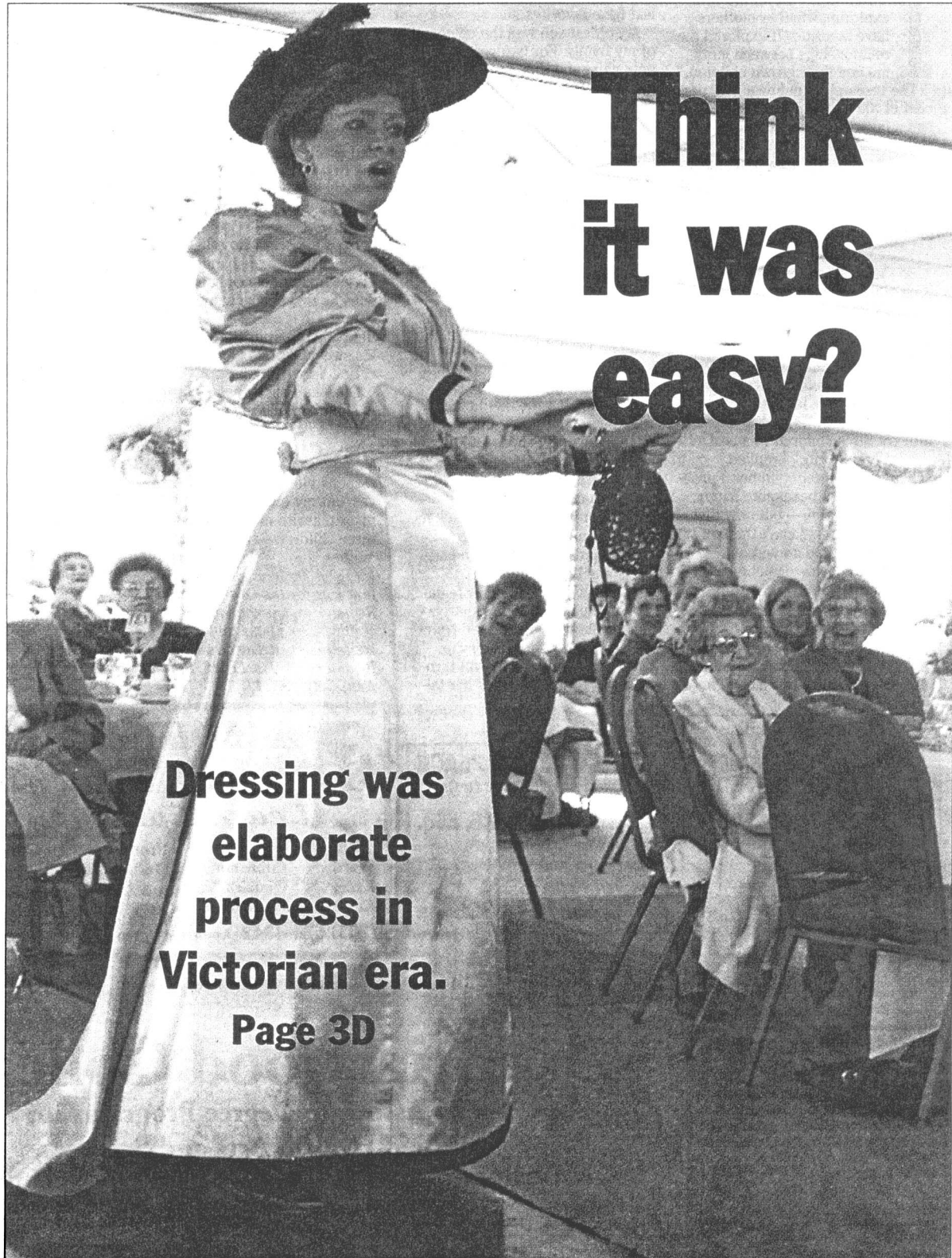


today's Woman



**Think
it was
easy?**

**Dressing was
elaborate
process in
Victorian era.**

Page 3D



Tom Kabelka Republican-American

Kandie Carle, "The Victorian Lady," performed and explained Victorian dress at the annual Waterbury Hospital Women's Auxiliary luncheon last week at the Watertown Golf Club.

No spandex and no zippers

Dressing was elaborate process for Victorian women

By Kellie Lambert
©1999 Republican-American

KANDIE CARLE was standing in her underwear in front of 170 people. With nary a shy bone in her body, she pranced around the room, displaying off her drawers while talking about bloomers.

No, this wasn't your average luncheon presentation, but Carle isn't your average woman. An actress, the East Haddam resident often spends her days dressing and undressing in front of large crowds as "The Victorian Lady." As she explained 19-century fashion's history, she dons vintage clothing to show women of the 1990s what women of the 1890s might have worn to this exact function, the annual luncheon of the Waterbury Hospital Women's Auxiliary held last week at the Watertown Golf Club.

"Volunteerism and auxiliaries were very big 100 years ago," she said. "So I will show you what was typically worn to a luncheon such as this during this time of year, how a Victorian woman would have dressed for a spring day gathering."

The history lesson would not be academic, she said, since she is an actress with a passion for fashion and not a Ph.D. With years

of amassing more than 200 books on vintage fashion as well as trunks of authentic and reproductions of clothing from all over the country, Carle provided an amusing glimpse at the clothing worn by ladies of yesteryear.

"There was no spandex, no Velcro, no nylon and no polyester," she said. "And there definitely was no such thing as a zipper."

The etiquette of fashion was an important part of a well-to-do Victorian woman's life. She spent much of her day dressing and primping to receive guests and venture out to events, and the daily routine of donning clothing was a long and involved process.

Carle began the program clothed in a robe, which she soon removed to reveal the basic undergarments of a Victorian woman: drawers, long, white cotton shorts opened in the middle; a chemise, a white cotton sleeveless dress-like garment; and stockings, which were held up by garters since the cotton fabric tended to stretch out. The undergarments were often very ornate, with colored ribbons and elaborate stitching, lace and ruffles.

Everyone wore the stockings, she said, including men. For the evening, stockings might be more elaborate, perhaps made of black silk with embroidery on them — she's even seen a pair with a red dragon sewn around the ankles, a shocking piece of cloth-

ing since the ankles were usually covered.

After putting on this basic attire, women would put on their shoes, Carle said. Why? Because once they had finished dressing, they wouldn't be able to bend down and reach their feet. Yesterday's shoes resemble the pumps of today, leather with chunky heels and pointed toes. Pointy toes were popular, she said, and shoes were often much larger than actual feet because the pointed toes extended out from the wearer's toes.

Clothes were sold in stores like today, but catalog shopping was very popular in the last century, she said.

"Mail order and direct mail was the best way to get goods, with the largest variety," she said.

Because of the mobility of the loose undergarments, many women would style their hair at this point in the process. Combs held hair in elaborate upsweeps, and adorned the topknots with ornate grace and style.

They often used curling irons, believe it or not, which were resembled today's mechanisms except they were made of iron and warmed in a fireplace instead of electricity. Men often used miniature curling irons for

DRESSING: A tough job for Victorian women

Continued from Page 3D

their mustaches, she said.

After hair styling came the Victorian female's torture device: the corset.

Corsets were worn over the undergarments and were used to cinch in a women's waist to a fashionable size, much like girdles hold in stomachs. Every girl wore some form of a corset, including babies, although children weren't formally cinched in until age 11 and completely cinched in at 16. From age 11 and up, the corsets featured boning which helped hold in a woman's figure. A lady's maid often helped her into her corset, which needed to be laced up and pulled tightly until the two ends of the corset met completely, otherwise clothing would not fit properly.

The garments confined middles so intensely that women ended up with medical problems, Carle said.

"Organs grew into places they shouldn't be and shapes they shouldn't have grown in," she said.

One autopsy report revealed that a Victorian woman had ribs removed so her waist would be smaller, Carle said.

Corsets were worn until World War I, when the metal from the boning was needed for the war effort, Carle said.

Petticoats were now added, whether one or several layers. Like other undergarments, the underskirts featured elaborate stitching, ruffles and lace.

Finally, corset covers were worn over the undergarments. The covers looked like a little white cotton vest which buttons up the front.

The entire process of dressing, until this point, took at least 30 minutes. Meanwhile, Victorian men, she joked, easily put on a basic white union suit in one fell swoop while women piled on the layers.

Then Carle decided to cover up and add her formal clothes. She donned a seafoam green silk skirt with velvet trim and a dust ruffle sewn underneath. The dust ruffle served a useful purpose: Since skirts were so long and near the ground, the ruffle could be removed for laun-

dering instead of washing the whole skirt, she said.

Every piece of clothing was made in pieces so you could mix and match, she said. For example, her skirt could be paired with a more revealing top to wear to an evening ball. For this occasion, she added a matching jacket, a tightly fitted garment which featured similar boning to the corset and fastened snugly up the front.

"Hooks and eyes, hooks and eyes," Carle said, referring to the garment's little fasteners as she arduously affixed her jacket.

Now that her clothing was finally complete, Carle began adding her accessories. She chose a matching necklace, bracelets and "ear bobs," or earrings, she said. The jewelry was ornate but not glittery or shiny, since women saved that style of accessory for the evening.

A smart-looking black hat was secured upon her head with a hat pin, a tool which could also be used "for those occasional mashers," she said, referring to a date gone wrong. A tiny crocheted purse was filled with the correct accouterments, from a handkerchief and vial of perfume to a tiny container of smelling salts.

A parasol was an essential accessory to block out the sun, since tanning and sunburning was a Victorian "no-no." Tanned and burned skin was found only on the poor, Carle said.

"They were incredibly class-conscious," she said.

Make-up was forbidden "unless you were a harlot or an actress," Carle said, making a face to refer to the latter occupation. A ripe strawberry rubbed on the lips and cheeks, and a little bit of charcoal on the eyelashes could improve a well-to-do appearance, she said.

Tussy-mussies, or posy holders, were little metal or silver cones which held tiny bunches of aromatic

flowers and hung from a ribbon attached at the waist. In the Victorian era, different blossoms had different meanings and bunches of flowers reflected sentiments, she said. The little bouquets provided aromatherapy for times when scents were not exactly desirable, she said.

"There was no such thing as deodorant and there were many, many horses," she said while the audience chuckled. "It was a polite way of saying P-U!"

Skin-tight gloves were added to the hands and fitted so taut that often maids had to help put them on with special glove stretchers. Gloves were practical, Carle said, since they often protected the wearer from germs and viruses transferred by handshakes.

Fancy fans were used not only for a cool breeze, but for messages as well. When a woman held a fan in various positions, a message was communicated without words to a man across a room.

The little details of Victorian life,

from the beauty of the clothing to the languages of flowers and fans, reflected people's respect for beauty. The era had a high mortality rate, and the Victorians appreciated every moment.

"They knew how precious life was and how to honor it," she said.