

Homestead Notes

York seamstress fashions authentic 18th century dresses

By Sally Bair
Feature Writer

Pannier, stomacher, and fichu are probably not words used in your everyday vocabulary even if you are a seamstress or a fashion expert. But they could become important words to you if you are planning to make a bicentennial dress and want it to be an authentic 18th century reproduction.

If you delve into the past and study the kinds of clothing our pioneer ancestors wore, you may find yourself becoming familiar with a wide range of words which have a very foreign sound.

In a two-part program conducted by the York County Extension Service, Mrs. Joan Lamberson, extension home economist, and Mrs. Virginia Kent taught homemakers some of the finer points of constructing authentic garments. Mrs. Kent is the former manager of the Gates House and Plough Tavern in York and has done extensive research into 18th century clothing, designing and sewing the costumes worn at the restored homes.

The first consideration in making your garment will probably be the fabric to be used. According to Mrs. Kent there was very little "middle class" in that period, so women were either "ladies of fashion" or pioneer women. Station in life, therefore, determined the type of garment one would wear and the fabric used.

Mrs. Lamberson said a lady of fashion would have worn floral prints or solids in imported fabrics of damask, taffeta, chintz, silk, woolen or fine muslin. She said, "The colors would have been delicate and lively, but not bright."

Rural, pioneer women would have had very functional clothing. The fabric might have been either handwoven by herself or by a weaver, and it would have been made from flax which she planted or from wool from the family sheep. So fabric would have been linen or wool, or homespun fabrics "such as hopsacking with nubs and slubs in the weave." The colors might have been yellows, greens, browns or blues, and Mrs. Lamberson said, "stripes or floral prints might have been used on special occasions."

But the question, of course, is what would one choose today? Chances are you'll be visiting the local fabric store instead of importing fine fabric or weaving your own. In any case, Mrs. Lamberson said acceptable fabrics would include your own. In any case, Mrs. Lamberson said acceptable fabrics would include kettletcloth, calico, lightweight linen, floral or striped chintz, polished cotton, combination stripes and floral motifs, broadcloth and others, especially those which might be 100 percent cotton. For a more elegant formal gown, brocade, taffeta, velvet, damask, or moire might be used.

Slightly dull colors are best, for most of the fabrics would have been dyed with vegetable dyes.

Aprons were often a part of the costume in those days, even dressy ones, but Mrs. Kent told the women never to use sharp whites, only off-white. She suggested that if you have white fabric you're considering using for an accessory of some sort, it should be tinted in tea or coffee. Unbleached muslin, which is readily available now, is very appropriate, especially for "pioneer" clothing. Homespun in natural colors is also very good, according to Mrs. Kent.

Naturally you won't get far in your planning without choosing a pattern. Commercial patterns are available in many colonial styles. Mrs. Kent, however, advises adapting these patterns to make them more authentic in detail. She said, "I used four or five patterns in making my dress."

She said zippers should be eliminated completely, and invisible closings should be substituted. She suggested using hooks and eyes or snaps, which were available then, but she also admitted to having used a Velcro closing on one bodice she sewed.

Button closings can be adapted for some patterns, but buttons were not common in those days. They may have been made of wood or bone, and for the very well off pewter buttons were available. There were also cloth covered buttons.

Mrs. Lamberson suggested that patterns could be cut down the center front and 2 inches of fabric added to be used as a facing. The facing can be folded back and buttons and button closings added in this way.

Mrs. Kent said that necklines in the 18th century were square in the back, and skirts were usually pleated, not gathered. Also, she said, elastic should not be used at neckline or elbow. Drawstrings were appropriate, and would have been woven tape or ribbon.

One detail which is omitted on most commercial patterns is extra seaming in the back bodice. There may have been as many as six seams, Mrs. Kent said, radiating from a point in the center of the bodice. Again, Mrs. Lamberson said a pattern could be altered to include this seaming. Her only caution in doing this is to make sure that correct seam allowances are added.

Fashionable gowns were frequently of two pieces, or more. The bodice and skirt were separate and often an overskirt was worn over one or more petticoats. The front bodice was fashioned to come to a point somewhere just below the natural waistline, and the bodice was very flat. The center, triangular part of the bodice was referred to as the "stomacher" and Mrs. Kent said it was often stiffened with whalebone, flexible steel rods, boards (!) or willow rods. Today, Mrs. Kent said, stays may be added to achieve that effect, or the entire stomacher could be backed with a stiffening of some type.

The "layered look" is nothing new. The 18th century lady of fashion also had a layered look to some degree. Her undergarments were often a chemise and a corset. The overdress was referred to as a "robe" and, as mentioned before, often the overskirt revealed a ticoat.

Another interesting part of her costume was a "pannier" - this was a side hoop or rump bun which added fullness to the hips, giving a bell shape to the full skirts. This added fullness, according to Mrs. Kent, helped to make the waist appear tiny and slim.

Frequently, 18th century dresses showed a prodigious use of lace. Mrs. Kent advised real caution in choosing laces for your garment. She used old lace for her clothing and she said, "Never use white nylon lace - it looks awful and ruins your outfit." Also she said lace should be matched to the fabric type. "Don't use delicate lace with plain fabric." She recommended tinting lace with tea or coffee to achieve an older look.

The pioneer woman's dress was really much simpler. It was often a simple chemise, belted at the waist, or drawn in by the apron. A drawstring would have been used at the neckline and sleeves. Often a "mobcap" completed the simple dress.

If you want to make a really authentic costume, you could follow Mrs. Kent's lead and sew your entire costume by hand. Mrs. Kent said she cheated only with the long skirt seams, but sewed everything else by hand, including yards and yards of hand done ruching, an authentic 18th century trim. One of the two dresses she modeled here

[Continued on Page 45]



Mrs. Kent brought a wide array of visuals to demonstrate some of the techniques in making an authentic colonial dress.



Mrs. Lamberson shows the wateau back on her gown as Mrs. Kent discusses how to construct it.

Country Corner

Two speckled pigs and many memories

By MELISSA PIPER

While growing up I saw many animals, especially pigs, come to and leave our farm. Interestingly enough each individual animal had its own disposition and personality which made it unique and easily remembered. There were two animals that I will always remember with clarity and a smile - Emily and Elmer the pigs.

Emily and Elmer were a pair of littermate crossbred pigs - their origin without pedigree - and their black speckled bodies and almost smiling grin set them apart from their colleagues on the farm.

The two pigs were quite different from many others that shared their pen, for they had a gentle nature and almost lazy indifference that made them easy to work with and very likeable. And in no time the two speckled pigs became family pets instead of strictly my 4-H project for the summer!

Elmer and Emily received a lot of attention from all the members of our family which included a friendly back-scratching, a basket of grass clipping for dessert and often an extra measure of corn at feeding time.

When the 4-H showtime rolled around I became a little less anxious to participate as I knew that each animal shown had to be sold later in the day. But encouragement from my family to experience the show atmosphere finally persuaded me to do so.

It was not an easy decision but Dad wanted to keep Emily for breeding purposes and so Elmer was selected to be primed for the 4-H show. I wonder if more attention was ever lavished on a pig - except Arnold of course - but Elmer got the full treatment of several baths, a tail clipping, ear clipping and even glossed feet!

Although it was my first year exhibiting in the show ring, Elmer captured first place in his crossbred class and was later named reserve champion of the breed. And while the medals and ribbons kept me glowing, parting with my animal didn't come easy.

Meanwhile back on the farm, Emily became even more popular as years went by as she was one of our most productive and gentle sows. And even when she became too old for breeding, we kept her as a favorite farm animal.

Although I recall with fond memories many of farm animals, Elmer and Emily will perhaps always be among my favorites. Their gentle nature and comical appearance won a place in our family's heart which will linger for many more years.