuses more on her overall experience wearing 18th century clothing for five years while she worked as an apprentice at the dressmaker's shop in Colonial Williamsburg. Cox shares several misconceptions, including ideas of comfort. While her 18th century clothes were not comfortable like modern sweatpants would be, her clothing was not strictly uncomfortable. It also provided mental comfort. The garments that Cox wore daily, a bum roll, petticoats, stays, and other items, made her fit the late 18th century aesthetic ideal. With these garments, her real body was hidden and no one knew what she looked like under her clothes. Cox stated that during her five years at Colonial Williamsburg her weight fluctuated thirty pounds but never once did she have to remake her garments. Her modern clothing lent no such assurance. These ideas are perplexing to moderns who rail against corsetry. While dressing to fit a cultural norm may seem oppressive, Cox effectively turns the question on its head, forcing the viewer to think about the ramifications of modern clothing which reveal one's body. While corsetry was a

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for 5 Years & This is What I Learned (Corsets Aren't Bad), *Youtube*, 10 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyWnm0Blmh4&t=0s.

cultural necessity to be a moral woman, it is wrong to think that all women were against corsetry and understood it as oppressive, but only wore it because they were powerless.

Cox's video brings up the second prong of the debate about corsetry: that of comfort. Are corsets uncomfortable? It is important to point out that comfort is foremost a cultural concept, and often by asking the question, "are corsets comfortable?" one is showing their thoroughly 20th and 21st century mind. Each epoch has its own ideas of comfort; for instance, one needs only to look at the prevalence of yoga pants, tennis shoes, and other athleisure wear in the 2020s. Athleisure conforms to the body and works to increase comfort in terms of temperature regulation, sweat reduction, mobility, and feel of fabrics. Corsets were certainly not comfortable in the sense that athleisure is comfortable. Rather, it is fairly well-documented, especially for late 1700s stays, that these garments provided physical support for women as they did physical labor. Women needed to be able to work in their corsets.[142]

The short answer is that corsets, when made correctly, do indeed shape the body, provide support, and are not meant to be uncomfortable. A number of works from the literature of the period suggest that people were well aware of how corsetry could be misused. Some doctors did argue that corsetry was unhealthy and there was a small amount of reform dress.[143] Very few women laced themselves tightly, and many recognized the dangers of this.[144] As Steele argues, these garments were understood in a variety of manners by different people; there was no monolithic understanding of corsets.[145] A book entitled *Health and Beauty; or corsets and clothing constructed in accordance with the physiological laws of the human body* by Roxey A. Caplin, published in 1854, sought to teach women how to create corsets that properly fitted their body and benefited their health. The author argued that the occupation of corset making had

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[142] Linda Baumgarten, John Watson, and Florine Carr, *Costume Close-Up: Clothing Construction and Pattern, 1750-1790* (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999), 64.
[143] Steele, *The Corset*, 35.
[144] Steele, *The Corset*, 25.
[145] Steele, *The Corset*, 28.

fallen into the hands of frauds who made uncomfortable and physically injurious corsets. Caplin notes that though many doctors were against corsetry, women continued to wear them. Corsets, he argued, could give support where needed, correct bodily defects, help the wearer maintain correct posture, all while offering mobility.[146] Patents from the period also show that inventors were seeking ways to make corsets more comfortable.[147] The records indicate that people of the 19th century understood that corsets could be uncomfortable and dangerous, and that proper, comfortable corsetry was necessary to one's well-being. Women wanted fashion, they wanted to be good, moral people, but on the whole women were also generally unwilling to submit writ-large to discomfort. This nuance challenges the idea that corsets were hegemonically oppressive.

It is difficult to discern if women on the frontier wore corsets. Summer's discussion of working women offers a convincing argument that working women did wear corsets. But the frontier was a rural space, with farms and ranches spread out. Would a woman wear a corset when she knew that she might not receive visitors that day? Images from North Dakota, Kansas, and Montana may have some answers. The selected photographs are all of women in family photographs outside of their home. The families wear work clothing and often carry tools with them, possibly indicating that the photos were relatively informal and they did not have time to prepare. Corsets create a smooth, unbroken line across the chest and abdomen. When the bust is sitting at its natural position, there is typically a shadow or distinct break in the figure. This shaping allows visitors to see if a woman is wearing a corset or not.

A photograph of ten people in front of a two-story clap-board house has two women in it, one of whom is clearly wearing a corset. The second woman holds a child on her lap as she sits, so it is impossible to tell.[148] Another picture of the Solomon Smith family in front of a sod house

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[146] Steele, *The Corset*, 41-42.
[147] Steele, *The Corset*, 43.
[148] *John A Baird family, Cogswell (D.T).* Photograph. 1884. Bismarck: North Dakota Oral History Project Photograph Collection, 00032, Folder SA-07, 00001.

has a variety of clothing on the women. The woman on the far left wears a relatively decorative dress that follows the stylistic norms, including a number of ruches and ruffles. She clearly wears a corset but the other two women in the picture wear looser clothing and it is unclear. What makes it particularly difficult to tell is the bulk of the clothing. They both wear aprons tied at the waist and the dress flows over the top. It is difficult to tell if this is truly because of the bulk of the fabric or the breasts resting at their normal, uncorseted location.[149] A final image of three people who are older, taken in 1885, perhaps shows a woman wearing a corset. She also wears an apron at the natural waist, but the top of the dress is more form fitting. There are a few inches of abdomen before the bust, though there is a significant shadow, perhaps suggesting that the bust is resting at its natural place, rather than having a corset draw a soft line.[150]

[149] "Solomon Smith Residence, Saline, Kansas," Photograph. 1884. *Kansas Memory Project*, Topeka: Kansas, 312992, FK2.S1.75.S.

[150] *A Family in front of their sod house, Thomas County, Kansas, 1885.* Photograph. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Memory*. 442417.

Figure 9, John Baird Family

John A Baird family, Cogswell (D.T). Photograph. 1884. Bismarck: North Dakota Oral History Project Photograph Collection, 00032, Folder SA-07, 00001.

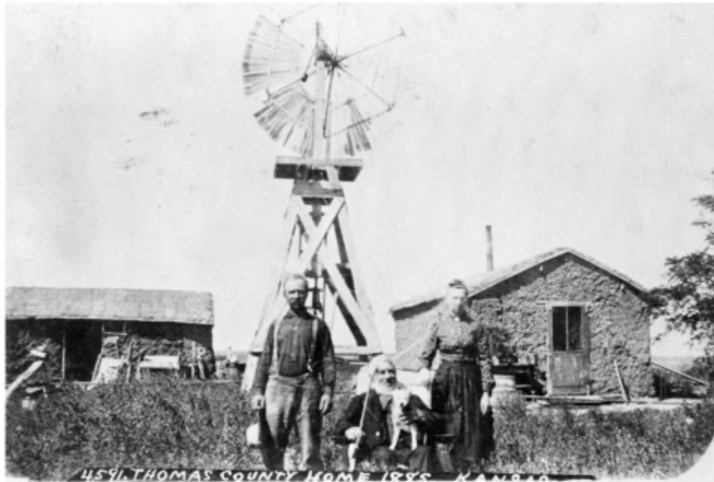

Figure 10, Thomas County, Kansas

A Family in front of their sod house, Thomas County, Kansas, 1885. Photograph. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Memory*. 442417.

A famous image of a Kansas woman pushing a wheelbarrow full of cow chips also provides some evidence that women wore corsets while working.[151] Like the others, there is a smooth, uninterrupted line across the chest. In the images listed, at least four of the women wear corsets, but for others it is unclear. Corsets were more comfortable than modern popular notions believe and the 19th century saw great strides in making that garments more comfortable. Summer's arguments about working class women also parallel this study. For these reasons, it is probable that women did wear corsets while working on the frontier. There is no clear, complete way to know if women wore corsets while working, but these images lend viewers the idea that perhaps it was a matter of personal choice. This discussion of corsetry will be continued in the next section, as the most effective responses to Summers comes in the form of experimental archeology.

Figure 11, Kansas Woman

"Kansas Woman Gathering Cow Chips," Photograph. Liberal: Liberal Memorial Library, Chrisman Collection, E19.

[151] "Kansas Woman Gathering Cow Chips," Photograph. Liberal: Liberal Memorial Library, Chrisman Collection, E19.

Conclusion

When Laura told her sister that no girl in the East could "hold a candle" to her, she was expressing the sentiment that though Mary was from the frontier and came from a poor family, she was just as good as any other girl there. Her clothing denoted that she was respectable and a woman of good character. Clothing had many meanings on the frontier. The modern popular imagination has often considered the frontier an isolated space, but a whole host of cultural trends manifested themselves there. While historians have debated the role of women on the frontier, it is clear that many women desired a return to the life and community they had once known. Women did not eschew their culture, and even for those who adapted their clothing, by and large women continued to wear the clothing that Euro-American culture deemed appropriate.

Perhaps most importantly, this section seeks to raise a question of historical perspective: What of today's clothing will be considered oppressive? High-heels? Bras? Makeup? These items change 21st century bodies and make them "more beautiful" according to current standards. But are these changes really simply tools of heteropatriarchal oppression? No. It is problematic to understand these items solely in terms of oppression. Many women wear these items willingly on their own terms. Casting corsetry, long sleeves, and ankle-length skirts as oppressive simply because it is not what 21st century citizens would choose to wear is profoundly tone deaf to the many factors that go into wearing clothing and strips women of their agency. To properly understand fashion of the past, viewers must understand it first on Victorian terms.

While the frontier influenced what a woman wore in terms of her amount of physical labor, her type of home, and her class, fashion was still present. Fashion was a spectrum, but in the images above women often put decorative elements into their clothing. Even for families living in dugouts and working the land, some amount of fashion was often still accessible. And though what they wore was not as up-to-date or beautiful as others, their cleanliness was the more important concept. Clothing signaled a host of meanings, and wearing proper clothing allowed

women to follow gender conventions and show others their morality. For these people, clothing and cleanliness were a means of respectability and maintaining their sense of self. Clothing had multiple meanings on the frontier, but by and large it was a means of thriving in the frontier and an expression of desire for the continuation of the cult of domesticity.

CHAPTER III

GATHERING THE DRESS

An early scene from *Little House in the Big Woods* recalls the Ingalls family traveling to the town of Pepin, Wisconsin. The girls ride in the wagon bed and Ingalls-Wilder describes what it was like to see a town for the first time.[152] Pa stops the horses in front of the general store and the family gets out and begins perusing the goods for sale. "Laura could have looked for weeks and not seen all the things that were in that store. She had not known there were so many things in the world," Ingalls-Wilder wrote. Laura wanders the aisle in wonder. Ma begins to examine the many varieties of calico, and again Laura looked in awe at the expanse of the selection. After buying their necessities, Pa prodded Ma to purchase a calico for herself, threatening to buy the ugliest pattern if the shy and fiscally conservative Ma did not choose one for herself. She eventually picked out a fawn-colored fabric with roses and leaves. The scene ends with the shopkeeper gifting Mary and the star-struck Laura two heart-shaped cakes and the family riding off into the woods again.[153] The selection and purchasing of materials are as memorable, if

[152] This story does not appear in *Pioneer Girl*, Ingalls-Wilder's original memoir. It is likely that she fabricated this portion of the story for world-building purposes. Scholars have repeatedly noted Ingalls-Wilder's and Wilder-Lane's embellishments in places while still marketing the stories as completely true.

[153] Laura Ingalls-Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1932), 168-172.

not more, than the scenes which concern the creation of dresses in the *Little House* books themselves.

Like the scene above, this chapter examines the materials needed to recreate Dress 2829. As experimental archeology scholar J. Reynolds has laid out in his main points for a successful project, the tools are just as important to the results of the project as the final product itself. First, this chapter begins with a discussion of Dress 2829's temporal period, showing how the reality of clothing and the objects presented in fashion plates were often very different and why that might be so. The second section explains what undergarments women wore. While 1875 to 1885 is considered the "Natural Form" period, in which clothing tended to reflect a woman's actual body without hoopskirts or large bustles, women wore about six undergarments which shaped the body. These garments physically protected the dress and the body, but also were necessary for a woman to "be respectable." A discussion of what inspired women and the fabric that they selected shows a desire for beauty. Finally, information about general stores and female purchasing habits indicate that women were consumers in their own right and sought out Victorian middle-class values through their spending habits.

In the end, these pieces continue the larger story of desire not only for respectability but also for beauty. Women on the frontier wanted to be respectable people and achieved this through pursuing fashion, wearing the proper undergarments, and purchasing certain goods, seeking out beautiful garments and goods which they cared for and preserved, all of which signaled to themselves and others that they were no different from women in the East.

Time Period for Dress 2829

To accurately understand this garment, it was important to first determine a probable date of creation. Few garments retain their provenance, and Dress 2829 is no exception. The exhibit

label states 1875 to 1880, which curators likely wrote with the assistance of Laurel Wilson, a professor of textiles and independent contractor who the museum hired to assess the Grandee collection, per the donation agreement. To determine the age of the garment, I looked for specific stylistic benchmarks which are present in garments of the period that have sufficient provenance to correctly date them. First, Dress 2829 is cut in a popular style called the princess bodice, which featured a bodice and skirt cut in one long piece without a waist seam. The dress achieved its shape through darts in the front and the seams in the back. These styles clung close to the body and were intended to show off the woman's figure.[154] Princess style dresses were firmly established by 1876 and highly popular throughout this period.[155] This period was also known as the Natural Form Period, where garments were more formfitting than in previous or subsequent periods, and showed off more of the woman's figure, even though she still wore several undergarments.

The small bustle allows for a more accurate date for Dress 2829. While bustles were incredibly popular throughout this period, their size and the undergarments women wore to achieve that style varied. In 1876, people still wore bustles under their dresses but that was quickly falling out of favor during the Natural Form Period by the end of the 1870s until about 1885. During this period women wore a small bustle pad or very small bustle cage. The large bustle cage reappeared after 1884.[156] With the style of dress and the size of the bustle, we can firmly place Dress 2829 within this ten year span. Though it may be possible from other stylistic elements, such as the skirt and sleeve length, to shrink these dates by several more years, lack of provenance makes this difficult.

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[154] Anita Stamper and Jill Condra, *Clothing Through American History: The Civil War through the Gilded Age, 1861-1899* (Denver: Greenwood Press, 2011), 278.

[155] Lydia Edwards, *How to Read a Dress: A Guide to Changing Fashion from the 16th to the 20th Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 103 and 105.

[156] Edwards, *How to Read a Dress*, 103, 105, and 108; Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 273.

In the initial stages of this project, it was difficult to place Dress 2829 in one singular decade as it seemed to fit into multiple, often contradictory short-term stylistic periods. Fashion plates or fashion magazines and the garments held in world-famous museums give the impression that real garments fit neatly into the yearly style categories they show, thereby making objects easy to date. Yet, few dresses are like this. There are a number of potential reasons for this, all of which are important to understanding how stylistic trends play out in reality. The first possible solution is that Dress 2829 was remade, and the maker kept some older stylistic elements while incorporating newer elements. This is difficult to assess. Though remaking was pervasive across the vast majority of classes during this period, it was impossible to make that distinction with Dress 2829 without examining the interior. The other dresses in the Grandee collection from the same period did not show any significant 19th century alterations. As the reconstruction project shows, this dress is also incredibly unique. The longer side panels are not necessarily common and while the size of the bustle was accurate to the time period, I did not find a similar bustle elsewhere. The front is particularly ornate with pleats, rouching, and lace. Collars were present in this period, but the specific smaller size of this collar is also unique to this dress. These ideas, the bias of highly fashionable dresses preserved in larger museums; the false ideal of fashion plates, which were essentially idealize fashion magazines; and the maker's application of stylistic benchmarks provide a mistaken idea that this dress does not "fit" in any temporal category.

There is an inherent bias in larger museums and books which use objects from those museums. Just as there is bias in the sources that this project uses, there are biases in those collections. The key difference here is a bias in provenance; that is, which garments have provenance and which do not. Garments which retain their provenance over long periods of time typically had something special about them when they were first created. They might have been a

special occasion dress, or may have belonged to someone of notable status.[157] Provenance is usually a result of people who have the money to make dresses with the prettiest fabric and nicest materials. Upon their creation these garments are clearly valuable and the owners are likely to keep them as well as record exactly when they made the garment and wore it.

Museums with enough funds can acquire these materials and then make them more accessible to the public via online collection databases or exhibition catalogs. Museums specifically related to fashion or particularly well-known for their fashion exhibitions can afford to be choosy, only keeping or purchasing objects with provenance. For instance, the Fashion Museum in Bath has over 300 donations per year, allowing curators to be particularly selective when choosing garments to accession.[158] Fashion exhibitions at The Met or the Victoria and Albert are results of donations from fashion collectors, and many of their exhibits reflect the "ideal consumer," a woman who formed her identity around being fashionable or had a lot of clothes.[159]

Of course, this is not to say that these dresses are invaluable. Quite the opposite is true.[160] Lack of provenance in no way means that a garment does not contribute to researcher's understanding about the past or provide valuable insights. Aside from the sheer pleasure of looking at garments without provenance, they provide researchers a standard to compare other higher-fashion garments against and show how non-elites applied fashionable ideals. Dress 2829 is a prime example of this. Dress is most likely belonged to a woman of means; the pleats, laces,

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[157] *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking,* ed. Barbara Burman, (New York: Berg, 1999), 171.

[158] Rosemary Harden, "From Museum of Costume to Fashion Museum: The Case of the Fashion Museum in Bath," in *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice*, ed by Marie Riegels Melchior and Birgitta Svensson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 131.

[159] Petrov, Julia. "Gender Considerations in Fashion History Exhibitions," in *Fashion and Museums,* 82.

[160] Excepting fashion designer collections. These are a waste of space, only serve to make the fashion designer "credible," and do not reflect the reality of clothes the average person wears. In the future, these collections will take up valuable, limited resources and keep museums from accepting clothing that will actually help historians and connect with future visitors.

rouches, and the fabric indicate that it was very likely the wearer had the money to purchase those luxury goods and time to maintain them. But though Dress 2829 is fashionable, it also reflects the fact that even people who could afford these fabrics often did not follow fashion plates to the letter. This brings us to the final point, the application of stylistic benchmarks.

Like garments in museums like The Met, The Fashion Museum at Bath, and others, fashion plates and magazines provide a good idea of a period's styles, but the reality is different from the ideal. The majority of women were rarely able to keep up with the latest fashions. These fashion plates, released nearly every month, were carriers of the latest fashions and were made with sumptuous, highly expensive materials. This was unrealistic for most women, as outlined in the previous chapter. First, even those who were relatively well-to-do most likely did not have the finances nor time to so completely and often make new garments or remake their current garments.[161] It was more realistic to keep one's accessories updated, such as retrimming a hat or making a purse, than to completely remake a dress, but even updating accessories could become unrealistic quickly. A second point is that though minor details of the dresses might change, the overall silhouette and major details, such as popular styles (i.e., the princess dress or general fabric styles), did not change overnight. In reality, the January 1878 and the December 1878 *Delineator* magazines were not wildly different in their overall styles. This should, though, make it relatively easy to date Dress 2829, rather than make it harder.

This dating difficulty arises because making one's own dress provided — forgive the pun — a "wild west" of how the maker could apply popular styles. Especially on the frontier, women could not remake their clothes on every whim. Those tied to farming and ranching usually had limited expendable cash and time, both of which prevented them from following the ideal to the

[161] Jennifer Farley-Gordon and Colleen Hill, *Sustainable Fashion: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 2.

letter. Most importantly though, makers in both the East and the West were not bound by fashion plate conventions; high fashion was always more of a suggestion than a hard and fast rule. Makers could take multiple fashion elements they liked and put them in the same dress; then the wearer could wear the item long past when it was exactly fashionable. One could wear garments that were of the latest fashion a few years earlier, but were still acceptable several years later.

Though dresses without provenance can be slightly more difficult to date because they do not appear to fit neatly, they are still products of their environs and more realistic than the infinitely fashionable garments. Though it was initially difficult to date Dress 2829, through this experimental archeology project and continuously reexamining the source material when reconstruction questions arose, it became apparent that Dress 2829 truly was from 1875 to 1885. This discussion of dates shows the difference between real garments and fashion plates, but also indicates that frontier women, despite limited resources, wanted to make and wear fashionable clothing.

Silhouette

The silhouette is the most important portion of the garment. No matter how well designed the outer garments and accessories are, foundations make the dress look "historically accurate" as undergarments mold the body into the proper "shape" of the period. An apt analogy is that the undergarments are the cake while the dress is the frosting and decoration. In Chapter One, this work discussed the importance of corsets in the Victorian period and their presence on the frontier. This chapter will discuss the rest of the undergarments. From 1875 to 1885, though the outer clothes varied, the overall popular silhouette was the natural figure with at least a small bustle. Despite more or less following the natural figure, undergarments were still necessary to shape the body and create a fashionable ideal. Six individual undergarments achieved this goal:

the chemise, drawers, stockings, corset, corset cover, and petticoat. Women wore these items not only to protect the garment from body oils and sweat and to protect their body from chafing, but also to be respectable in appearance.

Chemise and Drawers

The first garments were the chemise and drawers. Their primary goal was to protect the skin from rubbing and chafing under the corset and to protect the outer garments from sweat and body oils. These garments were typically made of cotton and were white, which allowed them to be easily bleached by boiling.[162] The chemise was sleeveless and reached to the knees. One garment in the Grandee collection shows the importance of chemises, as there are clear sweat stains where the chemise did not reach (Figure 8).[163] In keeping with the form-fitting style of the period, the undergarments had less fabric than in previous decades. Chemises of the 1860s and earlier were made with a large amount of fabric gathered and attached to a neckband that sat across the shoulders.[164] Chemises of the 1870s and 1880s were made with less fabric and shaped via darts, gores, and pleats to fit the woman in an effort to reduce bulk under the outer garments.[165] Drawers were made of the same materials as the chemise.[166] The fabric was gathered at the waist and attached to a waistband which closed with buttons or hooks and eyes. They were split down the middle to allow women to urinate without removing their copious layers of

[162] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 150-152.
[163] Object 91.1.2831, The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
[164] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 114.
[165] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 282.
[166] "Clothing and Furnishings," by *Lord and Taylor, 1881*, from American Historical Catalog Collection (Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1971), 104-105.

clothing. As dresses became more form fitting, the drawers came to the knee.[167] These garments, though unseen by the world, were often rather decorative.[168]

Figure 12, the interior of Object 91.1.2831 which exhibits sweat stains.

Object 91.1.2831, The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Second were the stockings, usually made of cotton or silk which ended above the knee and were held in place with an elastic garter.[169] An 1881 Lord and Taylor catalog does list a number of decorated stockings, usually with ribbing in the knitting or a bit of clocking (a woven decoration), around the ankle, in a variety of colors. The plain colored stockings and ribbed

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[167] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 283.
[168] Lord and Taylor, 102-106 and Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 282.
[169] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 281.

stockings were both listed at fifty-five cents, whereas the ribbed and clocked stockings of the same size were listed at a dollar and thirty cents, well over twice the price of the plain cotton stockings.[170] It is a reasonable assumption that many farmers and ranchers on the frontier might be constrained by their finances as to what they could purchase and might not be able to afford the special stockings.

For this project, I created an extremely simple chemise that comes to the knees and is sleeveless. The seams are unfinished, and there is a small pleat in the front to properly size it, along with two darts in the front reaching from the apex of the bust to the top of the hip. The garment remains undecorated. I used a pair of drawers from a previous project which split down the middle and come to below the knee. I also have a pair of white cotton stockings which I bought some time ago and serve well for all decades.

Corset

Women wore corsets over the chemise, drawers, and stockings. The princess line and close fitting dresses of the 1870s and 1880s necessitated corsets that were longer and provided more shaping to the lower abdomen to create a smooth line. In the 1860s, waistlines tended to be at the natural waist, and the large skirts ballooned out from there.[171] In this instance, however, dresses fit over the hips, requiring a flat stomach and hipline. Corsets of this period went down over the hips, ensuring a smooth form for the princess style.[172] Corsets marginally reduced the size of the waist and moved the body mass up and down to the chest and hips; the shape was then

[170] Lord and Taylor, 68 and 69.
[171] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 88.
[172] C. Willet and Phillis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 179-180 and Lord and Taylor, 119.

augmented by the location of decorations which further emphasized the parts of the body of the period.[173]

There are a multiplicity of reasons for why the corset achieves its goal of shaping the body. It is not the boning and busk that allow corsets to shape the body but the pattern itself. Rather than straight pieces of fabric which are then sewn together and cinched down with boning, the pattern pieces fit the natural curves of the body but also subtly shaped it (see Figure 9 for an example). The second shaping mechanism was the coutil, a very stiff fabric. This helped to hold the body in shape and shift the body mass around.[174] Only after the pattern and the fabric did the boning and busk shape the body. As the supply of whalebone dwindled, it became increasingly expensive, and manufacturers shifted to using metal boning.[175] Special to this period were spoon busks, which curved and became thicker at the base of the corset, appearing like a spoon.[176] Spoon busks helped to achieve the smooth line wearers needed for their garments. Corsets were made in a variety of colors and had some decoration in the form of a bit of lace, bows, or flossing, a bit of thick thread over the edges of the boning to reinforce where the sharp ends of the boning might wear a hole in the fabric.[177] Over the corset was a corset cover, and much like the rest of the undergarments from this period, it was often made of the same materials, same style, and same decoration.[178]

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[173] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 285.
[174] Lord and Taylor, 120-121.
[175] Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 48.
[176] Steele, *The Corset*, 46.
[177] Steele, *The Corset*, 39.
[178] Lord and Taylor, 112.

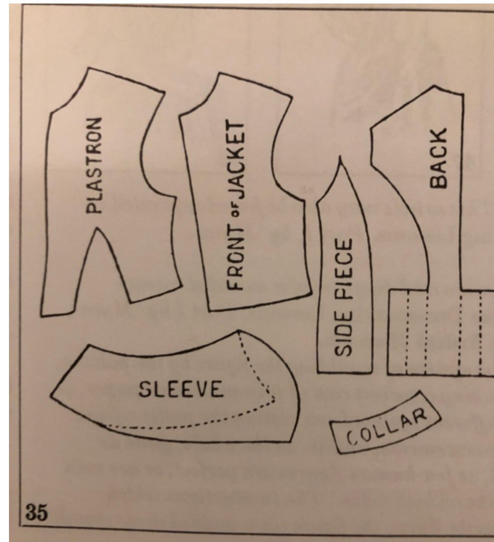
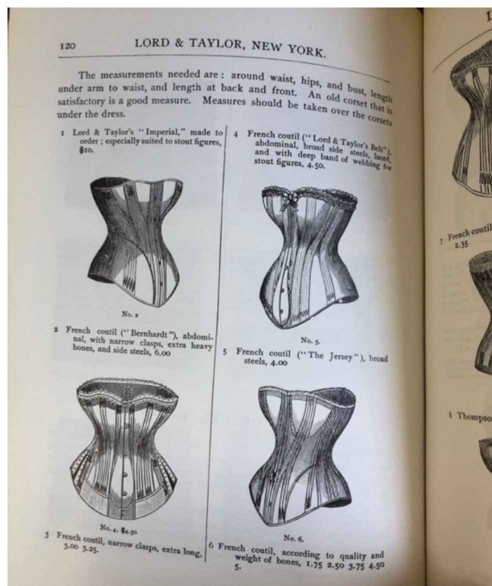


Figure 13. Note the curves on all of the pieces. These provided the shaping for garments.

Janet Arnold, Patterns of Fashion 2, 1860-1940 (London: McMillian, 1977), 9.



120 LORD & TAYLOR, NEW YORK.

The measurements needed are: around waist, hips, and bust, length under arm to waist, and length at back and front. An old corset that is satisfactory is a good measure. Measures should be taken over the corsets under the dress.

1 Lord & Taylor's "Imperial," made to order; especially suited to stout figures, $10.

No. 2

2 French coutil ("Bernhardt"), abdominal, with narrow clasps, extra heavy bones, and side steels, 6.00

No. 4. $4.50

3 French coutil, narrow clasps, extra long, 3.00 3.25.

4 French coutil ("Lord & Taylor's Belt"), abdominal, broad side steels, laced, and with deep band of webbing for stout figures, 4.50.

No. 5.

5 French coutil ("The Jersey"), broad steels, 4.00

No. 6.

6 French coutil, according to quality and weight of bones, 1.75 2.50 3.75 4.50 5.

Figure 14, Corset Selection from the 1881 *Lord and Taylor Magazine*, 120.

Women could make or purchase a corset. Magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* published patterns and women tailors published books related to the making of these items.[179] Specialized stay and corset makers had existed for many centuries, due to the difficulty in cutting the baleen and the strength required to insert it into the small boning channels.[180] This trade continued well into the nineteenth-century and the increase in factory made clothing during the latter half of the nineteenth-century resulted in relatively inexpensive corsets.[181] Even in this period where factory and mass made clothing for women was still looked down upon in most cases, the number of advertisements and patents for better-fitting corsets indicate that purchasing corsets was common.[182] The 1881 *Lord and Taylor* magazine listed numerous corsets for sale, many for a reasonable price, ranging from a dollar and fifteen cents to six dollars.[183] Nebraska pioneer Luna Kellie's memoir also notes that one of her neighbors was a corset sales-woman and continued her business after its initial failure in the East. The neighbor had moved to Nebraska for a fresh start, just as the Kellie family had, and continued the corset business there.[184] This also seems to indicate that the job, though very much a side business, was viable in this location.

For this project, my corset tends towards a more 1860s silhouette, as I utilized a Martha McCain Simplicity pattern designed for the 1860s.[185] Regardless, the fit is still similar enough to be usable for this decade. It extends well over the hips and the top ends at the apex of the bust, creating a clean silhouette that allows for a smooth line over the hip and accentuates the waist. While spoon busks were more common, they were not universal, and this corset follows that

[179] Steele, *The Corset*, 39-40.
[180] Steele, *The Corset*, 16.
[181] Steele, *The Corset*, 46.
[182] Steele, *The Corset*, 43; Lord and Taylor, 120-124; *The Delineator*, November 1878, 262; and *The Delineator*, December 1878, 312.
[183] Lord and Taylor, 120-124.
[184] Luna Kellie, *Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, RG3914.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, 77.
[185] "1139 with The Fashion Historian," Simplicity and Martha McCain.

trend.[186] It is made of green duck canvas with metal boning at six places. The boning in this garment is steel pieces created for that purpose.

Bustle Pad

Women wore a bustle pad or cage. The size and shape of this garment depended on the year's fashions and one's access to goods. For more fashionable dresses early in the 1870s, the bustle could be quite large, requiring an entire cage.[187] As the decade progressed, women forwent the cage for a smaller horsehair pad or wire cage (Figures 11 and 12). Three kinds of these items are held in the NCWHM collection and were indeed rather small. Item 81.21.15 was made of horsehair and less than half an inch thick. It was pleated and tied around the waist with a tape. One other item, 81.21.4- was a wire gage about three inches thick with a waist tape that buckled in the front.[188] These items varied by thickness but were not the incredibly large bustles women wore before and after 1875-1885. In her original memoir which she wrote for her daughter and now published under the title *Pioneer Girl*, Laura Ingalls Wilder recalled walking to school the first fall that bustles (called hoops in her manuscript) were back in style shortly after 1885. The Dakota wind would make the girl's bustles and skirts slowly creep up to their knees. After walking for a bit, the girls would twirl around to let the skirts and hoops fall back down.[189]

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[186] Lord and Taylor, 120.

[187] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 279.

[188] Objects 81.21.15 and 81.21.4-, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

[189] Laura Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, ed. Pamela Smith-Hill (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society, 2014), 290.

Figures 15 and 16, bustles

Objects 81.21.15 and 81.21.4-, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

For this portion of the dress, I created a feather pouffe to achieve the same effect. I created a bag and filled it with feathers from a pillow. Due to the bulk of the fabric on Dress 2829, I was under the impression that a large bustle was worn under the dress. However, upon trying on the reconstruction dress with the large amount of feathers, the bustle filled out the seams of the overdress and prevented me from looping up the fabric in such a way as to achieve the original look on Dress 2829. This also inhibited the fit of the dress, pulling on the sides to create wrinkles at the side seam. As I began to fit the front of the garment, I removed the bustle, and the wrinkles disappeared. After reexamining the garments and sources, I was led to believe that a smaller bustle was necessary and most of the bulk was achieved through looping up the

fabric in the back. Though the bustle appeared large, it was not nearly as large as I had thought it was. This experiment suggested that Dress 2829 truly did belong between the years 1875 to 1885, the years in which many women only wore small bustle pads or cages.

Petticoat

Over the bustle was a petticoat which helped give volume to the dress. In the Gilded Age, women wore about one petticoat as the garments were intended to be more form-fitting. In previous periods, multiple petticoats were needed to create the correct shape and add volume.[190] However, these petticoats could be complex, with many ruffles and starching, allowing a single petticoat to sufficiently give the proper shape to the dresses.[191] I wear a single petticoat for this garment.

Inspiration and Patterns

The methods for deciding what to wear were important to women in 1875 to 1885. Inspiration from clothing came primarily from fashion magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Harper's Bazar*, or *The Delineator*. These magazines included full length plates of models wearing fashionable clothing with incredibly ornate decorations. Intense descriptions followed these images. While the descriptions primarily focused on the materials that made up a garment and how they looked, occasionally construction details were included.[192] Luna Kellie recalled her aunt mailing a copy of *Harper's Bazaar*, allowing Kellie to see some of the newer styles.[193] Not

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[190] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 285.
[191] Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 177.
[192] *The Delineator*, E. Butterick and Co. November 1878, 209.
[193] Kellie, 55.

every woman purchased her own magazine and neighbors often shared with each other.[194] The magazine connected women on the frontier to the most popular American and European styles. Though the magazine may have taken longer to arrive on the frontier than it did in the East, the frontier was not without fashion.

Women also gained inspiration from the people who visited them. Both Kellie and Ingalls-Wilder noted new arrivals on the frontier, especially those who had excellent taste in clothing. The story of Kellie's first arrival in Nebraska, mentioned in chapter one, shows that though she was poor upon her entry into the community, her arrival from a non-frontier location meant that she was more fashionable than anyone else.[195] Later in her writing, she mentions that a visitor to the community dressed much better than anyone else there.[196] Ingalls-Wilder recalled the general consensus that Eliza Jane Wilder, who would become her sister-in-law, was a highly fashionable woman with very nice dresses.[197] Newcomers, especially those with style, were notable on the frontier. Women tried to be fashionable, and did pursue nice clothing, as I have repeatedly argued. But, the geographical constraints of the frontier could inhibit fashion, contributing to the idea of "the frontier look."

Most of the garments shown in fashion magazines were, for the most part, far and away out of the budget of the women who read them. The vast majority of women could not afford to remake their dresses several times a year, but even late-arriving magazines still helped them to remain knowledgeable about the latest fashions and provided inspiration to recreate their garments whenever they could and wanted to. Magazines, etiquette manuals, and sewing handbooks all implored women to be thrifty through remaking their garments and often discussed practical ideas for reconstructing and remaking dresses.[198] It is not possible to know how many

[194] Kellie, 71.
[195] Kellie, 13.
[196] Kellie, 52.
[197] Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, 242.
[198] *The Delineator*, November 1878, 215; Farley-Gordon and Hill, *Sustainable Fashion*, 9.

women read these magazines on a regular basis, but their continued publication indicates it was economically advantageous to maintain the business.

As women began to construct these garments, they needed patterns to do so. In this early settlement period, army wives like Elizabeth Custer had to create their own patterns. Army wives without the basic knowledge of sewing struggled even more with making patterns. Entertainingly, at least for modern readers, these wives recalled the fruits of their labor, specifically some dresses that looked "something like a bag."[199]

The period of 1875 to 1885 was a moment of change when commercial paper patterns assisted women in creating their own garments. Paper patterns became readily available through catalogs and magazines.[200] The E. Butterick Company, in addition to publishing *The Delineator*, also published patterns for the garments that were shown in the magazines.[201] Though these women at least had a pattern, these patterns typically came in one size, leaving the maker to figure out how to size them properly. More difficult than simply tracing the outline and making it smaller or bigger, in some places the shape needed to be slightly changed or altered, creating a potential nightmare if a woman did not know how to do so. In addition to making their own patterns, women would also borrow them from each other.[202]

The patterns for this project utilized an old McCall's pattern.[203] The garment followed the general idea of 1870s-1880s clothing. The skirt was highly decorative with rouching and pleating and gathering on the back for a bustle and the placket closed with hooks and eyes. The overdress came to slightly above the knees. There were at least three back seams, if not more: one back

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[199] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 132.

[200] *The Delineator*, May 1878, 242 and January 1878, 49.

[201] Joy Spanabel Emery, "Dreams on Paper: A Story of the Commercial Pattern Industry," in *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman (New York: Berg, 1999), 242.

[202] Kellie, 71.

[203]"M8189," McCall's Costumes and Angela Clayton.

seam, two side seams. There was a side seam on each side under the arm pit, then four darts in the front coming to the apex of the bust. The collar came to the collarbone and above with a neckband. The sleeves were three quarters length like those on Dress 2829. The pattern had four back seams and two front darts but a round neckline. I made two mockups of this dress in size twelve. The side seams of Dress 2829 were further to the front of the bodice than the pattern and I moved them. I also lengthened the neckline of the dress to above the base of the neck for cutting down to size when the time arrived. After examining the garments in the NCWHM, I noticed that the shoulder seams were several inches off the center top of the shoulder. I made sure to correct this in the pattern as well.

Fabric

Silk, wool, and cotton were the most popular fabrics in the late 19th century, though linen was still used occasionally. Cotton is a useful fiber as it is relatively comfortable, easy to wash, and relatively cheap. Dyes hold relatively well, but the fiber burns easily. Wool insulates the body, even when wet and was useful especially for cold weather but could also be used for summer garments. Most importantly, wool is self-extinguishing, making it excellent for working around the kitchen or an open fire.[204] Linen was popular before the Industrial Revolution made cotton easier and cheaper to produce. Linen is incredibly strong and though it burns rapidly, it can suffer through higher temperatures.[205] Silks, from which Dress 2829 is made, are the least utilitarian of all of the materials. Though the strongest of all the natural fibers when dry, it loses fifteen to twenty percent of this property when wet. While highly absorbent, it does not conduct heat well and traps the wearer's heat. Silk takes dyes incredibly well, lending itself to incredibly vibrant dye colors.[206] Victorians greatly enjoyed fabrics with intense colors such as blue, green,

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[204] Rosalie Rosso-King, *Textile Identification, Conservation, and Preservation* (Park Ridge: New Jersey, Noyes Publications, 1985), 49 and 51.

[205] King, *Textile Identification*, 23 and 24.

[206] King, *Textile Identification*, 42.

orange, pink, and more.[207] Silk is difficult to launder and prone to breaking when wet, making it a highly impractical fabric.

Modern technological processes allowed for a numerous fabric types, though they were all made from the same four constituent materials. For instance, cotton could be used for a wide variety of garments, such as calico and gingham for workwear, but the same constituent material could be used for a lovely summer dress from muslin, gauze, or lawn.[208] While all were made from cotton, the type of weave and the quality of the material created a multiplicity of fabrics. Different weaves and quality of fibers could make fabric cheaper or more expensive. For silk cultivation, wild silk worms and domestic silk worms provide different qualities of silk; wild silk worms produce coarse, irregular filaments while domestic worms have finer filaments. The amount of chlorophyl that a silk worm ingests changes the color of the silk, and this color plays a part in silk grading. Waste or low-grade silk worm cocoons can still be used to create silks such as dupioni or spun silks.[209]

For more utilitarian dresses, cotton calico and gingham were popular fabrics and these were the quintessential prairie garb.[210] Calico, previously an expensive fabric, became increasingly popular towards the end of the century when printing processes advanced so much as to make it cheap.[211] Both were cotton but different in terms of how they looked. Calico was fabric with a design printed onto it, while gingham had a grid pattern woven into the fabric. This fabric was readily available in garrison stores at army forts, though there was a distinctive class difference in who bought these fabrics. Elizabeth Custer and her ilk did not care for these fabrics as they were associated with the lower classes and Native women, and she had the funds to

[207] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 274 and *Fashioned From Nature*, ed. Edwina Ehrman (London: Victorian and Albert Publishing, 2018), 79-80.
[208] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 275.
[209] King, *Textile Identification*, 42-43.
[210] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 276 and 309.
[211] Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), 69.

purchase better fabrics and pay the shipping costs. The women who joined spouses at army outposts were limited to these fabrics, and Native peoples exhibited interest in trading for these goods.[212] Both Laura Ingalls Wilder and Luna Kellie recalled wearing calico, even as their best dresses, and Ingalls recalled this being readily available in company stores.[213] As shown in the previous chapter, there is one image from the 1870s of the Ingalls sisters wearing gingham dresses.[214] Images from Kansas show women wearing patterned calico dresses.[215]

Silks were used in nicer garments during the summer and winter alike. Silks, wools, velvets and others were used in the winter.[216] Despite the expense and difficulty associated with silk, it remained a popular choice for fashionable clothing. The first chapter effectively argued that fashionable clothing, even silk clothing, was present on the frontier. Dress 2829 is made from a silk brocade. The fiber is silk, while brocade is a term that denotes how the fibers are woven together. Brocades have a pattern which is woven into the fabric and have a stiff hand with a medium weight, meaning the fabric is relatively stiff when held in the hand. Likewise, the skirt, though perhaps not accurate, was also made of silk.

Nearly every garment examined at the NCWHM was made from silk. It was very common to use a variety of colored and textured fabrics in the same garment and these garments carry out that trend. The main fabrics were silk taffeta, while makers used velvet trim, satin, lace, or moiré for decoration or the front panel. These bodices were ornate and did not show significant signs of wear-induced damage. The prevalence of silk garments in the collection indicates the value that makers and wearers placed on these garments. Silk was an investment and not

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[212] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 133 and Glenda Riley, *Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1815-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 190-192.

[213] Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, 45, 160, 174 and Kellie, 74.

[214] "Image of three oldest Ingalls sisters," 1879, *Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum*, Mansfield, Missouri.

[215] "Solomon Smith Residence, Saline, Kansas," Photograph. 1884. *Kansas Memory Project*, Topeka: Kansas, 312992, FK2.S1.75.S. and *A Family in front of their sod house, Thomas County, Kansas, 1885.* Photograph. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Memory*. 442417.

[216] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing Through American History*, 275.

something that people wore for everyday activities. It was special, and thus women sought to preserve it for special occasions. As women wore these garments less, they then had a much higher chance of not wearing out, surviving over time, and showing up en masse in museum collections. As such, museum collections are likely heavily biased towards garments that are not representative of everyday wear.

Object 91.1.4426 was made from wool and was by far the plainest dress in the Grandee collection. The dress was made from a black wool with a deep brown cotton flatlining. The construction methods follow the same format as the other garments, making the biggest difference between the garments their decorations and material. The dress, however, is cut in the polonaise style, with five seams in the back and the back of the skirt being looped up on a bustle. There is also a large bow on the bustle and some lace accentuating the sides. The wool suggests that the dress was less fancy and more utilitarian, however, the decorations might suggest that it was not really used for housework. Without provenance and more research, it is impossible to know.

Figure 17, Object 91.1.4426. National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Every garment examined for this project included flatlining. Flatlining is a lining sewn to each individual piece of the main fabric and basted together with a loose stitch. Then, the maker follows the sewing instructions normally. The flatlining helps provide structure and body to the garment. The flatlining fabric in these garments was made from a glazed cotton fabric, of which one side is polished to a high sheen. This is typically more durable and often much stiffer than regular cotton. The subtle sheen in the garments also indicates that the shiny side was showing. As mentioned earlier, the upper portion of garment 91.1.2831 exhibited signs of sweat stains, showing why flatlining was popular, as it caught the sweat stains and prevented it from ruining the exterior fashion fabric.[217]

[217] Object 91.1.2831, The National Cowboy and Western History Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

For this project, I elected to purchase a plain straw colored silk taffeta for the overdress. While there are companies who could have printed the pattern, it would have been polyester satin and not brocade. Both the polyester and unwoven material would have changed the final product. Printing is not the same as brocade and would have not given the project the same hand and feeling. Polyester silk is in no way the same as real silk. It does not feel the same, it does not drape the same and it does not work the same way. Additionally, polyester fabrics do not react well to ironing. Pressing seams open with an iron is incredibly important to give a project a clean, finished look and to help the object lay flat. The original garments are well pressed with flat seams that do not buckle. To maintain the integrity of the project, I felt that it was more instructive to use real silk. For the skirt, I elected to use a red silk taffeta, rather than the satin of the displayed garment. I could not find a plain red silk in the desired color, so I selected a ribbed silk taffeta, giving it a subtle texture. Likewise, I purchased a deep tan colored glazed cotton for the interior of the dress and skirt.

As mentioned in the introduction, it would have been impossible to use "historically accurate" fabrics. Silk, and all fibers for that matter, were grown and harvested, processed, and woven in ways most likely far different from today's manufacturing methods. There is no earthly way to recreate those conditions to make those fabrics. In lieu of this, I elected to use what I did have available from a seller who specializes in selling goods for historic costumes.

The fabrics women selected varied from highly utilitarian to rather impractical, and the decision of which material to use for a garment depended on the planned use of that object. The washability and price of cottons and wools made those better selections for work wear, while the issues that arose when using silk made it only practical for stylish clothing. Makers worked hard to balance necessities with desires and sometimes fabric selections achieved both. Calicos were useful but also pretty. The expense of silk and the difficulties in caring and laundering it made it a valuable commodity. A wearer of silk showed those around her that she was financially stable

and had expendable cash and time to purchase and care for a silk dress. Fabric choices, just as much as the style and decorations of the dress, sent an important message about the wearer.

Shopping

General stores played a valued role on the frontier. More research is needed to understand the place of shopping and consumerism on the Northern Great Plains from 1875 to 1885, but a few key pieces of evidence and secondary source research about other locations provides an excellent starting point. At these stores, women were consumers in their own right and the items that they purchased signaled respectability. As Linda English argues in her book *By All Accounts: General Stores and Community Life in Texas and Indian Territory*, many owners were self-made men and had deep ties to their community, and desired to help the community succeed.[218] The fortunes of general stores were also connected to the prosperity of the people they served. When crops were bad, families suffered and were unable to buy the goods they needed, and store owners suffered. Owners also saw themselves as purveyors of eastern values and culture, something many purchasers wanted. Rural Americans were not immune to desires for goods and respectability through their purchases. English argues that store ledgers indicate people sought out these goods, even on the frontier.[219]

Women with the army in the west were extremely limited in their shopping options, but class difference dictated what a women's options were. Garrison stores, stores supplied by the army, usually only carried calico, a relatively cheap, utilitarian fabric. For American women who were in the camp, this was all that they had to purchase. Native women could buy this fabric as

[218] Linda English, *By All Accounts: General Stores and Community Life in Texas and Indian Territory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 23-24.

[219] English, *By All Accounts*, 31-32.

well. Army officers' wives, such as Elizabeth Custer, however, were reticent to purchase these goods. Their standing in society precluded them from doing manual labor, and calico was associated with women who worked or Native women, who the army had come to order and restrict according to American standards.[220] Distaste for garrison fabrics and their monetary station in life allowed these women to send off for fabric or fashionable goods that they wanted. Nonetheless, shipping fees could be as much or more than the order itself.[221]

While families made many of the goods they consumed, such as food, clothing, and more, there were many items that they purchased from stores. Corsets and patterns were mentioned in earlier sections, while the reasons for women making their own clothing will come up in the next. But women by and large purchased the entirety of their clothing-making goods from general stores. Fabric was far cheaper to purchase as mechanized looms made fabric far cheaper and just as high quality as hand-made cloth. People purchased accessories, thread, ribbons, needles, shoes, and many other accoutrements here.[222]

Women were capable consumers, just as much as men were, and could readily be found in general stores.[223] Linda English notes that in locations where there was a relative male to female ratio, general store records reflected that ratio. Often women listed their purchases with their husband's name as well as their own. While English interprets this as women being subordinate to their husbands, in reality this indicates that families were simply sharing their resources, and putting all their purchases under one name made it easier to pay off at a later date.[224] Families of the past moved as a cohesive unit, at least that was the ideal, rather than having multiple financial accounts.

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[220] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 133.
[221] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 130-131.
[222] English, 83.
[223] English, *By All Accounts*, 80.
[224] English, *By All Accounts*, 83.

Wage labor and purchasing power were not limited to adults. After working making men's shirts in DeSmet at either age twelve or thirteen, Laura Ingalls-Wilder spent $2.56 of her $3.75 earnings to purchase four yards of calico, a steel thimble, cloth shoes, a charm, a plume, and half a yard of silk.[225] In previous years, the family had been rather impoverished with extremely limited funds. This is the first instance of even minor extravagance in her works. In *The Little House* novels, Laura used this purchase to help make Mary's school dress, as mentioned in Chapter One. The original memoir does not note if that was what Ingalls-Wilder used the purchase for, but Ingalls-Wilder did keep the receipt from the store, suggesting that she herself made the purchase and that it had been significant to her.

While railroads did not determine where towns cropped up, they often decided which towns survived and which did not.[226] The presence of a train station provided residents a way to more easily send their wares to market and to purchase needed goods. Both the Ingalls-Wilders in DeSmet and the Kellies near Hasting, Nebraska had trains near their homes.[227] These trains almost certainly were the way that towns received their goods, and as such provided not just the items needed to survive, but the items that signaled increased civilization on the frontier.

In some cases, the constraints of the farm and the distance from stores could prevent women from going and lack of money forced women to make-do with what they had. The closest store to the Kellie family was in Hastings, Nebraska.[228] Kellie began to sew garments for her first child out of clothes she had before her marriage, but was very worried about her baby crawling around in nothing but white, which would make more work for her. Moreover, white thread was

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[225] Ingalls-Wilder, Pioneer Girl, 240.

[226] Jacob K. Friefeld, Mikal Brotnov Eckstrom, and Richard Edwards, "African American Homesteader 'Colonies' in the Settling of the Great Plains," in *Great Plains Quarterly* 39, v. 1, 2019, 11-38, 15.

[227] Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, 174 and 185 and "Map of Adams County, Nebraska," The Kenyon Company (Lincoln: The Nebraska State Historical Society).

[228] "Map of Adams County, Nebraska," The Kenyon Company (Lincoln: The Nebraska State Historical Society).

too expensive so she began her project with black thread. Her step-mother eventually saw what Kellie was doing and gifted her some white thread.[229]

Again, more research is needed to provide a definitive and conclusive answer as to the role of general stores on the Northern Great Plains frontier during 1875 to 1885. It is clear that stores were necessary parts of life and that trains were the connecting factors between the frontier and the East. How gender played out, it seems, was also far more complicated than researchers have initially postulated.

Conclusion

Today, the towns surrounding Lake Pepin, Wisconsin are sleepy little retirement towns, filled with RVs during the summer months. The lake, which Laura and her family cross at the beginning of *Little House on the Prairie* on their way to Kansas, is the main attraction. On the lake are docks and in Pepin proper there is a little section cornered off for swimming. The beach is filled with rough pebbles and even in the summer the water is chilly. A small Laura Ingalls-Wilder museum is on the town's main street, and from it visitors can see the lake. A twenty-minute drive from the town is the Ingalls' homestead, with a reproduction cabin sitting on a little hill. The site is now surrounded by fields and there are only a few trees.

After visitors have had a chance to see the homestead site, stroll through Pepin, and visit the museum, they may decide to stop in the gift shop. There, like in all of the Ingalls-Wilder sites, the museum offers up chances for little girls to live out their pioneer-girl dreams through purchasing a bonnet or a dress. Made from various patterns of calico, these objects offer a highly tangible way to look like Laura. Just like the Laura in the stories and the Laura in real life,

[229] Kellie, 7 and 33.

visitors can peruse the calicos and select their own, then don their purchase and imagine living as a pioneer.

For these visitors, the clothing that Ingalls-Wilder wore is really nothing more than calico and a sunbonnet. Visitors do not find calico particularly beautiful and do not wear the proper undergarments under the dress, though they may be subjected to false notions about the painfulness of corsets. Regardless of visitor's stylized knowledge about clothing on the frontier, clothing played an important role. The pieces that went into women's clothing were important to them as a sign of respectability and a means of making themselves beautiful. Women pursued fashion, wore the proper undergarments, and were active consumers in their towns. The following chapter will discuss how women used the items they bought to make dresses, but as J. Reynolds notes, the tools people used were just as important as the final product itself.

CHAPTER IV

MAKING THE DRESS

Luna Kellie came to Nebraska for a new life. She and her husband, James, arrived in Nebraska in 1876 or 1877. Her father, stepmother, and younger siblings had emigrated from Wisconsin several years earlier, and though life was difficult there as well, they found promise in the land that they bought and their proximity to the railroad. Luna Kellie, between eighteen and nineteen, came on the train with her son. Life was not easy for the Kellie family either, and her memoir records sickness, poverty, miscarriages, the death of children, and depression. In the early years of their settlement in Nebraska, they faced poverty for some of their most basic necessities. Kellie recalled her inability to purchase new fabric to make baby clothes. She worried about remaking her white wedding clothes for a baby wont to crawl around in the dirt. After relegating herself to this reality, she discovered that white thread was too expensive and started the project with black thread.[230] Though her stepmother eventually saved her with a gift of the correct color thread, creating garments under these constraints was difficult.

In the end, Kellie's memoir ultimately records a hopeful story of her family's ascent from struggle to one of comfort and relative ease. The end of the memoir reads, "And our eggs brought us all we needed of clothes and groceries. All we needed I say for as we never went where fine clothes were needed new calico and gingham was all we cared for and it was fairly cheap."[231]

[230] Luna Kellie, *Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, RG3914.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, 33-34.
[231] Kellie, 78.

Within a decade of their arrival, the Kellies lived in relative ease and could purchase luxuries such as sheep, apple trees, and strawberry plants.[232] Yet, for their comfortable existence, they had had to make do many a time, even when it came to making their clothes. This chapter discusses the very practical, physical aspects of recreating Dress 2829 and explores the meaning behind the little details of clothing from this period, details which might not be knowable apart from this project. Just as the thread color of Kellie's baby garments very visibly showcased her poverty, the details of garments are equally instructive about the life of the wearer.

A number of realities become apparent here. First, a woman's class affected her ability to sew on the frontier. In a sense, the frontier served as the great equalizer in a woman's ability to achieve the idol of "respectability." While lower-class women could not afford nice clothes like upper-class women could, lower-class women likely knew how to sew and make well-fitting garments while upper-class women might not. Sewing machines complicated this picture, and while historians have debated the merit of these labor-saving devices, purchasing a sewing machine indicated that a family had some measure of financial stability. Sewing machines also show how communities developed on the frontier and people came together to ensure not just survival, but also community thriving. The skirt, overdress, and decorations on this garment indicate a desire for fashion and dedication to the finances and time management that those garments required. The gathering and pleats on the skirt, the length of the overdress, and the amount of lace required time and money to make. However, women's construction methods show that they sought to strike a balance between wearing fashionable clothing and making the most of and preserving their financial investment and labor.

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[232] Kellie, 85 and 91.

The Role of Sewing: Class and Sewing Knowledge

Women's clothing from 1875 to 1885 was almost entirely handmade, a reality which partially stemmed from the cult of domesticity and partially from ideas of respectability. This said, knowledge of sewing was not strictly necessary to being a good woman; clothes from a dressmaker certainly carried the same weight as making one's own clothes. Sewing machines, which were becoming popular during this period as well, were also acceptable because women used them in the home. Most clothing, but especially women's clothing, was made by hand in the 19th century. Men would begin to purchase factory made clothing in the 1890s, but ready-made women's clothing would not become popular until well-into the 20th century.[233] Some of the reasons why had to do with the anxieties of the late-Victorian period.

The 1870s and 1880s Gilded Age was a time of great change in America. Still reeling from the Civil War, increased urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and the Turnerian idea of a closed frontier contributed to an immense amount of fear and anxiety in Americans.[234] The lives and lifestyle they had known were changing and people sought ways to maintain a sense of normalcy. The cult of domesticity had an answer.

Women's handmade clothing was one way for women to maintain some sense of normalcy and preservation, but also show that a woman was respectable. As manners historian Alan Kasson notes, the details of a person's dress belied their character.[235] So too with the cut and fit of a woman's clothing. Factory clothing was considered expensive and poor quality and had a reputation for poor fit, whereas handmade clothing was supposed to be made to fit the wearer's body perfectly. It follows that ill-fitting clothing signaled that a woman did not have an important

[233] Rob Schorman, *Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 51.

[234] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 13, 53, 87, 102-103, 114, 149.

[235] John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 114.

female skill: sewing. It could also signal that the wearer had bought clothing from a magazine, meaning that she did not handle family finances well and did not value her husband's hard work in financially providing for her. A woman with ill-fitting clothing did not have time to properly clean herself or her children, meaning she was bad at time management skills and her only role in the world: caring for her family and herself.[236] Scholar Rob Schorman writes, "Popular women's magazines of the 1890s…agreed that sewing and custom-made clothing were closely linked to a social identity as a woman and mother."[237] Schorman's work focuses on the 1890s, a few years outside of the temporal span of 1875 to 1885. But the ethos and culture behind women's clothing, and obviously women's roles as reflected in clothing, were very similar. Since those living on the frontier were often terminally short on cash, "wasting" money on over-priced clothing could indicate she did not respect family financials.

Despite the necessity of home-made garments, sewing knowledge was not a given. It was socially acceptable for women who could afford to send their clothing orders to dressmakers. Scholars also note the prevalence of dressmakers on the frontier.[238] Of course, this cost more money than making clothing oneself. Dressmakers were relatively cheap, but the sources herein indicate that women did continue to make their own clothing. Moreover, if one arrived early enough, there were no dressmakers. Eliza Custer was one such person, who found that her lack of sewing knowledge was problematic. She and others like her had relied on dressmakers. Eliza Custer came to the frontier and as she was to remain there for the foreseeable future, it was necessary to make and remake one's clothes.[239] She wrote a letter to her parents lamenting that she had ignored their advice as a young girl and not learned how to sew, "I remember how you

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[236] Schorman, *Selling Style*, 45-46, 56, 69.
[237] Schorman, *Selling Style*, 46.
[238] Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 129.
[239] *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking,* ed. Barbara Burman, (New York: Berg, 1999), 130-131.

both wanted me to learn when I was at home, and I almost wished I had, when I found it took me such ages to do what ought to have been short work."[240] Now, it was her detriment. Thus, for women with financial means, knowledge of sewing was an option rather than a necessity. A woman's class directly influenced her ability to survive on the limited conditions of the frontier.

Women lower on the social ladder, such as Luna Kellie, Laura Ingalls, and Montana settler Bertha Anderson, all knew how to sew and knit before their arrival on the frontier. These women, their fortunes tied to the land from a young age, had always known how to make their own clothing. Unable to afford dressmakers, sewing was a necessity and a fact of life.[241] These women made, remade, and sold clothing. Kellie remade and repaired clothes on a regular basis, and even used her skills to bring in a bit of extra money. She and her husband hired a man to help with the harvest and he asked Luna to make him some work shirts, for which she charged him fifty cents.[242]

Ingalls-Wilder used her skills to work as a wage laborer making men's shirts at the age of fourteen. She wrote, "The mother-in-law made shirts as ordered from goods in the store and she needed help, so I sewed for her for 25 cents a day, slept with her in the attic and ate with them in the kitchen. Mrs. Clancy quarreled constantly with her son-in-law, so that at times was unpleasant."[243] The overlap between the necessity of wage work and the availability of that work for a young girl could be obviously a distasteful burden. Yet, Ingalls-Wilder's ability to sew saved her from buying clothing for herself and offered an opportunity to earn some much needed money.

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[240] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 132.

[241] Kellie, 59; Pioneer Girl, 185 and others; and Bertha Josephson-Anderson, "Excerpted Material from the Handwritten Autobiography of Mrs. Peter Anderson, Sr., Sidney, Montana," (Helena: Montana Historical Society), 3

[242] *Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, 59.

[243] Laura Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: An Annotated Biography*, ed. Pamela Smith-Hill, (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014), 237.

Scholars have noted that women's financial contributions through work or selling eggs and butter helped to preserve the family through difficult times.[244] Kellie and Anderson both sold eggs and dairy goods which made significant contributions to the family coffer and they used to purchase vital necessities.[245] Sewing was part and parcel of this. Thrift was the byword of a women's lot on the frontier and lower-class women, as reiterated throughout, were used to manual work and as such were at an advantage in terms of knowing how to survive in that space. While the cult of domesticity said a woman belonged in the home, and middle-class respectability necessitated women keep from working outside the home, through using her homemaking skills, a woman could find acceptable avenues for work.

A sewing manual published in 1886 by Emily G. Jones in London for middle and upper class women provides a glimpse into the role of sewing in women's lives. Jones begins with describing the current state of women's education which focuses on "intellectual improvements" that include the study of art, politics, and geology among others, has left off the study of sewing. Jones use of the word improvements shows that she approved of these advancements, though she lamented the gaps therein.[246] She notes why people might not want to sew. She agrees that hand sewing makes women (this is understood to be upper class women who can afford help or a dressmaker) feel poor. She writes, "What could be more contemptible than mere mechanical drudgery? What more revolting to the aesthetic mind than confronting poverty by darning the vulgar stocking?"[247] Women had been brought to a higher plane by studying art, music, and beauty, through education and as such found regular hand sewing a bane. However, the necessity of clothing reared its ugly head and the wants of fashion required knowledge of hand sewing.[248] Though the sewing machine

[244] Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, Homesteading the Plains Towards a New History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 130.

[245] Kellie, 78 and, "Autobiography of Mrs. Peter Anderson," 13-14.

[246] Emily G. Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework and Cutting-Out* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1886), 9.

[247] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 9.

[248] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 9-10.

had improved the speed of sewing, it did not solve all ills.[249] Likewise, Jones laments the common complaint of Eastern women that servants were not really a help if they did not have sewing skills themselves.[250]

Jones fronts the argument that hand sewing is necessary to be a good wife and mother. She writes in the preface that "How to Teach Plain Needlework and Cutting Out,' has been written in the earnest hope that, by its aid, a most valuable part of a woman's education may be so simply and effectuality taught, that the girls of the present may be fitted to become the thrifty, helpful, happy wives and mothers of the future."[251] In the frontier where there were no dressmakers and limited access to new clothing, making, remaking, and repairing one's clothing was key to a decent appearance. The ability to repair one's own clothing and stockings made one a helpful wife.

It was less common, but not unheard of for men to know how to sew. Bertha Anderson, an immigrant to Montana from Denmark, grew up well-versed in the care of sheep and turning their wool into garments. After her marriage, her and her husband, Peter, would knit together and she recalled that "he could knit as well as any woman."[252] Jones's sewing manual also states that boys were present in her school, and she expounds upon the benefits of teaching young boys to sew. As such, it was not unheard of for men to assist with knitting and sewing. For an unmarried man, especially on the frontier, this might even serve as a benefit. Many sources, though, indicate that most men did not know how to sew. While more extensive research could argue otherwise, Kellie's work, and Laura Ingalls' wage labor shows that lack of sewing knowledge was pervasive among males. The cult of domesticity did not preclude men knowing how to sew or occasionally assisting their wives with such tasks, but the cult of domesticity certainly made it clear that it was

[249] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 10.
[250] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 11.
[251] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* Preface.
[252] "Autobiography of Mrs. Peter Anderson," 3.

the woman who was to be the primary care giver in this area. While women like Eliza Custer might be more fashionable, more well-to-do, and have servants to assist them, the class of women like Kellie, Ingalls-Wilder, and Anderson gave them a distinct advantage in this new world.

Machine versus Hand Sewing

The presence or lack thereof of sewing machines added another layer to women's ability to sew on the frontier. Inventors had been trying vainly during the first half of the 19th century to create a workable sewing machine. Not until 1846 did Elias Howe patent a viable sewing machine, and the industry began to develop.[253] The machine quickly became popular for men's tailoring, women's undergarments such as crinolines and hoopskirts, and factory work.[254] A decade after Howe's patent, Isaac Singer made the first home-use machine in 1856, which made him into the premier sewing machine sales-man not just in the United States but across the world.[255] Historians have noted a special development in how Singer advertised these machines. Rather than focus on machine developments, offering "the latest and greatest," he explicitly marketed these as a means of domesticity and well-being, making it associated with home-work rather than factory work.[256]

Sewing machine sales soared by the 1890s and home sewing machine ownership seemed to become ubiquitous.[257] Increased industrialization of the Gilded Age translated to sewing machines as well and their increased affordability made wide-spread ownership possible. These

[253] Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), 74.
[254] Kidwell and Christman, *Suiting Everyone*, 77.
[255] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing,* 257.
[256] Burman, 257 and 260; Paula de la Cruz-Fernandez, "Marketing the Hearth: Ornamental Embroidery and the Building of a Multinational Sewing Machine Company," in *Enterprise and Society,* 15(3), 2014, 442-471, 443-444.
[257] Burman, *The Culture of Sewing,* 258.

machines also moved past basic features and increasingly included embroidery and decorative functions and add-ons. As Paula de la Cruz-Fernandez has outlined, from the beginning sewing machine inventors marketed sewing machines for home use. Initial cost made them prohibitively expensive for home use and many Americans saw the sewing machine and the shops that used them as taking advantage of women and their work corrupting them. Marketing sewing machines for home use made these objects socially acceptable.[258]

But though very useful, sewing machines were nowhere near ubiquitous from 1875 to 1885. It appears as though some women shared their machines with friends, as Luna Kellie's did with her. Kellie took her projects to her friend's house and sewed the long seams of her garments.[259] This is corroborated by the Grandee collection items. In these garments, the long seams of the bodice and sleeves are done by machine. There could be several reasons for this. First, long seams come first in sewing and would take up the most time to do by hand. After these seams, while there was much more sewing to be done, it required lots of little steps that might be inopportune to do at a friend's house. This will be explained a bit more during the skirt and overdress construction section, but in essence it is much more reasonable to only do these longer seams by machine.

This construction type is seen in a Grandee garment which was constructed by a sewing company.[260] After this, other parts of the garment could be sewn by machine if needed, but were not nearly as long nor time consuming as the seams and did not necessarily need to machine sewn. It is likely that the limited ability of some sewing machines contributed to how women could make their garments. More research is needed to determine the ability of period machines. Yet, some pieces of the garment simply had to be done by hand, regardless if the maker had a

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[258] De la Cruz-Fernandez, 443-444.
[259] Kellie, 71.
[260] Object 91.1.2531.

machine or not. Machines could not entirely alleviate the need for hand sewing, and some finishing needed hand sewing to make the garment nicer looking. This will be explained more in a later section.

Sharing sewing machines showcases the role of community in the success of new settler communities. Scholars have well noted how community or lack thereof directly contribute to a family's success or failure. Distance from stores necessitated help from those who resided close to a family, both in terms of sharing goods and work but also if emergencies occurred. Not only this, but living in community contributed to a family's mental well-being. While homesteading could be isolating, having friends or family nearby alleviated this distress. This was especially important for minority communities. Enclaves of settlers could cluster based on race, ethnicity, or shared languages.[261] Scholars have also shown that people began community building activities quickly after arrival, signaling a deep-felt need for it.[262] Sewing machine sharing was part and parcel of community building and caring for one's neighbors, knowing that they would return the favor at the next opportunity.

People could purchase machines from traveling sewing machine representatives, and later Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck magazines carried sewing machines.[263] Sewing machine ownership could signal that a family had made a turn in their fortunes. Many arrived on the frontier hoping for a new life, escaping from the woes that had followed them in their home country or in the East. Purchasing a sewing machine could indicate that the family had a firm enough financial footing to buy much wanted but unneeded items. Sewing machines could sell for a range of prices. Between thirty and sixty dollars was common, though they could go well

[261] Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 163-176.

[262] Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 174 and Julie Roy, *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 94.

[263] Riley, *The Female Frontier*, 91.

above one hundred dollars.[264] The Kellies spent forty dollars on a sewing machine for Luna, and this seems to have been a reasonable price.[265]

However, some historians have questioned if sewing machines truly saved labor. Certainly, machines did not negate the need for hand sewing. Particular among these historians is Ruth Schwartz Cowen and her 1985 work entitled *More Work for Mother: the Ironies of Household Help*, which argues that though home help items, such as sewing and washing machines, initially saved time, in the end they created more work for women as quality of living expectations increased.[266] Because of the “supposed” ease with which women could create clothing after sewing machines became ubiquitous, society expected women to create more and more clothing.

As Cowen’s argument has remained popular, the remainder of this section shall devote time to rebutting these ideas. First, Cowen’s methodologies and temporal span limited her from properly viewing changes over time. The book is divided into three stages of American history: pre-industrial, early stages of industrialization, and the twentieth-century. This fails to account for smaller changes over time. She compares the beginning of the 20th century to the end and argues

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[264] “The Easy Running Boston Sewing Machine,” Boston Sewing Machine Company, 1881-1888, models lists between $40 and $125; National Museum of American History, Archives Center. Warshaw. Box 1, Folder 4, 242; “Bill over $86 to Dennis P. Viper for two Wilson no.9 machines and attachments,” Wilson Sewing Machine Company, National Museum of American History, Archives Center. Warshaw. Box 4, Folder 29, 3455; “Flier advertising Wheeler and Wilson’s Sewing Machines numbers 6,7,8,” Wheeler and Wilson Manufacturing Company, 1878, machines listed between $30 and $60, National Museum of American History, Archives Center. Warshaw. Box 18, Folder 0, 2674; “Receipt of Victor Sewing Machine Company to Peters Jones over $37.50,” Victor Sewing Machine Company, 1876, National Museum of American History, Archives Center. Warshaw. Box 4, Folder 9, 3001; “Receipt to Peter Jones of Victor Sewing Machine Company over $42.50,” Victor Sewing Machine Company, National Museum of American History, Archives Center. Warshaw. Box 4, Folder 9, 3002; Tryber and Sweetland, Chicago Sewing Machine Company, 1879-1182. 819, Textile Collections, Box 1, Folder 0, listed between $35 and $50; Bartlett Sewing Machine Company, “Bartlett’s Reversible Sewing Machines are the Cheapest, Reliable, Licenses Machines.” Between 1870 and 1876, 798, listed at $25; Centennial Sewing Machine Company, “Centennial Sewing Machine/ New elastic lock stitch family sewing machine.” 1876, 806, listed at $40.

[265] Kellie, 71.

[266] Ruth Schwartz Cowen, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, (Basic Books, 1985), 13, 63-64, 101.

that the labor and time it took to purchase, make, and launder garments at the beginning of the century is roughly equal to the labor and time it took to purchase and launder garments in the 1980s.[267] Cowen argues that labor saving devices created more work for women because they have more clothes to wash and care for.

This is unequivocally false. Using this dress, as an example, it took me about one-hundred hours to make my reproduction of Dress 2829, not to mention the months spent researching and writing. More modern manufacturing does not change the reality that it takes longer to make clothing. Purchasing a simple shirt may take an hour if the buyer is particularly picky or does not know what they want when walking into the store. Making a comparable shirt would take at minimum two hours of time. This time frame only increases the more complex a garment is, but the time it takes to buy a more complexly made garment does not necessarily increase proportionally. People do certainly have more clothes in the 21st century, and this does come from the ease of purchasing clothing.

Though women from 1875 to 1885 did spend more time making clothes; once they had a sewing machine, a labor saving device, undoubtably some made clothes that they actually wanted rather than only what they needed. What is common among the memoirs and diaries surveyed for this project is that many families moved from poverty to financial stability, as Luna Kellie demonstrated in the introduction. New research has also shown that most families did not fail to prove up on their homestead claims, which could demonstrate that they had some measure of financial stability.[268] Likewise, Laura Ingalls Wilder recorded purchasing silks and decorative items after living in South Dakota for some time and spending time thinking about the latest fashions and styles.[269] Ella Lawrence's diary, from South Dakota, also notes her "fancy work."[270]

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[267] Schwartz Cowen, *More Work For Mother*, 151.
[268] Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains*, 33.
[269] Ingalls-Wilder, Pioneer Girl, 298.
[270] Ella Lawrence, *Ella Lawrence Diary*, 1879, South Dakota State Archives, Pierre, March 5.

Though heavily peppered with mending and less joyous forms of sewing, she still had time to create something she enjoyed. While these women may indeed have had to care for more clothing, this indicates a higher quality of life. Emily Jones briefly discusses ornamental stitching in her sewing manual and writes of their necessity, “But as soon as our necessities are supplied, the advance of civilisation and the desires for ornamentation appear to be synonymus [sic].”[271] The more and nicer clothes they had shows that the women had achieved some modicum of financial stability and their wardrobe no longer consisted of only work clothes. They had reason and desire to wear nicer clothing.

Below I have briefly calculated the generalized time it might take to purchase and launder garments in 2023. I have based the first two calculations on what would be the most work regarding modern clothing practices, such as spending a day shopping and doing laundry all at once. Because of the vast differences in laundry practices between 1875 and 2023 it is impossible to do a side by side comparison, but I have explained below the laundry process in the late nineteenth-century. While this data is not precise and more experimentation over a wide array of people would be needed to scientifically make these calculations, rather than detract from my argument, it only helps to bolster it as the purpose is to show alternate interpretations of Cowen’s argument.

[271] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 37.

Table 1: Laundry for a family of two, 2023

Item	**Time**
Gathering and sorting laundry for a family of two	15 minutes
Starting three loads of laundry in the washer:	15 minutes
Moving laundry to dryer:	15 minutes
Folding laundry and putting it away:	45 minutes
Total:	**90 minutes, bi-weekly**

To understand laundry between 1875 and 1885, consider the amount of clothing that each person wore in the late Victorian period. Women wore chemise, drawers, corset covers, stockings, petticoats, aprons, and dresses. Men wore undershirts and underpants, shirts, pants, and stockings. Washing clothing was a chore that took up most of a day and occurred about once a week. First, women had fetch water then soften the wash water with wood ash or quicklime several days before starting. Women sorted their clothing by color and soil level, then treated stains. For white garments, women soaked the cloths in cold water with soda or lime to bleach the garments, and for colored garments which had dyes that could fade over time they needed to add a mordant and wash the garments separately. To make the suds, women sliced their hand-made soap and put it in a small pot of boiling water and let it simmer until the water and soap became gelatinous. Then, they could begin washing. For white garments, women first rinsed the soda or lime water out, boiled the garments, washed the garments with the soap, and then rinsed the soap out with two to three tubs of clean water. Then, they dipped the garments in starch and let them dry. Bear in mind that most undergarments were white during this period, creating an immense amount of work. For colored garments, women washed them one at a time in warm water, not boiling so that it would not destroy the color, then followed a similar procedure to the white

garments.[272] Between the sheer amount of clothing that each person wore and the amount of labor that went into washing that clothing, it is unrealistic to argue that this is the same as doing laundry in the 21st century.

Cowen also bolsters the claim that men were unkind as they did not immediately front the money to purchase these labor-saving devices. But not purchasing these devices immediately ought not to be mistaken for cruelty. Particularly in the context of the frontier, this is ludicrous claim. There, and I have much belabored this point, most people did not have much expendable cash. Especially for farmers and ranchers, farming and ranching implements came first because that was the family's primary way of earning money. Without putting the proper investment into the project that actually brings in the bulk of the family's money, the project will fail. A modern rendition of this is readily apparent. While one may want a new stove or some such object which would indeed make one's life easier, if the car breaks and there is not enough money to purchase both a new car and a new stove, one must fix the object which directly impacts their ability to earn money. Here, the car. Without the car, one cannot go to work and earn money for a living.

In essence, sewing machines signaled shifts in garment construction practices and an increasing stability in family's fortunes. These machines may have both created more work for women and allowed for a higher quality of life in some respects. Sewing machines also were a large part of community building activities and how families cared for each other. Despite some historian's erroneous ideas, sewing machines can be seen as a wholesale good for female labor.

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[272] Joan Gregory Ritter and Betty L. Feather, "Practices, Procedures, and Attitudes Toward Clothing Maintenance: 1850-1860 and 1900-1910," in *Costume Society of America* 17 (1990): 156-168, 160-161.

Cutting

Emily Jones writes of the importance of proper cutting techniques. She states that only the poor person really needs to be cautious about wasting fabric, but that it is there in which she sees the most waste, perhaps contributing to the family's poverty.[273] Jones' contention was most likely inaccurate. The expense of clothing made attention to fabric usage common and even high-fashion magazines such as *The Delineator* acknowledged the reality of remaking clothing. Nonetheless, this statement has a ring of the cult of domesticity to it. If a woman was a proper woman, then her cutting techniques would show that she cared for her family; if it was not, then her incompetence (in Jones' eyes) could help impoverish the family.

Generally, Jones states, the selvedge should "go downwards, from neck to foot of the garment."[274] The selvedge of a garment is the finished edge of the fabric (See Figure 18). Fabric is woven in one continuous length and the selvedge is the taut end of the fabric on either side of the length or the end of the weaving length which is attached to the loom. The grain of the fabric, which way the threads run, follow the same direction as the selvedge. When cutting, aligning pieces with the grain makes the piece stronger and easier to sew. Cutting slightly off center of the grain, also called the bias, makes the fabric stretch and difficult to work with. Cutting on the grain is also the most economical option as cutting on the bias takes up more space. By instructing people to cut on the selvedge, Jones was both assisting people in making their sewing easier and learning how to save money in their endeavors.

[273] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 81.
[274] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 80.

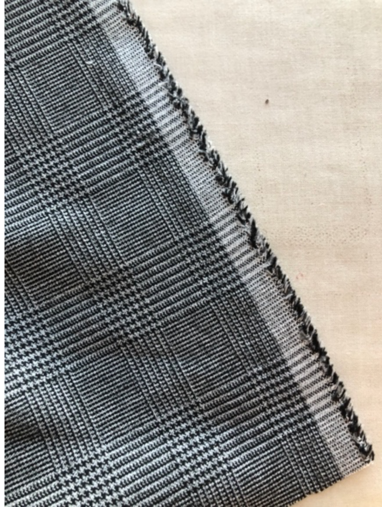

Figure 18, Selvedge. The selvedge is the white part. Photo by author.

Fabric widths differed from this period in comparison to modern fabric widths. Jones gives the example of calico widths, ranging from twenty-eight inches to forty inches wide whereas typical modern widths are about forty-five inches or fifty-six inches. Jones laments that many young girls did not know how to plan for a garment or even know the width of the fabric required, drawing a relationship between the amount needed and the garment one was making. As an example, she says it would be imprudent to buy twenty-eight inch width fabric for a man's shirt, or thirty-eight inch wide fabric for a child's shirt. Fitting the width of the fabric to the proportion of the person most likely allowed for minimal waste.[275] Jones also disliked calicos or uni-directional patterns, as they required more fabric to get all of the pattern pieces to match and required more care in the cutting.[276]

The reconstruction project was cut out following the directions in Jones. The garment pieces were rather long, over forty inches in some case. While with modern taffeta widths would have allowed me to cut out these pattern pieces width-wise rather than length-wise and still

[275] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 82.
[276] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 89.

follow the selvedge, I elected to cut out the pieces length-wise in an effort to follow Jones' instructions to the letter. Cutting length-wise also allowed me to cut out two of the same piece at once, rather than cutting out the two necessary pieces separately, thereby saving me time. To save space, fabric comes folded down the middle so that the width is folded over. Though a fabric may be fifty-six inches wide, folded in half it is twenty-eight inches wide. This fold leaves a distinct crease down the middle and the edges even, as well as the wrong sides of the fabric together. When cutting, it is best to leave the fabric folded as most garments use two of the same piece. (The pattern piece will be titled "Dress Front" with the instructions "Cut Two" written below). One pattern piece must be cut as a left side and the other as a right side, but if the fabric is left folded then the maker only needs to cut out the piece once but will still get a left and right piece. Unfolding the fabric length-wise only requires the maker to fold it width-wise again.

Thread

According to the garments examined, I sewed the seams of the garment with a machine with a Pfaff Ambition Essential, at a straight 2.5 stitch per inch rate (See Figure 16). Sewing machines use two threads. The upper thread and the bobbin thread loop together as the machine moves, creating stitches without any dead space in between them. Hand sewing on the other hand only uses one thread, leaving dead space between the stitches. This is the primary way to discern machine stitches from hand stitching, though certain hand-stitches do not leave dead space. Using a modern machine is a deviation from the second principle concerning tools that Reynolds requires. However, finding a period correct machine would have taken and enormous amount of time and resources that would have made this project difficult.

Figure 19, Seams of Garment. Note how there is no space between the straight stitches, indicating that this was done on a machine. Photo by author.

I used cotton thread in three colors: white, red to match the skirt, and tan to match the over dress. The 1881 *Lord and Taylor* magazine lists silk, cotton, and linen thread. Silk thread was used for button hole finishing and embroidery, while it appears that cotton and linen thread could be used for basic projects interchangeably.[277] Other sources do not mention the fiber content of their thread, but occasionally the expense of one color of thread caused makers to use a color that did not match the color of the item they were sewing.[278] Jones discusses the importance of selecting the correct thread, but also the value of well-sewn seams. The thread must match the type of garment; in essence, makers must not use thick thread for finer projects, and they must not use linen to gain seam strength. Rather, excellent hand sewing provides the strength.[279]

The interior thread of the Grandee garments typically matched the project. The thread used for the seams matched the exterior color of the garment while the whipstitched threads matched the lining color, though one example did use yellow thread.[280] Initially, I used thread that

[277] "Clothing and Furnishings," by *Lord and Taylor, 1881*, from American Historical Catalog Collection (Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1971), 139.
[278] Kellie, 33.
[279] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 104.
[280] 91.1.2531; 91.1.2532; 91.1.4426; 91.1.2215; 91.1.283. Joe Grandee Collection, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

matched the outer color of the garment for the interior bits, but eventually turned towards white cotton thread, as it was cheaper to buy in bulk.

Skirt

Temporal Period of the Skirt

As much as this research assuaged any doubts as to Dress 2829's temporal period, the research indicated that the skirt displayed under the dress is most likely not from the 19th century. The skirt is made of a red satin which matches the shade of the accent fabric on the overdress, giving the impression that the two items are meant to go together. The skirt is quilted with large squares and at the bottom is a thin line of feathers, almost like a faux feather boa. Skirts were highly decorative in this period with pleats, draping, and rouching but no sources indicate that feathers or quilting were used in this period.

The photographs surveyed for this project do not feature any quilted skirts or feathers on skirts as décor. An image of two young girls standing on a Dakota street during the winter gives researchers a glimpse into winter wear on the frontier. The girls wear long coats which come to their knees or ankles. There are significant cuffs on the sleeves and large collars. Both wear scarves and gloves. They do not wear special winter hats, but there is very little snow on the ground which could mean that it was early or late in the winter season and not terribly cold.[281] These women, from Dakota Territory, lived in an environment which was incredibly cold many months out of the year. This image, while it does not show the garments they wore under the dress, does give some indication as to how women kept warm during the winter.

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[281] *No. 377 View of 3d street looking west from Walnut, 1881.* Photograph. Yankton, Dakota Territory. Stanley J Morrow Stereograph Collection (ST 003), Montana Historical Society, *Montana Memory Project*, ST 003.58.

Outside of the frontier, winter issues of *The Delineator* never show nor discuss quilting skirts as a means of keeping warm. In regards to warm winter fashions they suggest heavier fabrics and trims made from velvet.[282] Waterproof fabric was also available for purchase at this time, and the winter issues of the magazines are filled with mentions of muffs, hats, hoods, cloaks, and fur trimmed garments, as well as advice for women who wanted to participate in ice skating.[283] In lieu of a mention of quilted petticoats, it is most likely that the skirt is inaccurate.

Making the Skirt

For this project, however, I elected to make a skirt of my own design that followed designs outlined in *The Delineator* (See Figures 17-19). Skirts typically followed a rule of thirds. The top of the skirt was plain and usually had the overdress on it, meaning it did not need decoration. In the middle was some form of decoration, perhaps some draping, and the bottom often included some pleating. These are not hard and fast rules and there was much deviation in this idea, but skirts did tend to follow this form.[284] I used the McCall's pattern which matched the overdress.[285] This skirt was accurate to the time period and matched closely to many items in *The Delineator* and other images. The pattern came in three portions: the upper skirt (three individual pieces not including placket), the middle skirt (five individual pieces), and the lower pleat (two pieces). The upper portion was slightly curved at the top to provide some shaping across the hips, as the waistband sits at the natural waist. The middle portion of the skirt was ruched or shirred and the lower portion was made of an upper hem and lower hem, with instructions to pleat the upper hem.

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[282] *The Delineator*, November 1878, 244-24.
[283] *The Delineator*, January 1878, 5-12, 21, and 46.
[284] *The Delineator*, January 1878, December 1878, November 1878, May 1878, and April 1883.
[285] McCall's, 8191, Angela Clayton.

Figures 20, 21, and 22. Images from The May 1883 *Delineator*.

First I flatlined the pieces to give body and structure to the garment. For the middle section, initially I sewed all of the pieces together. I pressed the seams with half of the seam allowance going to each side, as evidenced in the original garments. Then, I finished the seams with a whip stitch. Silk taffeta shreds very easily, needing a finishing. Finishing the seams means cutting them or sewing them in such a way as to keep the fabric from shredding and becoming incredibly messy and unsightly, thereby preserving the fabric, as it was expensive, and if the dress fabric needed to be reused later.

There are a number of way to finish a seam, but the two present in the collection were either with pinking shears or whip stitching.[286] Pinking shears are scissors with a scalloped pattern, which provides enough of a pattern to keep the fabric in manageable condition. Whip stitching is more laborious, but was the more common in the collection (though this could easily be selection bias). A whip stitch essentially goes around the edge of the fabric in a circular motion (See Figure

[286] 91.1.2531; 91.1.2532; 91.1.4426; 91.1.2215; 91.1.2219, Grandee, NCWHM.

20). This is done by hand. As most of the garments which I examined were whip stitched I elected to do this. This was partly due to most of the garments being whipstitched and partly because I forgot that one garment had sheared seams until I was most of the way done. It was also incredibly difficult to use the pinking shears, as the variegated pattern makes it difficult to cut and there is a large amount of fabric to cut through. These realities may have also contributed to the amount of whipstitching rather than sheared seams.

Figure 23, Whipstitch. The Whipstitch goes around the edges of the seams (here, it is the slanted stitch). Photo by author.

These pieces were rouched, which is essentially rows of gathering stitches. I made five long gathering stitches across the length of the pieces, now sewn together to make one piece, then tried to pull up the gathering stitches to rouch the garment. However, the thickness of the taffeta when combined with the flatlining caused the thread to break in several places. Modern sewing manuals recommend making several gathering stitches rows in case one breaks, however, the visible nature of this rouching mean that only one thread should be visible. With one thread, if the thread broke then I would have to re-do that entire seam. As it happened, the thread broke in every single seam especially when it went over the joins in the fabric where the thread had to go through four layers of fabric, rather than just two. Even if I managed to keep the thread from

breaking, it was incredibly difficult to make the gather evenly spaced across the entirety of the piece. Since there was no way to effectively move the gathers to the middle, the sides were incredibly gathered while the middle was not. After several attempts at redoing the rouching, I decided to unpick my seams and sew rouching stitches for each of the five sections individually, then join the pieces together again, matching the rouching stitches to give the appearance of one continuous stitch. This turned out to be a much better solution, allowing for even gathering across the entirety of this segment.

For the final portion of the dress, I made pleats and an under hem. I cut the hem at a width of six inches and hemmed it with an inch and a half hem. These large hems were rather common, as it improves the drape of the garment on the body and allows for remaking at a later date. I sewed down the hem with a tiny whip stitch, as shown in the dresses. The hems were about an inch with tiny whip stitches that were hardly visible. The stitches in the reproduction were about six threads apart; I began by trying to make mine about four threads apart, in conjunction with the hemming seen in the Grandee collection, but they ended up being six threads apart. Jones recommends making a "v" with the stitches, wherein one side of the "v" is one the body of the fabric and the other on the hem.[287] In doing so, I found that this allowed for a sturdier hem. I did not add a flatlining to this portion as I felt it would make the pleats too heavy and difficult to keep their shape.

I also attached red wool braid on the hem. It was very common for skirts to have this wool braid to help preserve the dress. This primarily protected the hem from wearing out quickly when rubbing against the floor.[288] Likewise, I used a four to six thread spacing whip stitch on both the top and the bottom of the thread when attaching it.

[287] Jones, *A Manual of Plain Needlework,* 20.
[288] Stamper and Condra, *Clothing in American History*, 102.

Then I worked on creating the pleats, which were a common design feature for dresses like these.[289] I experimented with some paper making the distance of the pleats from one another. Once I found a size that I liked, tallied the length of the pleats that I could create with my paper, then measured the amount of fabric which would pleat down into that paper.

Table 2: Pleats

Equation:
Length of fabric=length of pleated section
Length of hem: (needs this long of pleated section)
Length of hem=length of pleated section
Length of hem/pleated section x length of fabric that goes into pleated section= amount of fabric necessary

As I later found out, my math was slightly off and I had more pleats than I needed. I hemmed the fabric in the same manner as the inner hem but did not add wool braid. I pleated the fabric, keeping it in place with pins and scotch tape, the latter is, admittedly, historically inaccurate. I did opt for to use the scotch tape though, as the bulk and sheer number of pins when in the fabric made a distinctive “hump” in the fabric which prevented it from laying totally flat. Perhaps one reason for this is that I used modern sewing pins, which are potentially longer than historical pins. This would be an interesting avenue for future research. When the pleats were finished, I sewed the top of the pleats to the top of the inter hem with a basting stitch to keep them in place. Then, I pinned it to the bottom of the middle section of the dress to ensure I had the correct length. I pinned the raw edges of the inter hem/pleats so they would fit the middle portion. I made sure that the seam ended at the end of pleat, rather than in the middle of one, otherwise it would have looked odd and been obvious that there was a seam there.

[289] Lydia Edwards, *How to Read a Dress: A Guide to Changing Fashion from the 16th to the 20th Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 107.

To finish the skirt, I gathered it at the back. This allows the front to lie flat under the overdress and maintain the flat front of this period. I included a one inch waist band which closed with two hooks and eyes. At the back of the top piece I added a placket, which was essentially a two inch band of fabric which was folded in half and sewn to the raw edge of the opening. This was then pressed and turned out to fold over each other.

A number of realities made themselves readily apparent through the making of this skirt. Primarily, the amount of fabric required for this garment was enormous, which belies the expendable cash to purchase and maintain these items, while also devoting the time to properly caring for them. The rouching and pleats took up an unnecessary amount of fabric. The amount of fabric shows that those who could afford pleats in their dress were well-to do, as they could afford this extra fabric. In addition, they had the leisure time to take care of the pleats and maintain them as they need pressing. The pleats in my garment often needed repressing to ensure that they stayed nicely formed; for Victorians who valued the details of their garments, this surely was an important feature to them. What is important here is that fabric was expensive. The more one had, the richer the person was, the more fashionable they looked and the richer they were; they also tried to protect their investment. Following these fashions required some financial stability, and thus wearing a dress served as a signal of the family's economic situation and also a woman's leisure time to properly care for that garment.

Overdress

Interior

The interior seams of this dress were completed by machine, as indicated by the precise, even, and uninterrupted stitching. The edges, however, were finished either by hand with a whipstitch or by pinking the edges with a pair of pinking shears. This kept the fabric from

fraying, which would create a messy look and waste the fabric. These portions were also completed by hand as early machines were only capable of a straight stitch, and only a forward stitch at that. The interior seams of the garments could also be clipped in one or two points at the part with the sharpest curve. This allows the garment to curve more sharply, allowing the garment to fit better.

The darts on this garment were unique from other garments, as they come very close to the edge of the straw colored portion of the over dress. Like the darts on the other garments and images from the period, the darts end at the apex of the bust. These darts provide shaping to the dress without the addition of other seams. Including darts rather than separate pieces would be much easier when remaking a garment. The fabric is not cut away after darts are sewn into the dress, which means that if one were to unpick the darts, the front piece of the dress would still be intact, one large piece, rather than a large piece with two holes in the middle. Thus, it is entirely possible that the darts allowed for remaking garments in an effective manner. Women had to manage preserving garments for remaking with getting them to fit well. Examples of clipping are one way that women found to make the garment fit better while also preserving as much of the garment as possible. Darts could be handsewn or machine sewn.

Another form of shaping and fitting came through waist ties and hooks and eyes. Hook and eye sections were nearly ubiquitous, though there was one example of a garment using waist tapes. These allowed for the front piece to close tightly without putting pressure on the front piece of the garment, which usually had some form of decoration in the form of a different fabric. In the displayed dress, the fabric is delicate red silk with rouching across the stomach. The area of the stomach, which sees the most bending and movement, is a place for wear and tear. In addition, this is where the rouching section was, which increases the instability. Adding a hook and eye under this takes most of the pressure off the area, allowing it to remain decorative without pressure.

After finishing the general seams, I added boning channels into the garment. The collection items showed relatively little boning in the bodices, really in only about three or four places. I elected to include boning at the center back seam and at the two side seams, which were the most common. Boning was also present in all of these garments. The boning in garment 91.1.2532 is visible, and appears to be a dark grey boning. The amount of boning could vary from garment to garment, though it was typically found on the back seam and two of the side back seams or sides, and possibly the darts. Lord and Taylor lists baleen for sale at ¼ to ¾ inches wide between thirty to thirty six inches at the price of six to eight cents. Short corset bones, which I presume to be steel, were listed between four cents to seven cents.[290] This was marginally cheaper, and during this period as the whalebone supply was dwindling steel boning began to replace it.[291]

The lengths of the boning were from the waist to about the middle of the back, around seven inches. The boning was inserted into boning channels made from boning channel tape, which is indicated by a thickly woven strip of fabric with a selvedge on both sides. The 1881 *Lord and Taylor* magazine lists this notion for linen tapes, from two cents to twenty five cents depending on the width.[292] These were attached with a herringbone stitch, a loose and wide stitch typically used for tasks such as this. This stitch was completed by hand to prevent the stitches from showing on the exterior of the fabric.

At the back of the dress I attached a waist tape to tie in the front. This feature was only present on one garment, and when compared to my use of a hook and eye section on the front, this proved only marginally helpful. This might be the reason that only one garment included this feature.

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[290] *Lord and Taylor*, 140.
[291] Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 48.
[292] *Lord and Taylor*, 140.

I began to look for a way to finish the bottom edges of the dress to keep them from fraying. I turned under the raw edges and whip stitched the fashion fabric and lining together, being careful to keep the stitches from showing on the other side of the fashion fabric. This encased the raw edge of the fabric and provided a clean finish. While it is really only possible to see the front part and the ends of the other pieces are looped up into the bustle, encasing the raw edges keeps the fabric from fraying and thereby preserves the monetary investment and does not allow threads to come undone which need to be fixed during laundering. So while I did not have any evidence directly from Dress 2829 to do this, it was in keeping with historic practice.

Front Piece

The front piece of the dress proved to be rather troubling. Initially, I patterned out a large piece of fabric, as much of the fabric would be pleated down and rouched across the stomach. The front of Dress 2829 has pleating at the top of the front and rouching across the stomach. It ended in a point at the bottom and there was lace on both sides. It closed with pear buttons and hooks and eyes at the rouched portion.

However, on every fitting the front poofed out in the front. My examinations of period garments showed that they fitted flat across the front of the wearer. It took some time to determine how to fix this. After some time, I came to the realization that there were too many pleats and rouches. I reduced the number of these, leaving the fabric which would be under the lace free from these items. This, in addition to trimming the excess fabric from the seam, significantly reduced the bulk of the front, allowing it to lay flat. I sewed lace into the seam between the front and side front piece.

After rectifying the front piece issues, I tacked down the rouching to the fabric lining to keep it from moving. In earlier iterations, whenever I grabbed the front of the dress the rouching

would stretch out and I had to pull the gathering stitches to the correct length repeatedly. I attempted to do a few tacks right at the edge of the front piece but this also did not alleviate the issue. I ended up doing a long series of tacks from the edge of the fabric nearly to the end of the front piece lining. This successfully kept the gathering stitches from pulling out. This technique is corroborated by garment 91.1.2215.

Figures 24 and 25 Object 91.1.2215, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum

After securing the gathering stitches I used my machine to make the button holes. Three of the Grandee garments included machine done buttonholes.[293] The other garments closed with hooks and eyes.[294] Dress 2829 closed with pear buttons and had no visible closure across the

[293] 91.1.2531, 91.1.2532, 91.1.2219, Grandee Collection, NCWHM.
[294] 91.1.2831

stomach. It likely closed with hooks and eyes which were not visible. There is also no button at the very top of the collar and I added a hook and eye there as well.

Sleeves

I created a number of mock-ups for these sleeves in an attempt to make them fit flatteringly while still allowing for sufficient movement and historical accuracy. The sleeves on Dress 2829 came three-fourths of the way down the arm, which is typical for afternoon dresses in this period. It was odd to note that Dress 2829 did not have piping around the sleeve seam, unlike most other dresses of this period. This piping served to make the seam stronger.[295] In an effort to recreate Dress 2829 itself rather than another dress, I elected to keep this out and have not been able to find an answer as to why this was excluded.

When trying on the dress, my pattern and the fitting had made the sleeves go too far over the shoulder and onto the arm, and I trimmed about an inch out of the armscye (the arm hole on the garment) to improve the fit of the dress. As there was no gathering in the sleeves during this period, having unequal circumferences in the sleeve cap and the armscye created some issues. To alleviate this issue, I changed the seams on the shoulder and under-arm seams to shrink the circumference of the armscye. This solved the issue. Matching the side back and back sleeve seams as I sewed them together.

It was highly typical in many dresses of previous periods, and most certainly the incredibly large, "leg-o-mutton" sleeves of later decades, that sleeves had some gathering across the top, however, that was not so in this decade. While there is no way to know for certain why this was, this period saw dresses that revealed more of the woman's natural form than many

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[295] Stamper and Condra, Clothing in American History, 97.

previous years and for many decades after. Perhaps the lack of gathering was an attempt to reveal, in yet another way, the natural form.

Unfortunately, upon trying the garment on, I found that the armscyes were too tight and were rather uncomfortable. The armscye was too tight around the top of the shoulder and greatly limited my movement. I had initially spotted this problem and in conjunction with needing to solve the issue of the armscye being too small for the sleeve, I cut most of the excess fabric from the bottom of the armscye, under the armpit. This did little to alleviate the issue, however. I began to do some non-historical research to determine why this was an issue. One video from a designer for Simplicity was particularly helpful. Garments that are fitted in both the bodice and sleeve caps make it difficult to have a full range of motion for the arm. This dress clearly had both. There is relatively little that makers can do to solve the issue, though adjusting the armscye can help. Contrary to my ideas, moving up the bottom of the armscye and cutting away more fabric from the top is the proper way to fix this issue.

This method does make sense. Other garments, such as dresses from the 1700s or the Regency period, do move the top of the armscyes fairly far back, which contributes to a larger range of movement. During the 1870s and 1880s, work wear had sleeves with more fabric in them, allowing for a full range of movement, allowing women more ease while working.[296] Unfortunately, I would have to recut most of the dress to fix my issue, so I do not know if doing this would alleviate the lack of movement completely.

For the cuffs, I took a square of fabric and lining fabric. I sewed the edges on one of the tops together then pressed the seam open. Then, laying the fabric flat and pressing the seam allowance towards the lining, I under stitched the fabric on the lining side to keep lining from

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[296] "Solomon Smith Residence, Saline, Kansas," Photograph. 1884. *Kansas Memory Project*, Topeka: Kansas, 312992, FK2.S1.75.S and *A Family in front of their sod house, Thomas County, Kansas, 1885.* Photograph. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Memory*. 442417.

rolling up and showing during wearing. Then letting the fabric fall into a natural position with the lining and fabric on top of each other, I folded in half across length and sewed the raw edge, making a tube of the fabric. I pressed this as well then attached the cuff to the sleeve, matching the cuff seam allowance to the inner-most sleeve seam allowance. I inserted the cuff into the sleeve with the right side of the fabric touching the wrong side of the sleeve, which is typically not how items are sewn together. I sewed the seam, then pulled the cuff out to reveal the lining, then folded the lining up to show the red fabric.

After securing the sleeves, I tacked the lace onto the cuff, leaving about a fourth of the fabric showing to fit my personal preference concerning the visibility of the red fabric. I tacked the lace on with tan thread at the thickest part of the lace to hide the stitch. Then I turned under the edge of the lace to hide it in the interior of the cuff and whipstitched it in place.

Collar

Collars, while not common, were often present in garments for this period. The primary sources objects from the NCWHM showed that when a garment did have a collar of some type, it did not always attach all the way. Modern collars, such as on a shirt or suit jacket, are completely sewn onto the garment. However, these seemed to be attached with sewing in one place then close with hooks and eyes so that the wearer could get into the garment. The collar remained in place through a series of fastenings. The collar for Dress 2829 did not necessarily seem to do this, but also was not sewn into the dress. Most collars of that type would be sewn into the seams of the neckline and front piece. Rather, there was a clear point at the front of the collar where it was not sewn into the front. As such, it appears that the collar was kept on through a similar manner as the other garments.

Using a dress mannequin, I drafted a collar with a piece of muslin. It was an incredibly simple collar, as shown in Figure Seven. I cut out the collar on the bias of the fabric and the under-collar from glazed cotton. I sewed them together right sides together, clipped the edges and curves to reduce the bulk of the fabric and allow for greater precision around the curves, then turned the piece right side out and pressed it with the iron. I tacked the lace onto the collar, as putting it on after sewing the collar to the dress would be too difficult. On the original dress, the collar does not appear to be sewn into the dress around the neckline and front seams, but rather seems tacked on. As the points of the collar lay across the lace of the front piece and the lace does not disappear into a seam, I hypothesized that the collar was sewn onto the exterior of the dress. I placed the dress on my dress form and pinned the collar on in the right place, then whipstitched it on. While I was initially worried about how the collar would lay with this construction method, it actually attached to the garment easily and neatly.

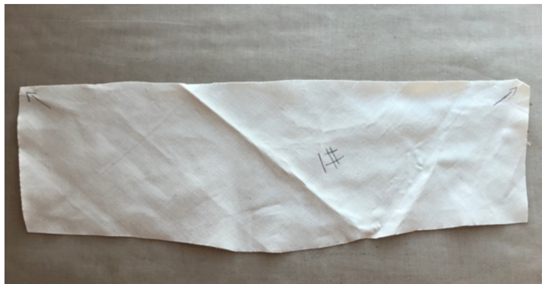

Figure 26, Collar Pattern. The lower, curved edge is the visible part of the collar.

Decoration

As I completed the lace appliques on the dress, I was struck by the amount of lace included and the work that went into putting it in place. Strictly speaking, I used about three yards of lace, which in the grand scheme of garments is not that large of an amount. The 1881 *Lord and*

Taylor magazine lists numerous types of laces. Cheapest amongst these was imitation lace which was made via machine, while the more expensive laces were handmade.[297] Here, the Industrial Revolution served to democratize clothing and allowed for a wider swath of people to purchase and enjoy decorative objects.

The laces were relatively affordable. In this project, I used about a yard and a half of four and a half inch wide lace for the collar and cuffs. For imitation lace, the price for the one and a half inch lace could range from three cents a yard to forty cents a yard; for this project the cost might range from four and a half cents to sixty cents. With the four inch lace, imitation lace could range from thirteen and forty cents; for this project historically the cost might range from nineteen and a half cents to sixty cents. Real lace, on the other hand, tended to be more expensive. One and a half inch real lace was listed between twenty cents to two dollars; at a yard and a half for this project, that could be thirty cents to three dollars. For the four inch wide lace, the prices could be as low as eighteen cents to as high as five and a half dollars. A yard and half, then, was between twenty-seven cents to eight dollars and twenty-five cents.[298] The presence of this lace still showed that a woman had the money to purchase this object and the free time to use and maintain it.

In addition, 1875 to 1885 is often considered the “Natural Form” period of clothing, as stated earlier. Yet, makers loved their decoration; all of this was anything but natural. While women were supposed to be “natural” this was in many ways a farce and women sought ways to make themselves feel and look attractive.

[297] *Lord and Taylor*, 1881, 74 and 75.
[298] *Lord and Taylor*, 1881, 74 and 75.

Conclusion

The details of how makers construct clothing is just as important as the larger details of the object. In recreating Dress 2829, the details showed how women thought about clothing and how their culture was stitched into the very garment itself. First, handmade clothing was a necessity because of the cult of domesticity. Hand sewing was not a given, though, especially for upper-class women who could afford dressmakers. But though some frontier women had to work outside the home to earn money, their sewing skills offered them a way to maintain their femininity while still making money. Despite some ideas to the contrary, sewing machines were a net benefit for women. Between 1875 and 1885, sewing machines were not ubiquitous, especially on the frontier, and so communities shared the few machines they did have. Acquisition of these machines also signaled that a family had some modicum of financial stability.

Dresses of this period were highly decorative and sought to show off a woman's natural form, but makers still wanted to preserve the investment in their garments for future use. The Natural Form Period was popular between 1875 and 1885 and this gave the idea of showing off much of a woman's natural figure. Yet, these dresses were also highly decorative with pleats, rouches, ruffles, lace, and silk. The ability to have dresses like these signaled that a woman had the money for such items and the leisure time to make and maintain these clothes. It also showed that a woman had a community and thus a reason to wear these garments. In the end, dresses like these showed that women sought respectability and that fashion was not just something a woman did for her own enjoyment; it was an important marker and signal.

CHAPTER V

HANGING ON FOR DEAR LIFE:

NEW WESTERN HISTORY, DIVERSITY, AND

THE REALITY OF DEACESSIONING

In 1991, Western artist Joe Grandee donated his personal collection, numbering well over 5,000 historic objects, to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum (NCWHM) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.[299] Grandee was an artist obsessed with accuracy and his collection served as a research tool to make his paintings as detailed as possible. A native Texan descended from Spanish Conquistadors, Grandee began painting commercially at the age of 29.[300] As evidenced by the collection, Grandee's art focused on a stylized interpretation of Western history, specifically one that focused on men and firearms. In a bid for accuracy, Grandee purchased historical objects which pertained to the scenes he wanted to create.[301] Three Joe Grandee History

[299] "Western artist put accuracy into artworks," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23 April 2000, 87.

[300] "Obituary of Joe Ruiz Grandee Jr.," Dignity Memorial, 4 November 2021, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/arlington-tx/joe-grandee-10434628, accessed 19 October 2022; "Grandee to State One-Man Art Show Here on Weekend," *The Daily Iberian*, New Iberia: Louisiana, May 11, 1960, 7; and "From Brush to Canvas, Joe Grandee brings life to western paintings," *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 28 November 1984, 125.

[301] "Businesswoman was her husband's best art critic," *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, 29 August 2008, 9B.

galleries, which utilized the objects from his donation, opened at the NCWHM in 2000.[302] Today, the galleries include information on Mountain Men and Plains Indians, an entire room dedicated to the post-Civil War military, and hunting in the West. Women are only mentioned twice in these galleries, the most prominent of which is a silk brocade dress, Dress 91.1.2829. These galleries, and Grandee's collection as a whole, provide a highly stylized and overtly masculine view of the West.

The West is a mythic space in the American imagination. Many Americans think of "cowboys and Indians," outlaws, the Oregon trail, and more.[303] But these ideas about the frontier are far different from reality. Following trends in academia, scholars such as Juti Winchester and Louise Pubols have noted the shift towards New Western history in other Western history museums such as the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming and the Autry Museum of the American West, in Los Angeles, California. Most importantly tough, both scholars show that these museums are key battle fields for the culture wars, as people expect these mythic ideas and see increased representation of people of color as submission to the political left. Especially in states which epitomize ideas of the West, such as Wyoming and Oklahoma, visitors expect to have a say in how the past is remembered and portrayed in these spaces.[304]

Some at the NCWHM recognize that the ideas presented in the Grandee galleries are myths of the West, rather than reality. These staff members also seek to increase diversity at the museum, whereby they equally include minority communities in collections and exhibits and tell a story of the West that more accurately reflects reality. To some extent the board supports these ideas as well, approving a revised mission statement that reads: "The National Cowboy and

[302] "Western artist put accuracy into artworks," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23 April 2000, 87.

[303] Nancy Reagin, *Re-Living the American Frontier: Western Fandoms, Reenactment, and Historical Hobbyists in Germany and America Since 1900* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2022), 17.

[304] Louise Pubols, "The Singing Cowboy and the Professor: The New West at the Autry National Center," in *The Public Historian,* V31 (4), 2009, 71-76 and Juti A. Winchester, "New Western History Doesn't Have to Hurt: Revisionism at the Buffalo Bill Museum," in *The Public Historian*, V31 (4), 2009, 77-79.

Western Heritage Museum preserves and interprets the evolving history and cultures of the American West for the education and enrichment of its diverse audiences of adults and children."[305] Yet, new mission statements are only one step, and implementing these principles is not an easy matter. In no area is this clearer than in deaccessioning debates. Collections are central to museums and their missions, and the debates surrounding what to keep, what to get rid of, and how to care for those objects are also influenced by the culture wars.

In the summer of 2022, I had the opportunity to intern at the NCWHM and work with the textile collection overall, and the Grandee collection more specifically. A large percentage of the collection included items related to military history.[306] My work specifically focused on female garments from 1875 to 1885, and objects within these parameters ranged from excellent condition to very poor, and included tops, skirts, full overdresses, hats, and other items. A significant portion of the female objects were in incredibly poor condition. There were multiple objects from the same time period, some in excellent condition and others in very poor condition, making them unfit for display. As I worked with these objects, I asked my supervisors about deaccessioning. The general consensus was that *some things* had to be deaccessioned. There was not enough money, time, or space to care for everything well. But here, I was surprised to find, the culture wars cropped up. The lack of diversity in the Grandee galleries, the museum as a whole, and the collection prompted some curators to keep the poor-quality objects for the sole purpose of adding diversity to the collections.

But what if, through seeking to achieve the admirable goal of diversity, we only contribute to the storage and collections issues we seek to eradicate? Museums, no matter how large or small, are beset by limited resources. There is not enough time, money, or space to

[305] "About the Museum," National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/about-the-museum/, accessed 19 October 2022.

[306] Rattenbury, Richard. "Cowboy Hall of Fame Acquires Joe Grandee Museum of the Frontier West," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 24 November 1991, 100.

properly care for everything a museum owns and accomplish everything they want to do. The NCWHM is no exception. At NCWHM specifically, some curators hope that through keeping these diverse objects, the items will eventually filter into the galleries. On the other hand, massive storage issues, busy schedules, inability to change out permanent exhibits, and limited funds require a smaller collection.

The central question is this: Should the museum deaccession poor-quality garments without provenance that have no hope of display, or keep them because it contributes to greater diversity in the collections, realizing that they can never be of use? Using my experience during the Summer of 2022 as a case study, I argue that desires for inclusion can sometimes get in the way of *effective* inclusion. Whether we like it or not, limited time, money, and storage space have an outsized influence on what we can keep. When museums choose to keep diverse objects which are badly damaged, lack sufficient provenance, do not contribute to the museum's mission, and have no hope of display, they take away the resources needed to care for objects which better fulfil the need for diversity.

Museum and Collection History

The story of the NCWHM began in 1952 with businessman A. Reynolds. Inspired by the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore, Oklahoma he began to petition Western governors to start a cowboy museum. Oklahoma won the bid and Oklahoma City donated thirty-seven acres for the museum building in 1955.[307] The museum opened ten years later in 1965. Early collections policies, according to curators and staff, were rather sketchy, to say the least. The museum often accepted objects with little to no provenance. An example of the museum's collection policies of

[307] "National Cowboy Hall of Fame," *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), 20 June 1965, 100.

that period show up in a pair of boots that supposedly belonged to Geronimo and two dresses from the Philippines in 1900. The donation records for these items simply state "Boots belonging to Geronimo," and "Dress from the Philippines, 1900." There were no donors' names, no information about the purchase history, or any other information.

The museum was born during the golden age of western films. In this period, the issues of the Cold War could be worked out on screen and makers were highly conscience of the allegorical value of western movies and capitalized on it during this period.[308] The myths of the frontier offered, "pseudo-historical narratives which suggested that human heroism could shape the course of future events."[309] A 1965 article about the museum in *The Daily Oklahoman* wrote:

> No era in the history of this nation stands so dramatically apart as the incomparable saga of the development of the west….To this heritage is dedicated the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center. It is the first gesture of grateful Americans to honor the noble men and women of dauntless spirit who pioneered the vast empire known as the American West.[310]

The museum, then, served much of the same purpose as these western films: to enshrine the past and find solutions for the future.

But this past only applied and appealed to a few. The museum realized a desperate need for a rebranding at the end of the twentieth-century. The museum opened in 1965 under the name "The Cowboy Hall of Fame," but in 2000 the museum officially changed its name to The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in hopes of turning the focus more towards Western heritage and appealing to a wider audience.[311] The museum also completed renovations

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[308] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 347-349.

[309] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 350.

[310] "The Past Recaptured," *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), 20 June 1965, 101.

[311] "Gaylord gives $30 million to museum," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, 24 December 2000, 3; New Frontier: City Museum Gallops into the Future," *The Daily Oklahoma*, Oklahoma City, 20 November 2000, 6; and Linda Miller, "Museums garner national attention," *The Oklahoman*, 24 April 2005, 135.

that year for a 220,000 square feet building and earned accreditation with the American Association of Museums.[312] Despite this change taking place over twenty years previously, a number of volunteers, including myself — I was less than a year old at the time of the name change — consistently referred to the museum by its original name during my time there in the Summer of 2022. Though we quickly corrected ourselves, the idea was ingrained in our brains that this institution focused on cowboys.

Exhibition Issues

The three permanent Grandee history galleries claim to tell a general history of the American West, and they are comprised of three rooms which discuss Mountain Men and Plains Indians, the military in the West after the Civil War, and hunting in the West. Only the first two galleries mention women, though I will focus solely on the military room. The first major issue in these galleries is that there is no definition of what the West was and is, and there are no connecting threads between any of the three rooms, aside from an inordinate number of guns and knives. The subject matter shows a highly masculinized, white, view of the West as the displays primarily feature guns and men's clothing. Gallery text does dances around military occupation and Native American relations in the map and the Gatling gun areas, never explicitly stating what happened and potentially providing a false impression of the past. These galleries do make a small effort to provide a diversity of experiences, and nods to the presence of Native peoples and African Americans; however, the general focus contributes to mythic ideas of West.

[312] "Gaylord gives $30 million to museum," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 3.

Part and parcel of this is the number of firearms. Guns are intensely polarizing subject matter to modern audiences, and many museums have firearms in their collections.[313] The immense number of guns in museums such as the Buffalo Bill Center of the American West, the Autry Museum of the American West, as well as the NCWHM reflects the association between firearms and myths of the West.[314] Thus, the display of gun collections contributes to mythic ideas of the West and how the Grandee galleries portray the past. Display methods also contribute or detract from a visitor's ability to interact with the objects. Most exhibits about this subject matter take the approach of an art museum: displaying many objects with minimal interpretation. Yet, this method assumes that the viewer knows much about these guns and can understand the significance of these objects and is really only appealing to gun enthusiasts. Rather, art-museum type displays of firearms can be confusing to the general visitor and do not draw connections between the objects and the past.[315]

Proper interpretation in these areas is vital so that visitors can understand what they are looking at and why it is important. There are ways to tell these stories in a non-partisan manner. While guns and such are certainly interesting to some people, it is far too easy for these items to take over the galleries and museums miss out on serving vast swaths of people when they do so. The number of firearms and military uniforms do not catch and hold every visitor's attention. While the military is an important component to explore, the inordinate size of the area is overwhelming and potentially boring to many. And, when the bulk of the museum does focus on these items all while claiming to be a museum about so much more than that, visitors can leave disappointed.

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[313] Jennifer Tucker, et. al. "Display of Arms: A Roundtable Discussion about the Public Exhibition of Firearms and Their History," in *Technology and Culture*, v 59, 2018, 719-769, 731-732.

[314] Tucker, et. al. "Display of Arms," 727.

[315] Tucker, et. al. "Display of Arms," 739-740.

Women in the Grandee Galleries

One portion that does catch the eye are the two dresses, one silk and one cotton, on the south end of the gallery. Contrasting with the blue and grey uniforms and military objects in the rest of the gallery, the dresses provide a visual difference for visitors to latch on to and gravitate towards. Unfortunately, the two dresses have been on display for many years, at least for a decade. While there are no records to indicate when these displays were last changed, I distinctly remember visiting these galleries as a child and this dress mesmerizing me. At the time of this writing, I am twenty-three years old and can say with confidence that this dress was on display long before I was thirteen. The room does not have windows, and the light is very low. The dress is also behind a glass case, protecting it from dust and curious visitors. Though these are the ideal display conditions, even low light over long periods is extremely damaging to textiles. In addition, textiles lack the internal structure of something like a sculpture and it is difficult to continuously display these objects without stress on the object.[316] But museum issues again rear their ugly head, and like other places, lack of time and resources makes it difficult for curators to redesign three galleries.

This review does not seek to deny the influence of the military in American history. But, museums need to consider the interests of everyone and make an effort to show a great breadth of history; the need for diverse collections is obviously apparent. Research has more than proven that women were not just present on the frontier, they were vital members of this community and their contributions were just as significant. Writers and the public had always recognized that women were present on the Frontier, but early works delineated five typologies of Frontier women: Saint in the Sunbonnet, the Pioneer Mother, the Frontier Feminist, the Helpmate, and the

[316] "Museum Handbook, Part 1, Museum Collections," National Parks Service, 1990, K 12, 15-16, and 19-20.

Light Lady.[317] Later works and popular culture would later add Prostitute with a Heart of Gold to this list.[318] These stereotypes reduced the history of women in the West and contributed to myths about the frontier.

In the mid-1970s as more scholars joined the field more feminist frameworks contested. These new histories also emphasized a reliance on documents written by them women they studied, rather than what other people had written about them. As the field began to grow, so did the archival sources as archivists began collecting diaries, letters, and other items related to women.[319] The founding of the Women's West Conference was one event that proved foundational in pushing this field towards the forefront of Western historian's work. The 1983 conference specifically spawned a book entitled *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson.[320] This work is representative of the field at that time, which included stories of prostitution, examinations of sexual mores, immigration, and stories of Native women. Today, a wide variety of works clearly show that women were not just present in the West, they were integral to the West.[321]

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[317] Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 81.

[318] Riley, *Women on the Great Plains*, 82.

[319] Riley, *Women on the Great Plains*, 82-83.

[320] Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 3.

[321] A brief perusal of recent publications include Connie Cronley, *A Life on Fire: Oklahoma's Kate Barnard* (Norman: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2021); Patricia Laughland and Sarah Eppler Janda, *This Land is Her Land: Gendered Activism in Oklahoma From the 1870s to the 2010s*, (Norman: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2021); Julia Brickland, *America's Best Female Sharpshooter: The Rise and Fall of Lillian Frances Smith*, (Norman: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2020); Mary F. Ehrlander and Hild M. Peters, *Hospital and Haven: The Life and Work of Grafton and Clara Burke in Northern Alaska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2023), Richard Edwards and Jacob Friefield, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteader's Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2023). However, as stated in the introduction, there is very minimal recent scholarly work on pioneer women.

Collection and Storage Issues, Provenance, and Value

Like many museums, the NCWHM struggles with storage space. The current vault encompasses eleven thousand square feet of space, though one-thousand of it is unviable for storage. In addition, open pipework crosses the ceilings at some points, and curators have noted that portions of the vault have flooded with sewer water at times.[322] Plans at the museum hope to implement a multi-million dollar hanging storage rack system, which according to estimates could increase the room's space by a shocking sixty-five percent.[323] In conversations with the curators and through my observations, it became clear that most cabinets, specifically in the textile area, are overcrowded. The cabinets primarily consist of hanging storage with garments hanging from padded hangers. The singular flat storage cabinet is stuffed so that the contents of one drawer are touching the top of the drawer above it. The bottom two drawers are missing, with the items shoved on the bottom and stacked on each other haphazardly, including at least two severely fragile beaded garments from the mid-twentieth century.

Staff certainly realized that this was an issue. In part to augment their facility renovation proposal for the board, curatorial and registrar staff invited an independent textile conservator to assess the collection and the objects, as well as provide immediate storage advice. For several days, I had the opportunity to assist the conservator and registrar in this endeavor, specifically in the cabinets that contained the Grandee collection. Through this process, we emptied the cabinets and created a spreadsheet with each item's accession number, a short description, and an item quality assessment ranging from 1 to 5. As we replaced the items we worked to prevent further damage through adjusting the hangers, adding more archival paper to protect the objects, and refolding objects with proper padding.

[322] Email with museum Registrar, Melissa Owens, 20 March 2023 and tour of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museums in November 2022 with assistant curator Nathan Jones.
[323] Email with museum Registrar, Melissa Owens, 20 March 2023.

For many of these garments, there were multiples from each decade that the collection covered. When grouped by decade, some items were in excellent condition, while others were in incredibly poor condition. The criteria for excellent condition objects included: no significant signs of wear, no tearing on the exterior, minimal staining on the interior, no insect or sun damage, and relative sturdiness.

Though Grandee was highly dedicated to accuracy in the details of his painting, this did not extend to preserving the historical integrity of some his objects.[324] Other garments which I had the opportunity to examine in the collection had been altered and curators noted this was common in his collection. One garment I examined from 1875 to 1885 had patches roughly sewn onto it. While remaking was common until recently, makers spent a considerable amount of time making their repairs functional and in an effort to preserve the garment.[325] These patches were sewn on hastily with large stitches which could easily break and with the raw edges of the fabric showing; this allowed the fabric to deteriorate more quickly. All of these facets indicate that the repairs were more contemporary, likely done by Grandee or his wife. Finally, Grandee kept incredibly poor records about his collection and there is no provenance for the ten items that I examined from 1875 to 1885. For better or for worse, these factors objectively make the objects less valuable because we do not truly know when it was made, where it was from, or who wore it.

Sadly, these issues are not new, even for museums as large as NCWHM. Lack of space, issues with irrelevant collections, and internal disagreements about appropriations for resources plague museums large and small. As the museum reworks its strategic plan and its storage facilities, some curators are working through these ideas of diversity and hoping to increase

[324] "Western artist put accuracy into artworks," *The Daily Oklahoman*, 23 April 2000, 87.
[325] Jennifer Farley-Gordon and Colleen Hill, *Sustainable Fashion: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

representation for minority communities and move away from mythic ideas about the West. However, these ideals can sometimes get in the way of practically implementing them.

Why Deaccession?

Of course, a spate of modern scholarship argues for more active collections which reflect the diverse needs of museum audiences and wholesale deaccessioning of duplicate objects, objects which do not contribute to the museum's mission, objects which are present purely to build the size of the collection or objects which contribute to ideas of colonialism.[326] Having smaller collections also allows museums to better care for what they have.[327] Museums should also not keep items on the basis of potential usefulness, emotional attachment, or the fear of making a mistake in what to keep or what to get rid of.[328] Using these texts, the issues with Object 91.1.2219 would mean that it ought to be deaccessioned. Though there are few women's garments in the Grandee and other collections, the poor condition of the object, limited storage, lack of provenance (though the least important here), and the presence of comparable objects in higher-quality condition provide four excellent reasons to deaccession the object.

The issue here is lack of clear, significant, provenance for objects which have a claim to fame. For example, why should a museum keep seven sets of tea sets from the same general period? Unless the museum focuses on the history of tea or decorative arts in that period, there is no reason to keep that many tea sets. However, if one of those tea sets belonged to George Washington or another figure, there is instant justification for keeping that particular tea set. This

[326] *Active Collections*, ed. Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Treavor Jones (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[327] Gail Steketee, "Practical Strategies for Addressing Hoarding in Collections," in *Active Collections*, ed. Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Treavor Jones (New York: Routledge, 2018), 127.
[328] Steketee, *Active Collections*, 122-123.

is what I mean by significant provenance: provenance which connects the object to someone important in the past. Being able to draw these connections is important.

This is not to say that objects without provenance lack value. Fashion scholars have argued that provenance is a necessity in fashion collections and some have even made the elitist argument that it is impossible to display fashion properly if there is no provenance.[329] Moreover, scholarship on fashion and museums focuses on large museums which are focused around or can have entire fashion or costume departments. However, while provenance does contribute to the value of an object, relying entirely on provenance to tell a story is lazy. Fashion has much meaning beyond, "Jane Doe wore this object." A good fashion display connects clothing to the culture that created it and shows how makers, even if we do not know who those makers were, stitch that culture and meaning into a garment. As such, lack of provenance is no reason to get rid of objects and certainly no reason not to display an object. Though provenance can make a garment more valuable it is not a sole reason for museums to get rid of the object. When accepting objects, museums must take care to understand how the provenance or lack thereof will affect the institution's collections. The recent acquisition of a purse purported to belong to Bonnie Parker is an excellent example of how to do so.

Current staff at NCWHM do recognize these shifting ideas about collection management practices. During the Summer of 2022, the museum acquired a purse which supposedly belonged to Bonnie Parker. The leather purse had a bullet hole in it. The object also had limited provenance and no clear connection to Parker, aside from oral rumors passed through the family. As opposed to Geronimo's boots, these collecting policies are much more judicious and careful. Their current

[329] Julia Petrov, "Gender Considerations in Fashion History Exhibitions," in *Fashions and Museums: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marie Riegels Melchior and Birgitta Svensson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 82.

collections policy manual reads, "The Museum will enhance its collections by adding, after careful consideration, those objects which are appropriate to the mission statement of the Museum. Acquired objects are…[obtained] for the sole purpose of augmenting and enriching the interpretive and research programs of the institution."[330] Instead of accepting carte blanch that this purse belonged to Parker, staff was more skeptical. In conjunction with the University of Central Oklahoma's forensics department, the NCWHM conducted a series of forensic tests and created a video series about the process. There were no conclusive results from these tests, which the staff expected. The museum did accept the donation, but admitted that the provenance was suspect and accepted the donation with the idea of using it more as a learning tool and a talking point for how we understand the west, rather than a historic object which actually belonged to Bonnie Parker.

Currently, there are no plans to display any of these garments in the Grandee collection, but especially not the ten from 1875 to 1885. These ten objects provide a good case study. Out of the ten, there were four in excellent condition, two in decent condition, and two in poor to very poor condition. The four objects in excellent condition were blouses and a plain black skirt. The two in decent condition were longer dresses, though less decorative. Finally, the two in poor to very poor condition were dresses, including the black brocade dress mentioned earlier. These had tears, patches, discoloration, and holes in them. Between the five objects which fall into the excellent to decent condition, there are a significant number of garments from these dates which cover a range of fashion styles.

If creating an exhibition with covers the dates 1875 to 1885, the excellent and decent condition objects serve far better in an exhibition than the objects in poor condition. The better objects could stand up to a several months-long exhibit. Their quality makes it so that the textile

[330] "Collections Management Policy," *National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum*, updated 11 November 2015.

conservator would not have to stabilize for display and would make the garment more attractive to viewers. The variety of styles (dress, skirt, and shirtwaist) provide a sufficient amount of uniqueness without the two objects in poor condition.

However, lack of diversity in the museum makes curators pause when considering deaccessioning the two poor-quality objects, as getting rid of them would reduce the overall numbers of women represented in the collection and ultimately the galleries. Considering the issues outlined above, this an understandable fear. There are also fears that deaccessioning objects from one cabinet will send out a flashing-neon invitation for others to take up that space. These fears are valid. It is likely that any long-term storage solutions will not surface for several years. While these fears are legitimate, keeping poor quality objects also does not contribute to a solution. Fighting for space is a separate issue and it is, though perhaps unintentionally, cutting one's nose off to spite their face if curators keep objects just to keep space from others.

Looking at diversity in collections as a zero-sum game only contributes to the issues that museums are facing. Collections diversity is a worthy goal, but we should not seek to keep diverse objects simply for the reason that they pad out our numbers. Quality of objects rather than quantity of objects allows us to better care for the objects we do have, proudly display those items, and make a difference in our communities through those displays. There is no earthly way to keep, preserve, and use every historical object in the world. Museums, much to the chagrin of those who love museums, do not have unlimited time, money, and space. These constraints force museums to reckon with the items in their collections and make value decisions based on the resources they have at hand. In an ideal world, the NCWHM could keep and restore all of the dresses mentioned herein. But reality, like gravity, ties us to the ground. Keeping these garments prohibits the NCWHM from properly caring for the objects which do indeed contribute to the museum's mission, and acquiring objects which better reflect diverse museum audiences and

telling a more realistic, un-stylized story about the west. Diversity should not be a numbers game, it should be a quality game.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

THE FRONTIER'S EFFECT ON WOMEN AND DRESS 2829'S EFFECT ON US

What is the significance of Dress 2829? The question I posed at the beginning of this project comes back again. Now, within the scope of this research, I can give an answer. In studying Dress 2829 specifically, it is possible to better understand the role of clothing on the frontier and how the frontier influenced clothing and the women who lived there. Laura Ingalls Wilder stands as a titian in American literary history, but she was a real person who lived on the frontier, and her story and others like hers serve as primary textual sources and help bring Dress 2829 to life. During the last phase of Western expansion on the Northern Great Plains between 1875 and 1885, for women connected to farming or ranching in some form, clothing helped them maintain a sense of respectability and normalcy, implement culture onto the strange land they inhabited, and signal to others that the harsh conditions of the frontier had not overcome them.

From its founding, the United States has been an agrarian based nation. It is fitting that one of the most mythologized parts of our history, pioneers and homesteading, is also based in agriculture. Many academics have discounted the value of further studying homesteading. Recent scholarship argues that homesteading was indeed a significant part of our history.[331] What people

[331] Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains Towards a New History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 23.

think of when they look at Dress 2829 or think about Laura Ingalls Wilder usually says more about them than it does about reality. Scholars must look anew to the role of pioneering and homesteading and pay particular attention to the role of women on the frontier. These events played an important part in the past, and properly studying them anew will benefit scholars as well as influence American national identity in regards to this subject.

In the modern, popular imagination, people believe that the frontier was a liberating space and theoretically, women had more choices in how they dressed. Using Dress 2829 as a chance to look past the myth and into reality, we notice several things. First, the dress nettles the idea that the frontier was a liberating space. It asks us what the word "liberating" means and how that notion can adversely color our understanding of the frontier's effect on women. What are we hoping for when we argue that the frontier liberated women? Are we disappointed to find that they often continued in the same vein as women in the East? If so, we believed a myth and we are putting our hopes of a liberated present unfairly on the past. We must take these historical actors on their own terms. This does not preclude passing a moral judgement, but hopes of making our scholarship more relevant to the present should not overtake our work.

Again, Dress 2829 subverts expectations about the frontier's effect on women. Instead of making an argument about change over time, I make a an argument about continuation. This is not to say that I do not discuss change over time; I do argue that as time went on and more towns and railroads cropped up, settler's clothing changed because they had more access to fashion and fashionable goods. Rather, I argue on the whole that when faced with the hardships of the frontier and the rending of traditional community and cultural structures from them, that some women sought out some sense of normalcy through clothing, and through that they signaled that they were still respectable women. In these sense, women wanted a continuation of culture as they had known it; they did not want the frontier to change them.

Through using Dress 2829 as a lens, I wanted to understand what it meant for frontier women to wear clothing. In Chapter One, I asked why women would continue to wear long skirts, long sleeves, and corsets. Indeed, the frontier did affect the way that women dressed. Many pioneers lacked funds upon their initial settlement, and farming was often a risky endeavor. In their initial years of settlement, families lived far away from town centers or railroads. These two factors combined to create a distinctive "frontier look" where women were not as up-to-date with fashion as people not in their situation were. However, these women did seek out some form of decoration in their clothing and a level of cleanliness, as well as continuing to wear all the accoutrements of a lady. Through doing so, they sought visible respectability. Yet, as time went on and families became more financially secure and developed communities, 'settling' the west, they had more access to fashion and they sought additional ways to be fashionable.

Key to getting past myths and understanding reality was my foray into experimental archeology. As Jennifer Thigpen wrote in her article about an exhibition she created on missionary Mary Richardson-Walker, knowing Walker's writings only gave one picture of her. Seeing her possessions gave a whole new dimension to understanding who Walker was and how she negotiated cultural boundaries and her life's calling as a missionary.[332] Likewise, my understanding about women on the frontier would be different without seeing images of them and remaking this dress.

In Chapter Two I explored the constituent materials of the dress. First, I gave an explanation for the dates that I selected, 1875 to 1885. Initially, it was difficult to date this garment, but there I argue that there was a difference between the ideal found in fashion magazines and how people made their garments. In addition, there is a strong bias in fashion museums and books that use those objects to accept items which have provenance and are highly fashionable examples, which

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[332] Jennifer Thigpen, "Desperately Seeking Mary: Materializing Mary Richardson-Walker," *The Public Historian* 34(3), 68-81, 75.

are not the reality for most people. After that discussion, it was important to show the role of the undergarments. While it is difficult to discern exactly what women wore while working, it is likely that they wore corsets at the very least. These undergarments served to protect the outer garment from body oils and dirt and to protect the body from chafing. These undergarments were also necessary to be considered a respectable woman. Women gained inspiration from magazines, which they often shared with each other, or new people who arrived on the frontier. When it came time to make garments, patterns were rather rudimentary and women still had to have some skill in that area. The fabrics that they chose depended on the need for the dress: for most dresses people purchased utilitarian fabrics such as wool or cotton. Silk was expensive and difficult to care for and was less popular on the frontier, though this in no way precluded its presence there. Finally, initially women purchased most of their goods at general stores and were capable consumers.

Chapter Three discusses the bulk of the reconstruction project. There I discuss the role of sewing in women's lives and how handmade clothing, either constructed by the wearer or a dressmaker, was necessary to being perceived as a good and respectable woman. While not all women knew how to sew, women who did so were at an advantage on the frontier. For lower-class women, this sewing knowledge also gave them an avenue to make money while not stepping over gender boundaries. As the period between 1875 and 1885 wore on, sewing machines became more common on the frontier, though they were still rare enough for women to often share their machines with other community members. Purchasing a sewing machine signaled that a family had some form of financial stability.

In that chapter, I also discuss what the popular styles in the context of the frontier signaled. These dresses were a part of the Natural Form Period but still highly decorative. The Natural Form Period supposedly showed a woman's more natural figure and her natural beauty. Yet, large amounts of decorations were popular. Utilizing these decorative features in a garment was

not just to satisfy a woman’s own’s desire. While the wearer may not have realized it, these features signaled something. Being able to participate in these fashionable trends showed that a woman had the finances and financial stability to buy extra fabric, ribbon, and lace. These features also showed that a woman had the time to make and maintain these objects. While these decorative features were not always available when a family had first settled on the frontier, this became more of a reality as town centers and rail lines cropped up and families had more financial stability.

In the final chapter, I acknowledge that museums are sites where the culture wars are fought in earnest. In the throes of this fight, curators and staff on both of sides of the aisle hold tightly to the objects they feel truly represent the past: both guns, knives, and such, as well as more diverse objects such as the female garments in the Grandee collection. Hopes for diversity can cause us to hold tightly to poor-quality objects which have no hope of exhibition, simply to elevate the numbers of diversity in our collections. I argue that in many respects this is creating more problems than it solves, and museums must be honest with themselves to discern why they want to keep an object.

Places for Further Research

There are a number of places where “Dressing Like Laura” falls short. First and foremost is the role of ethnicity and race. The frontier was not a homogenous, white space. While areas focused on here were predominantly settled by white people other western locations that were more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity were present everywhere. Especially in Kansas, African-Americans traveled to escape the Jim Crow south and find a new life. Initial forays into researching this subject showed a rich source base, but one that I could not do justice. Works Progress Administration interviews from the 1930s, archeological findings, and some

photographic evidence showed me that this is a subject that deserved far more attention than I had the time for.[333] The work of scholars Jacob Friefeld, Richard Edwards, and others began to study anew the role of African-Americans in these spaces and all-black towns in these areas. In the fall of 2023 they will be publishing a book devoted to this topic titled, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Question for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration*.[334] The Great Plains Black History Museum would also be a rich resource for any future scholars.

My initial thoughts regarding this subject center, much like the rest of this work, around the role of respectability. Scholars such as Tanisha Ford in her book *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* argue for the role of clothing in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In many ways, African-Americans protesting for their rights dressed in their Sunday best in hopes of showing the rest of America that they were respectable people who deserved equality under the law and in people's hearts and minds.[335] How did respectability play out in this period? How did they make new lives for themselves and what role did clothing play in that? How did they seek to present themselves to the world around them?

Ethnicity is another place for more extensive research. I utilize the memoir of Bertha Anderson, a Danish immigrant in my research; however, I did not have a chance to deeply

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[333] Jacob K. Friefeld, Mikal Brotnov Eckstrom, and Richard Edwards, "African-American Homesteader 'Colonies' in the Settling of the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 39(1), 2019, 11-38; "Early Area Homestead," *Library of Congress*, Nicodemus Historic Site, 923e3e50-e39c-4633-8419-c4a94b1cf8fb; "Speese Family," *Lily Speese Collection*, Great Plains Black History Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; "Armilda C. Benning Williams," *Kansas Memory Project*, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka Kansas, 223398 and "Sarah P. Benning," *Kansas Memory Project*, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka Kansas, 223399; "Interview with Bill Simms," *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Works Progress Administration, Library of Congress; "Interview with Clayton Holbert," *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Works Progress Administration, Library of Congress; Richard Edwards, "African Americans the Southern Homestead Act," *Great Plains Quarterly* 39(2), 2019, 103-130; "Treadle Machine Base," Kansas Memory Project, Kansas Historical Society, 310299, 14GH102-581-1, DaRT ID: 310299.

[334] Jacob Friefeld and Richard Edwards, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Question for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

[335] Tanisha C. Ford. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 70-73.

explore how the Anderson's heritage influenced them. She stated in her memoir that the clothes they brought with them were too warm for the summer heat, but she did not have time to remake their clothing.[336] In addition, knitted garments took an even larger role than sewing clothing did. In Denmark, her parents raised sheep and both she and her husband knew how to knit. During the early years of their marriage they sat and knitted together in the winter evenings.[337] While other sources do mention knitting how did the Anderson's ethnicity contribute to their experience?[338]

As mentioned in the introduction, I also wish to encourage other scholars to seek to understand the role that finances played for pioneers. Here, we see more myths that scholars believe. It seemed a common idea that pioneers struggled with money, but this was rarely cited and taken more as a given rather than something I could corroborate. Even though I do argue that this is true and use the women I study as examples, like Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo say, "…When analysis is solely dependent upon personal stories, as for so long the scholarship of homesteading has been, we have little way of knowing how representative such stories are."[339] However, the source material also makes it clear that as time went on, families achieve financial stability and were able to purchase fine goods and participate in fashion.

Other places of interest for this study include cleanliness as well as hair and make-up. I mention the role of cleanliness briefly in Chapter One, where I state that in the absence of an ability to be fashionable, women could at least be clean. Yet, there is far more room to examine this. How exactly did women keep clean on the frontier? Did it change their routines any? As for the second, I only found one mention of hair in my research, where Laura Ingalls-Wilder gives herself "lunatic fringe" before a party, much to her mother's distaste.[340] Luna Kellie also

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[336] Bertha Josephson-Anderson, "Excerpted Material from the Handwritten Autobiography of Mrs. Peter Anderson, Sr., Sidney, Montana." Montana Historical Society, 13.

[337] Bertha Josephson-Anderson, 3.

[338] Laura Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: An Annotated Biography*, ed. Pamela Smith-Hill, (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014), 185.

[339] Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains*, 19.

[340] Ingalls-Wilder, *Pioneer Girl,* 292.

mentioned cutting her hair after her child died. This was relatively common during this period for women to cut their hair when they were sick, believing that it would help them heal better.[341] Kellie said that she felt much better after this, but her husband was very distraught and took it as a sign of Luna's worsening mental state.[342] This would be a fascinating place for more research.

Conclusion

When I was a sophomore in college, I went on a museum trip with a group of students and one of my professors. While waiting for the rest of my group, I went to stand beside the professor and found myself looking at a case of Viking combs. She began to peer into the case with me and asked me pointedly, "What is that object?" I realized she knew the answer but was seeking to teach me a lesson. I told her it was a comb. "What is significant about that object?" I stared for a moment and began to think. I told her that combs were used for personal grooming. "What group of people did this object belong to?" she asked. "The Vikings," I replied. "What do people usually think about Vikings and cleanliness?" My professor asked me. I told her that many people thought the Vikings were a dirty, unkempt people. She nodded and smiled. "So what does this object mean?" A light went on in my mind and I smiled too. "It means that they did practice cleanliness in some form. It's not like people think!" My professor grinned, "That's right. There's a lot more to the story." The rest of the class caught up and we continued on, but that moment has remained as a significant moment in my education.

Without my professor, I would have looked at the combs and not thought twice about them. I would never have stopped to think about what the presence of combs meant and how that ought

[341] Audrey C. Peterson, "Brain Fever in Nineteenth-Century Literature: Fact and Fiction," in *Victorian Studies* 19, no. 4 (June 1976), 445-464, 460.
[342] Luna Kellie, *Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, RG3914.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, 71.

to shift my understanding of the past. I hope that I have achieved the same for Dress 2829. Visitors who see the dress may not think twice about its significance, and admittedly the lack of interpretation does little to alleviate this issue. Scholars have likewise passed by the importance of the homesteading experience.

In the end, I hope that I have been able to do justice to Dress 2829. I hope that I have been able to sift through some of the myths about clothing on the frontier to show how the frontier affected clothing and how women used clothing to negotiate the reality of life there in that space. Dress 2829 is important because when we stop and think about it, our thoughts say more about who we are. It is important to understand the reality of this space and time because it did play such an integral role in America's history and in our cultural memory. Dress 2829 is part and parcel of that history and memory and we must take a moment to stop, to consider, and to reflect.

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