

Early Industry 1800-1900

The 1890's

HATS: Women usually wore hats in the daytime. The hats were often decorated with feathers, flowers, ribbons and veils.

HAIR: Women grew their hair very long, but always wore it up in elaborate styles.

ACCESSORIES: Besides hats, women usually wore gloves on the street. Popular jewelry was made of jet, a black stone. Women carried muffs or parasols, depending on the weather.

COVERAGE: In the evening, a woman might expose her arms and throat. But in the daytime, complete coverage was required. High collars, long sleeves, and floor length dresses were the rule.

SHAPE: The hourglass figure was desirable. This was a very curvy shape with full bust and hips and a small waist. Tight corsets and extra padding helped achieve the hourglass look. Notice also the shape of the sleeves, full at the top and fitted at the bottom. This was called a leg-o-mutton sleeve.

PATTERNS: Rich, romantic patterns such as paisleys and florals were popular. Bold, wide stripes were also seen for daytime.

STYLES: American styles were greatly influenced by the English monarch, Queen Victoria. Designers also found inspiration in the theater, the Russian ballet and the countries of Asia.

SHOES: Ankle length boots that laced up were worn outdoors in the daytime. Low heeled evening slippers, often made of satin, were worn for parties and dances.



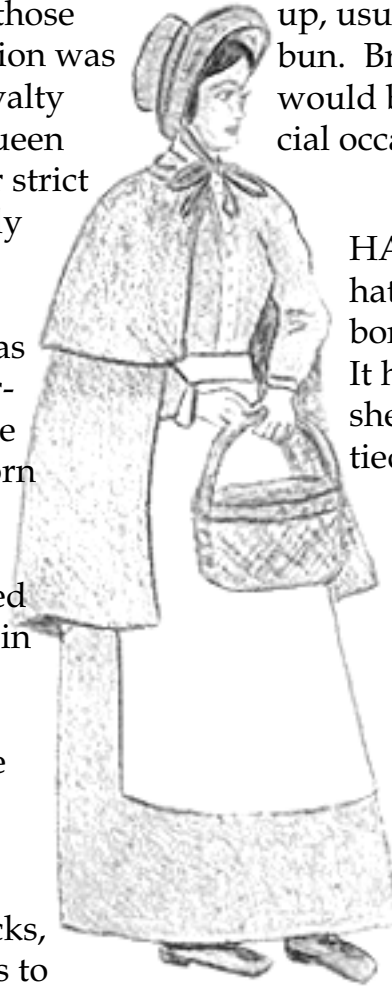
The 1800's Country Dress

STYLES: Country styles were mostly simpler versions of those worn in the city. High fashion was influenced by European royalty throughout the century. Queen Victoria of England and her strict moral code had an especially strong effect on dress.

ACCESSORIES: A cloak was the most common outer garment. This one has a double layer. Aprons were still worn to protect clothing.

PATTERNS: Small, flowered prints called calicos gained in popularity as machine-woven fabric became available. Gingham checks were also common.

COVERAGE: Day clothes almost always had high necks, long sleeves, and long skirts to protect women from the weather and to preserve their modesty.



HAIR: Long hair was put up, usually in a simple bun. Braids or curls would be added for special occasions.

HATS: The standard hat was the bonnet or sunbonnet. It had a deep brim to shelter the face and tied under the chin.

SHAPE: A fitted bodice and full skirt were popular throughout the century. Working women, especially in the country, did not wear as many petticoats, and so had straighter, simpler skirts.

Nineteenth-Century Fashion Overview

Both the way clothes looked and the way they were produced changed in some ways between 1800 and 1900. In other ways, things changed very little, especially compared to the quick changes in hemlines, styles, and fabrics that we're used to today. One thing that did not change was the basic woman's outfit: a long, ankle-length or floor-length dress. The basic men's outfit, on the other hand, changed significantly. In 1800 men were still wearing the tight, knee-length breeches, decorated coats and frilly accessories that are familiar from portraits of George Washington and other Revolutionary leaders. By 1900, men wore pants, jackets and ties not too different from today's.

Although women's hemlines did not change throughout the 19th century, their dress styles did - sometimes back and forth, the way we go back and forth between straight-leg jeans and bell bottoms today. Early in the century, American women began copying French rather than British women, looking to Paris rather than London for their ideas of high fashion. France had had a revolution in 1789; the king and queen were killed and a new "republic" was created. The revolution affected every aspect of life in France, much more so than the American Revolution, including styles. The ideals of the new leaders suggested a simpler kind of dress for women. The dress had a high waistline, just under the bust, and hung straight down with no petticoats or hoops underneath. It was made of very sheer fabrics, thin silk or thin cotton. Corsets went out of style, since this very straight dress style did not require a tiny waistline maintained by whalebone stays and tightly-tied laces. Even though they still covered a woman from neck to toe, these dresses must have seemed scandalously revealing to people used to heavy dresses worn over layers of undergarments.

Politics again affected clothing in 1815, when the French Revolution was overturned and the old monarchy came back into power. Women's dresses returned to an earlier style, with a tight waistline (held in by a corset, of course!) and wide skirt with petticoats or hoops underneath. This did not change for the rest of the century, although the details did change: necklines went up and down, decorations became more or less fancy. Beginning in the 1870's, hoops were replaced by a new undergarment that did change the shape of the long dress.

This was the bustle. Instead of holding the skirt out all the way around, like hoops, the bustle made the dress stick out in back but allowed it to fall straight down in the front and sides. Extra fabric folds and bows exaggerated the bustle's effect, making a woman's xxx look very large and prominent.

As in colonial times, how this basic dress was made and what it was made of reflected a woman's social and economic status. Women who could afford it had private seamstresses make their dresses or imported them from the fashion capitals of Europe. Working- and middle-class women made their own dresses, or at any rate they were made by family members. Even as late as 1900, there was not much of a market in inexpensive, ready-made women's clothing. The burgeoning textile industry that began in Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1820's produced mainly cotton, linen and woolen fabrics. These were the fabrics that were widely available in general stores and dry-goods stores, even in remote mid-western towns, and that women used to sew their dresses by hand. Although the sewing machine was invented in the mid-1800's, it was too expensive for home use through most of the century. As you can imagine, especially if you have done any sewing by hand yourself, women and girls spent many hours every day wielding a needle just to provide themselves with a very modest wardrobe. (In 19xx, Sears became the first store in the United States to offer credit to individual families, so that a family could buy expensive items like appliances and pay them off over time. A sewing machine was likely to be a family's first purchase "on credit".) Ready-made men's clothes could be bought in stores in the second half of the 1800's, decades before ready-made women's clothes. Perhaps this was because more men than women moved away from their families and earned their own money; these men didn't have a sister or a mother nearby to sew their clothes, but they did have money to buy them.

1800's Timeline

1800 Great Revival of 1800: widespread revival of evangelical Christianity, especially in the "western" states like Kentucky.

1803 Louisiana Purchase: the U.S. doubled its territory with this purchase of land west of the Mississippi River from France

1804 Aaron Burr challenged Alexander Hamilton to a duel and killed him

1812 War of 1812

1819 Panic of 1819: the U.S.'s first serious economic depression. The price of cotton fell from 32.5 cents a pound to 14.3 cents a pound and farmers suffered the consequences.

1823 Monroe Doctrine: The United States told European countries to stay out of North and South America.

1825 Erie Canal is completed, connecting New York City with the "western" territories.

1827 Writer Sara J. (Buell) Hale promoted the idea of Thanksgiving in her publication Ladies Magazine

1827 Swimming was taught at the first U.S. swimming pool in Boston

1828 Cherokee Phoenix, the first Indian newspaper expressed the attitude of the tribes toward leaving their lands: ". . . coercion alone will remove them to the western country allotted for the Indians."

1834 Mechanical reaper patented by John McCormick.
Founding of the American Anti-slavery Society.

1838 Trail of Tears: relocation of the Cherokee people to lands west of the Mississippi River, as required under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, with 4,000 dying along the way.

1845 Annexation of Texas to the United States.

1846 Mexican-American War begins. U.S. won in 1848 and took over the southwestern territory.

1846 The Singer Sewing Machine was patented.

1847 Founding of the Oneida Community in New York, a utopian community based on communal ownership of property and free love.

1848 First national Women's Rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York

1850 For the first time, the U.S. produced as much value in manufactured goods as in farm goods.

1852 Some women wear bloomers

1854 Supreme Order of the Star-spangled Banner, called the "Know Nothings," was formed to oppose immigrants and Catholics.

1850's The first popular national magazines are created - Harper's, Atlantic Monthly.

1860 By this year, the U.S. had 30,000 miles of railroad track and 50,000 miles of telegraph wire.

1861-1865 The Civil War

1863 Emancipation of slaves in the U.S.

1865 The Ku Klux Klan forms

1865 The U.S. Post Office guaranteed free mail delivery to all cities with a minimum population of 50,000

1869 First professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings.

1873 Panic of 1873

Early Industry 1800-1900

1874 Massachusetts passed a law limiting the work day to ten hours.

1876 Men's BVD underwear hit the market. Although people have many ideas about what BVD stands for, the letters are actually from the names of the men who owned the company: Bradley, Vorhees, and Day

1877 Railroad Strike

Reconstruction Era comes to an end in the South, replaced by segregation and disenfranchisement.

1879 Thomas Edison invented the light bulb.

1881 Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross

1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese laborers from coming to the U.S. for 10 years. The number of people seeking entry dropped from 40,000 in one year to 8,000

1886 Founding of the American Federation of Labor

1890 Battle of Wounded Knee, South Dakota - the last major battle over Indian land

1893 First successful automobile.

1893 Queen Liliuokalani, the last independent ruler of Hawaii, was overthrown by American settlers.

1898 Spanish-American War: the U.S. wins and gains colonies including Puerto Rico, the Philippines.

The Lowell Mill “Girls”

Before You Read:

In this lesson, you are going to read about the earliest factory workers in the United States: women who worked in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the early decades of the 19th century. At that time, factories were a complete novelty. Most of the women who worked in the first factories had grown up on a farm. They were used to hard work — but hard work on a farm and working in a factory are very different.

There are three readings in this section. Each reading has questions or assignments after it. As with anything, there were advantages and disadvantages to working in the mills. Some liked living away from home; others struggled to build a new sense of “home” for themselves in the city. As you read the first selection, “The Mill Girls’ World”, make check marks next to advantages the mill girls enjoyed and X’s next to disadvantages. This will help you to begin the writing assignment which follows the selection.

The second and third passages (“A Working Woman’s Complaint” and “Turn-Out – 1836”) are from the workers’ perspectives. Their words describe their feelings as life as a factory worker went downhill.

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to explain to someone else something about:

- Mill Girls
- working conditions in 19th century factories
- boardinghouses
- advantages to working in a factory

Visiting the Lowell Mills, reading novels about the time such as *Lyddie* and *Emmeline*, or contacting storytellers who have developed characters based on Lowell Mill workers are all ways to continue to study this period.

Reading: The Mill Girls' World



The term “mill girls” is used to talk about Lowell’s first group of factory workers. These workers were really not girls at all! Most were 17-35 years old. The term was used many years ago, and it stuck!

The first Lowell textile factory was completed in 1823. Workers were needed. Mill owners hired people called recruiters to find workers. Many of the workers they found were daughters of New England farmers. You may wonder why young women were hired for factory work. One reason is that sons were needed to help farm the New England soil. Another reason is that most young women already knew how to weave. Mill owners felt they would learn how to tend power looms quickly. Also, owners wouldn’t have to pay women as much as men. Many young women left the farm so the family would have one less mouth to feed. Some women sent the money they earned in Lowell home to help pay bills.

From Farm to Factory: Deciding to Move

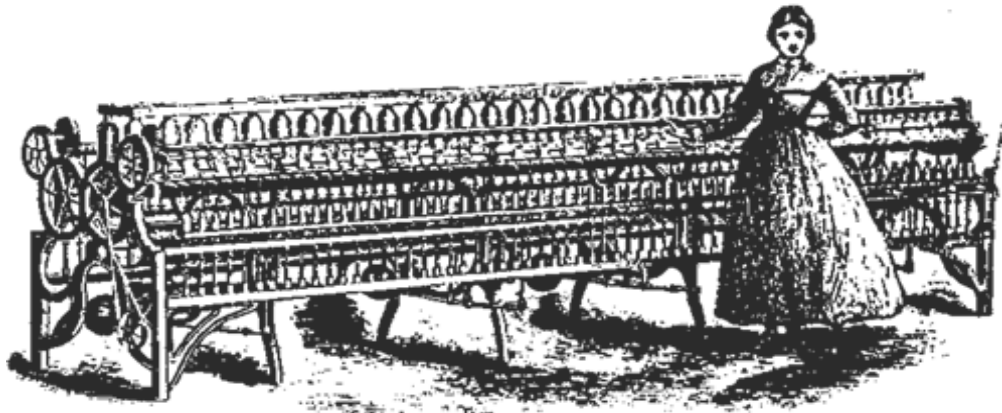
Life in Lowell sounded wonderful to many of the daughters of Yankee farmers. On the farm they were responsible for helping to cook, clean, make candles and soap, care for younger brothers and sisters, weave cloth, and make, mend, and alter clothes. They did these chores seven days a week, and didn’t earn a cent. In Lowell, young women worked six days a week, twelve hours a day, and they were paid. Most of them earned about \$3.25 each week. Room and board cost \$1.25, but the rest was theirs to keep or spend as they wished.

Time outside of work could be spent in any number of ways. Lowell had churches, a library, theatres, dances, a museum, shops, and traveling speakers. Very few of these things were available on the farm. Another highlight of Lowell was the chance to make friends with other women.

Boardinghouse Life

Lowell's mill girls lived in boardinghouses. Boardinghouses were large, long brick buildings owned by the factories. If you were a mill girl for the Hamilton Manufacturing Corporation you lived in a Hamilton boardinghouse. The boardinghouse was run by a woman called the boardinghouse keeper. She was hired by the factory to make sure her boarders were well fed and well behaved, in bed by 10:00 pm, and at church on Sundays.

Life in the boardinghouse had its ups and downs. Each young woman was expected to share her bed with at least one other mill girl. Most bedrooms had two or three double beds. In the attic beds were lined up side by side and women slept three to a bed.



If you were the last person to come to the boardinghouse in search of a place to stay - more than likely you'd be sent to the attic.

Life on the Corporation

A typical day on the corporation began early. The bells on top of the mills began ringing at 4:00 in the morning to wake everyone up. At 5:00 am they began ringing again to tell the workers to report to their work rooms. The mill girls had until 5:05 am to get inside the mill courtyard. If they were late the gates closed in front of them, and they were forced to walk through the counting house. A man in the counting house took down the names of those who were late. If you were late too often, you might get fired.

Once at work you took orders from the overseer on your floor. If you were a weaver you were responsible for keeping bobbins full, threads straight, and machinery running smoothly. You did not need to know exactly how your machine ran - that was the job of the loom fixer. If your machine stopped running for some reason, you had to call the loom fixer to get it started again. If you relied on the loom fixer too much - he might take his time getting to your machine. This was a punishment. If your machine wasn't working - you weren't making cloth. If you weren't making cloth - you weren't making money, and could lose your job. Weavers were paid by the amount and quality of the cloth they produced.

Mill girls generally worked from 5:00 until 7:00 in the morning. At 7:00 am the bells rang again to signal breakfast. The women dashed to grab their cloaks, then ran to their boardinghouses. They had until 7:30 am to eat, and until 7:35 am to get back to work. They then worked until noon, stopped work for a thirty minute dinner break, then continued to work until 7:00 in the evening. Supper was hastily eaten at the end of the work day. After supper the women could do what they wished until the keeper called them to bed at 10:00 pm.

After Hours

After supper young women liked to read, sew, tell one another stories, and write letters around the parlor stove. On some evenings a pedlar selling satin bonnets or fancy shoes, or a gentleman caller might stop by. Some of the women took classes in the evening, attended lectures, or went to the theater. Others took time to stroll the streets, looking in shop windows at jewelry and fancy dresses. Most women bought new clothing and bonnets once they had saved enough money. In the city there was a lot of peer pressure to wear fashionable clothing.

Working Conditions

Working conditions were less than perfect. The average temperature of a weave room on a summer day was often as high as 115 degrees. In the winter it could get as hot as ninety degrees. The windows were never open. It was important to keep the air in the weave room warm and moist. A breeze from an open window might cause threads to snap. Broken threads meant poor cloth. To give the room extra moisture, steam was pumped in through pipes. Cotton dust, or cotton fly, filled

the air making it difficult to breathe. Many women died from cotton dust getting trapped in their lungs.

Enough is Enough

Even though working conditions were dangerous, most women enjoyed the fast pace of Lowell in the early years. But by 1840 conditions had gotten worse. Women who had tended two machines were now required to watch three or four. The machines were running faster, and the young women were working as long as 13 hours each day. To make matters worse, the cost of living in a boarding-house had risen, and the pay had been lowered.

Many women would not work under these conditions. Some returned to the farm, some got married, others found new jobs. Some women refused to give up their jobs, but would not work under the bad conditions. These women went on strike. They walked off the job and refused to work until the hours were shortened and the conditions improved. Most of their strikes were not successful because there were always people willing to work. Many women left the mills for good. In time they were replaced by immigrant men, women, and children.

from Farm to Factory: Lowell Industrial Learning Experience. Lowell: Tsongas Industrial Center, 4th ed., July 1993. For more information, see <http://www.nps.gov/lowe/>

Reading: A Working Woman's Complaint

"I object to the constant hurry of everything. We cannot have time to eat, drink, or sleep: we have only 30 minutes, or at most three quarters of an hour allowed us, to go from our work, partake of our food and return to the noisy clatter of machinery. Up before day, at the clang of the bell—out into the mill, and at work, in obedience to the ding-dong of a bell—just as though we were so many living machines." *From a mill girl's letter to her parents, 1840's*

After Reading

1. What is this girl's complaint about her job?
 - (1) It's too much work for one person.
 - (2) Her co-workers aren't much fun.
 - (3) She is treated like a machine.
 - (4) Her job runs her life.
2. If her boss were going to answer her, he would probably say:
 - (1) Without the bell, some would get longer than others and it wouldn't be fair.
 - (2) You are hired to work with machines, so be like one.
 - (3) Your parents wouldn't let you come here if we didn't have a disciplined environment.
 - (4) I pay you for a full day's labor. Thirty minutes is enough time to eat.

Writing Activities

1. Explain why you chose your answer to #2.
2. Imagine that this girl went on strike with her co-workers and drew up a list of demands. Write the list as you think she would do it.
3. Some say that the U.S. schools are run like factories. Think about your experience in school. Write a paragraph explaining whether you agree or disagree that schools are run like factories. You might include details about the schedules, buildings, rules, and routines. Be sure to end with a conclusion that will sum up your viewpoint.

Reading: Turn-Out 1836

by Harriet Hanson Robinson From *Loom and Spindle* Published by Thomas Y. Crowell in 1898

One of the first strikes of cotton-factory operatives that ever took place in this country was that in Lowell, in October 1836. When it was announced that wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike, en masse. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went in procession from the several corporations to the grove on Chapel Hill, and listened to "incendiary speeches" from early labor reformers. One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in procession through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs. My own recollection of this first strike (or "turn-out," as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed. I had been an ardent listener and naturally I took sides with the strikers, When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, "Would you?" or, "Shall we turn out?" and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not turn out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying with childish bravado, "I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether any one else does or not," and I marched out, and was followed by the others.

The agent of the corporation where I then worked took some small revenge on the supposed ring-leaders, on the principle of sending the weaker to the wall; my mother was turned away from the boarding-house, that functionary saying, "Mrs. Hanson, you could not prevent the older girls from turning out, but your daughter is a child, and her you could control."

It is hardly necessary to say that so far as results were concerned this strike did no good. The dissatisfaction of the operatives subsided, or burned itself out, and though the authorities did not accede to their demands, the majority returned to their work, and the corporation went on cutting down wages.

from Growing Up Female in America: Ten Lives by Eve Merriam. (c) 1971 by Eve Merriam. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.

After Reading:

Multiple Choice Practice

1. The first Lowell strike in 1836 happened mainly because:
 - (1) Owners decided to cut pay.
 - (2) A girl spoke in public.
 - (3) Harriet Hanson Robinson convinced several co-workers to walk out.
 - (4) Mrs. Hanson lost her room at the boardinghouse.

2. The tone of Harriet Hanson Robinson's recollections suggests:
 - (1) vagueness due to her lack of memory of the exact events.
 - (2) rage at the factory owners who dared cut wages.
 - (3) resignation at the thought that the strike would do no good.
 - (4) pride at having had the courage to have led others.

3. The statement, "It is hardly necessary to say that so far as results were concerned this strike did no good," is compatible with which of the following views of history:
 - (1) For change to happen, people must take action over and over.
 - (2) Workers who unite can succeed in taking control of the means of production.
 - (3) Women throughout history are exploited as producers and not credited for their accomplishments.
 - (4) Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

No Wonder They Were Always Fainting!

Before Reading

1. Take a look at the pictures on the following pages. You can see pictures of 2 different kinds of undergarments worn by women in the 1800's: CORSETS & BUSTLES

2. Writing Activity

Pretend that you are traveling to Boston in the 1870's. You come from a country where both women and men wear very simple clothing. So as you walk around Boston Common, you are completely astonished to see the kinds of clothes that people are wearing - especially many of the women. You want to tell your family back home about it. Although the camera has been invented, it is not widely available yet. The only way you can describe these strange clothes is in writing, or perhaps by making some sketches.

Write a letter describing the corsets, crinolines, and bustles women are wearing. Include as many details as you can -Remember: your friends back home are going to have a hard time imagining such strange garments!

3. Keep in mind that this is a difficult reading, about at the level of the GED tests. Here are definitions for some of the new words you may run into in the reading:

frailty- weakness

slightness- smallness

fragility - being fragile or weak

vigor - energy

social status - how a person is "ranked" by others

ominously- threatening

muslin - a type of fabric

consumption - a disease like TB

debility- weakness

Victorian - refers to the years when Queen Victoria was the queen of England, from 1837 to 1901

mere- only

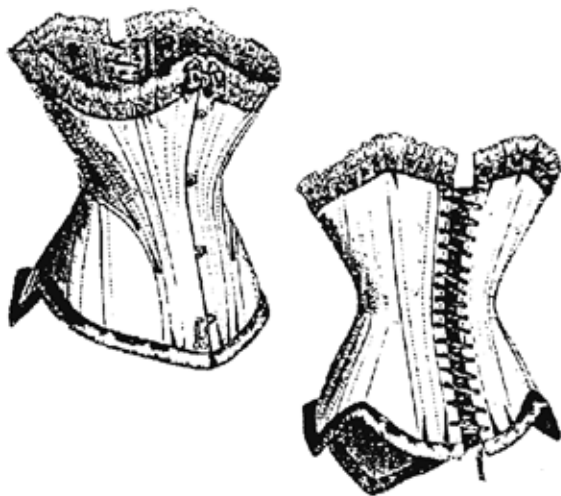
atrophied- weakened
debilitating- weakening
vigilance - being careful
expurgated - rewritten with the juicy parts taken out

Reading: Ladylike in the 1800's

This lesson is based on a reading from Alison Lurie's book, *The Language of Clothes*. Permission was not granted for the web version of the curriculum, so you have a few options: 1) Find the book published by Random House, 1981. 2) Obtain a copy of the print version of this curriculum. 3) Use the very brief quotes from the reading to construct your own lesson. 4) Find another source.

The fashions in the 1800's for women were based on ideas about women's essence. Male philosophers of the time saw women as weak in mind and body. They saw this weakness as attractive--childlike and angelic. Styles of the time accentuated this aspect of femininity and actually caused women to become more weak. For example, light colors, delicate fabrics, and low neck-lines made women look ethereal. Because they were underdressed for the cold weather, women could easily catch colds, viruses, and everything else that was going around..

Corsets were a feature of the 1800's dress. Sometimes little girls as young as three or four started wearing these garments. The idea was that women were too weak to stand on their own. They needed to be laced into a corset, to be kept straight.



Alison Lurie writes:

By the time they reached late adolescence they were wearing cages of heavy canvas reinforced with whalebone or steel, and their back muscles had often atrophied to the point where they could not sit or stand for long unsupported.

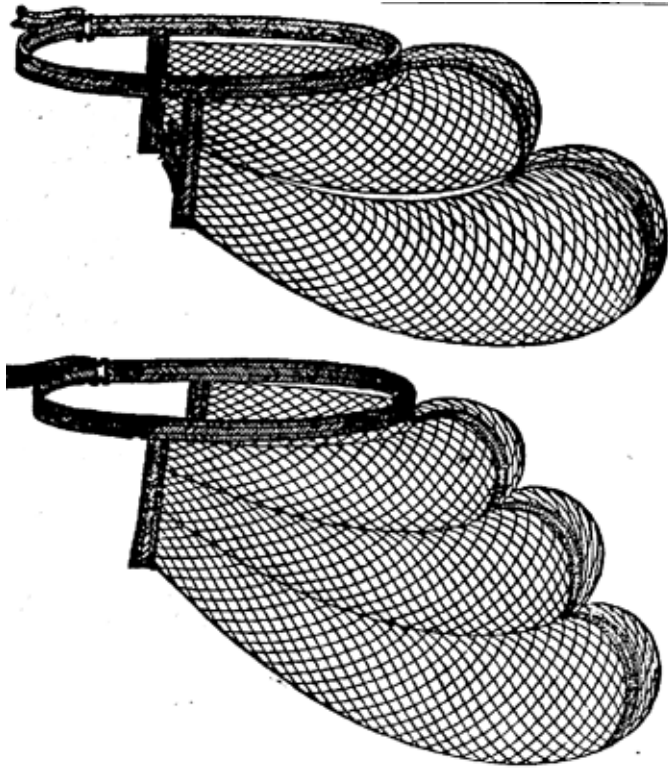
The corset also deformed the internal organs and made it impossible to draw a deep breath. As a result the fashionably dressed lady blushed and fainted easily, suffered from lack of appetite and from digestive complaints, and felt weak and ex-

hausted after any strenuous exertion. When she took off her corset her back soon began to ache; and sometimes she still could not breathe properly because her ribs had been permanently compressed inward (p. 217).

With layers and layers of clothing, it would seem as though women would stay innocent and untouched until marriage. Not necessarily so.

Although she was so heavily armored against a frontal assault, the mid-Victorian woman was often readily accessible in another direction, since she had no underpants in the modern sense. She might if she chose wear what were called “drawers”—loose, wide-legged undershorts made in two separate sections, joined only at the waist and otherwise completely open—but these conferred status rather than protection. Though this left the Victorian lady embarrassingly exposed in case of accidents, closed underpants were considered immodest because they imitated male garments (p. 219).

from Lurie, Alison, The Language of Clothes, New York: Random House, 1981.



Bustles from the
1800's

After Reading

Multiple Choice Practice

1. According to the passage, which of the following people would be most likely to be wearing a very tight corset?

- (1) a twelve-year-old girl
- (2) a young woman working in a factory
- (3) a married woman with a wealthy husband
- (4) a married woman who ran a tavern

2. Which of the following conclusions can best be drawn from the passage:

- (1) Women in the 1800's fainted more frequently than women in other eras.
- (2) Girls in the 19th century had less physical strength than girls do today.
- (3) Nineteenth-century women enjoyed wearing clothing which showed off their small waistlines.
- (4) Women's fashions in the 1800's were designed to assist women in carrying out the activities of daily life.

3. Which of the following statements best summarizes the main idea of the passage?

- (1) Nineteenth-century women's fashion included outmoded garments such as corsets, bustles, petticoats and hoops.
- (2) Women's fashions in the nineteenth century were very different from today, particularly their undergarments.
- (3) Women in the 1800's often wore as many as nine layers of clothing, which could weigh as much as thirty pounds.
- (4) In the 1800's, many women dressed so as to appear weak and help less; sometimes, their clothing actually did threaten their health and physical strength .

"The Bloomer Dress"

Before You Read:

Have you ever worn bloomers? Have you ever seen them? Sketch what you think bloomers look like. Compare your sketch to the pictures included later.

In this piece, you will read from the autobiography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Because this was written during the 1800's, some words appear here that we use less frequently today. If you run into any unfamiliar words, you can look at the list below for help:

advocating - make case for

temperance - in favor of no alcohol at all

abolitionist - person in favor of freeing slaves

donned - put on

locomotion- movement

merits - good points

elicited - brought out

sanitariums - a place to recover from TB or other diseases

doggerel- rhyme

degradation- humiliation

Much of this excerpt is about freedom. Underline any sentences, phrases, or words that point to this issue.

Reading: "The Bloomer Dress" Excerpt from Elizabeth Cady Standton's Autobiography

There was one bright woman among the many in our Seneca Falls literary circle to whom I would give more than a passing notice—Amelia Bloomer, who represented three novel phases of woman's life. She was assistant postmistress; an editor of a reform paper, "The Lily," advocating temperance and woman's rights; and an advocate of the new costume which bore her name!

Although she wore the bloomer dress, its originator was my cousin, Elizabeth Smith Miller, the only daughter of Gerrit Smith, the abolitionist. In the winter of 1852 Mrs. Miller came to visit me in Seneca Falls, dressed somewhat in the Turkish style—short skirt, full trousers of fine black broadcloth; a Spanish cloak, of the same material, reaching to the knee; beaver hat and feathers and dark furs; altogether a most becoming costume and exceedingly convenient for walking in all kinds of weather.

To see my cousin, with a lamp in one hand and a baby in the other, walk upstairs with ease and grace, while, with flowing robes, I pulled myself up with difficulty, lame and baby out of the question, readily convinced me that there was sore need of reform in woman's dress, and I promptly donned a similar attire. What incredible freedom I enjoyed for two years! Like a captive set free from his ball and chain, I was always ready for a brisk walk through sleet and snow and rain, to climb a mountain, jump over a fence, work in the garden, and, in fact, for any necessary locomotion.

Mrs. Bloomer having "The Lily" in which to discuss the merits of the new dress, the press generally took up the question, and much valuable information was elicited on the physiological results of woman's fashionable attire; the crippling effects of tight waists and long skirts, the heavy weight on the hips, and high heels, all combined to throw the spine out of plumb and lay the foundation for all manner of nervous diseases. But while all agreed that some change was absolutely necessary for the health of women, the press stoutly ridiculed those who were ready to make the experiment.

A few sensible women, in different parts of the country, adopted the costume, and farmers' wives especially proved its convenience. It was also worn by skaters, gymnasts, tourists, and in sanitariums. But, while the few realized its advantages, the many laughed it to scorn, and heaped such ridicule on its wearers that they soon found that the physical freedom did not compensate for the persistent persecution and petty annoyances suffered at every turn. To be rudely gazed at in public and private, and to be followed by crowds of boys in the streets, were exasperating. A favorite doggerel that our tormentors chanted ran thus:

Heigh! ho! in rain and snow,
The bloomer now is all the go.
Twenty tailors take the stitches,
Twenty women wear the breeches.
Heigh! ho! rain or snow,
The bloomer now is all the go.

The singers were generally invisible behind some fence or attic window.

The patience of most of us was exhausted in about two years: but our leader, Mrs. Miller, bravely adhered to the costume for nearly seven year. She was bravely sustained, however by her husband, who never flinched in escorting his wife and her coadjutors. Mrs. Miller was also encouraged by the intense feeling of her father on the question of women's dress. To him the whole revolution in woman's position turned on her dress. The long skirt was the symbol of her degradation.

from Growing Up Female in America: Ten Lives by Eve Merriam Boston: Beacon Press 1987.

After You Read:

Write your answers to these questions on a separate page.

1. Why did Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women start wearing bloomers?
2. Boys and men teased women who wore bloomers. It could be embarrassing. What would you have said if:
 - (1) Your mother wore bloomers in public? example, Mother, I wish you . . .
 - (2) Your wife or best friend wore bloomers in public?
 - (3) Your daughter wore bloomers in public?
 - (4) What advice would you have given to Elizabeth Cady Stanton? Write a paragraph explaining why she should follow the advice you give.

Multiple Choice Practice

1. Today we would call the “persistent persecution and petty annoyances” Stanton mentions:
 - (1) abolition
 - (2) harassment
 - (3) prejudice
 - (4) chauvinist
 - (5) none of the above
2. Which of the following does NOT support the theme of freedom in the piece?
 - (1) “Like a captive set free from his ball and chain, I was always ready for a brisk walk...”
 - (2) “To see my cousin, with a lamp in one hand and a baby in the other, walk upstairs with ease and grace, while, with flowing

(4) "To him, the whole revolution in woman's position turned on her dress. The long skirt was the symbol of her degradation.

3. Which of the following statements is true based on the information presented?

(1) The press played conflicting roles on the question of woman's dress, both presenting valuable information, yet ridiculing new fashions.

(2) "The Lily" was the only paper that made a positive contribution to the question of women's dress at the time.

(3) The press was completely to blame for the problems sensible women encountered from crowds of boys and men.

(4) In general, the press made a positive contribution to the discussion of women's fashionable attire by publicizing the crippling effects of tight waists and long skirts.