

The Story of a Day Dress:

What Women in the Montana Territory Wore and How They Made It

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Introduction

This project aimed to better understand the lives of the women who helped settle the Territory of Montana through the lens of clothing and fashion, focusing on the 1860s.

Women during this time were often responsible for clothing themselves and their families. To do so they had to have the knowledge of how to make clothing as well as how to source materials.

This research relied on the letters of two women who were among the first to settle Montana, Mary Edgerton of Bannack and Elizabeth “Lizzie” Chester Fisk of Helena.



Elizabeth Chester Fisk



Mary Edgerton

What Women Wore

Even women living in the rural areas of the territory wore many layers of clothing, including those that may seem restrictive by today’s standards, such as corsets and hoop skirts.

Other layers women wore include a chemise, drawers, petticoats, and the dress itself with removable undersleeves and collars.

“...think what a nice time they will have parading around with our corsets and hoop skirts on...”

Edgerton in a letter to her sister on the theft of one of her packages.

How They Sourced Materials

Stores in emerging communities often had very limited options when it came to materials to make clothing. Both women wrote to their families asking for specific types of fabric and threads. In one letter Edgerton asks her sister in the Eastern U.S. to send her all the materials to make a dress as well as fashionable sleeve and skirt patterns.

However, the mail system could be unreliable. Besides theft, the mail system was slow, with letters taking one to eight months to arrive and packages taking even longer.

How They Made Their Clothing

Sewing was primarily done by hand. Although Edgerton did receive a sewing machine in the late 1860’s, the machine only worked on certain fabrics and her local store didn’t carry thread for it, so she still did much of her sewing by hand.

Both women often write about all of the sewing they did. Fisk once wrote to her mom that she sewed 86 button holes in one day. For further context, skirts during this time had a sweep of 120” to 180” which would be hemmed by hand, let alone the rest of the dress or other layers.

Conclusion

This project left me in awe of the women who came before me. The amount of time and skill spent to not only make their clothing but also raise children and maintain a household is almost unimaginable.

Despite all of the hard work they had to do just to provide the bare minimum for their families, they still strived to remain fashionable and learned new skills to do so.

Details on my 1860’s Outfit

To supplement this project, I also decided to sew my own historically accurate outfit, including all of the layers that were typically worn by women.

For more details on the layers themselves and what I made, please use this QR Code:



References

- Edgerton, Mary Wright. *A Governor's Wife on the Mining Frontier: The Letters of Mary Edgerton from Montana*. Salt Lake City, UT: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1976.
- Fisk, Elizabeth Chester. *Lizzie, The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, 1864-1893*. Edited by Rex C. Myers. Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1989.

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