

A Testament for Simple, Historically-Based Modern Garments

By Susannah B. Smith

"I hope some of you may be able to help me out here. First of all, I believe in dressing conservatively, and I am shall we say of a husky build. As you can imagine, I have a hard time finding conservative non-pants outfits that fit. Most commercial dresses don't fit me because I am about 6 sizes larger on top than on bottom. So needless to say I am resorting to making my own clothing. Can anyone suggest dress and shirt/skirt styles that are flattering to full figures? I have kind of an apple figure. I'm only 4 months postpartum and tend to still look pregnant in dresses. But I would like to find at least one alternative to the shirt and skirt look. Also, it would have to be nursing accessible. What fabric would wear well and not cling to every little flaw? Also, I had the pleasure of a conversation with an old order Mennonite woman. I asked her how they could stand to wear a dress and head covering in the summer, I get so hot in my dresses that I get sick and have to go inside. She told me that the key was in the fabric they use to make the dresses out of, which she did tell me, but I can't for the life of me remember what it was. Does anybody have any idea? Thanks for your help. --Staci"

This plea was recently sent to a list to which I belong that is populated by people who wish to live simply and have a more tactile, self-reliant experience with daily life. The questions she asked are so deeply rooted in the everyday experience that a simple answer to the list could not possibly cover all that I have discovered in my 32 years in making garments, both historic and modern, for everyone from newborn premature infants weighing less than four pounds, to adults weighing in excess of 400 pounds.

Your body is your business; its shape and features are entirely your business, and how you dress and move about is expressly your business.

Still, sharing a little of my experience in dealing with nearly every body type could shorten a person's search for what is right for him or her. To that end, I offer some of what I have learned here.

My background is this: I practice living history at several historic sites, and have done so for over 15 years. It still amuses me to hear folks come to sites and express instant outpourings of sympathy --entirely unnecessarily --for my having to wear such "hot and uncomfortable" attire. I instantly express the same outpouring of sympathy for them: saying such impertinent, but entirely truthful things like: "I am so much more comfortable in my skirts and petticoats than you in your tee-shirts and shorts or jeans! Indeed, I have built-in air conditioning, while you must bear with such clingy, uncomfortable and non-breathable clothing." Then people are astonished to discover I am corseted. "How awful!" they exclaim. "You must be positively stifling; how can you work in that thing?"

"Nonsense," I reply. "I assure you I am much more comfortable than you." I smile, and they go on, wondering if I am crazy or merely misguided, and how much of this is part of the tour, anyhow? Therefore I do not add, but instead I keep the knowledge inside: Dresses and petticoats are quite possibly the most comfortable and healthful garments ever invented. Even men in other times, other cultures, wore them happily. I do not attempt to speak for the male experience, however, only the one I am familiar with: that of being female in a world where that femininity is lost, subdued, hushed up. I am quite sorry dresses and skirts fell out of fashion in favor of masculine-inspired wardrobes, but that is a social matter unto itself having to do with industrialization and the death of traditional lifeways that followed the First World War. I share the opinion of many social historians: that we are poorer for the loss, and in fact instead of being liberated from the fetters of Victorian social constraints, western civilization as a whole was robbed of our very femininity at this point in history. We merely traded one set of rules for another,

equally rigid and binding. Some have gone so far as to say that the women of the 1920s were masquerading as the boys who had gone off to war, had never returned, and so could not contribute to the betterment of society. There is myriad evidence for this. One day we will figure out a way to rectify this imbalance, and feminine culture will again be acceptable without the appearance of subversion it has now. Now to say one prefers femininity is to say one advocates the subjection of our sex to that of the masculine. There is nothing further from the truth. Our sex has had to become the masculine, in order to survive."

But I digress, indeed that is a subject for another essay. Back to our subject: that of clothing simply and attractively! Having dressed both in modern and past ways and performed daily chores doing so, true living historians can attest to several facts. Bear in mind that the recent "pioneer" type TV-reality shows were sensationalized and perpetuated many myths merely to make the experiences seem typically awful. Misery sells ads, people flock to see things they expect to be negative; if these people were happy, the general public would soon be bored, and the advertisers would not support the program. Suffice it to say, the true-life experience of our ancestors bears little resemblance to what we saw on these shows. Their real-life pleasures, dangers, distresses, and natural outcomes were not even a minimal part of these programs, despite claims to the contrary. But we will limit our discussion here to clothing. Also, dressing from the skin out in authentic historic garments is an entirely different experience than putting on a zip-back poly-cotton blend calico dress over modern undergarments, which is the usual practice of many historic sites that employ volunteer docents. The first is a pleasant experience, the second godawful.

FACT: It is entirely a misconception that our forebears "bore" the wearing of their clothing, including corsets and the attendant undergarments. Having worn such items daily for years, I can attest not only to their comfort but their practicality. Below I will list a few bits of advice that translate well to "modern" wardrobes. They may seem a bit odd at first, but believe me; they will go far in lessening the need for such absurdities as modern air conditioning and the Atkins Diet. My own frame of reference is, I live and work in the southern United States, where our summers are humid and hot, and our winters can be just as cold as those in Connecticut.

Nine Simple Steps to a Flattering, More Comfortable Wardrobe

*A not-so-short list of basic rules follows
that I hope will be of some help in assessing your clothing collection
and re-evaluating the decisions you make in deciding what to wear.*

1. PURE NATURAL FIBER FABRICS, including those in your undergarments, and excellent fit made to your measurements that are flattering to your body type are the keys. These are things over which you can exercise complete control if you make your own garments and/or purchase from natural fiber sources. 100% cottons, silks, linens, lightweight wools, rayons, or blends using a combination of these natural fibers are your best bets. Avoid blends containing polyester, nylon, elastic spandex, and acetates. These hold moisture and body heat and do not allow the body to breathe in order to regulate its own temperature. Some sources: WinterSilks, Garnet Hill, and the Vermont Country Store for natural undergarments with a minimum of terrible things such as spandex, nylon, underwires, and elastic. These materials are unhealthy and uncomfortable. Shun them in favor of brassieres, slips, tap pants, and camisoles made of natural silk, cotton, batiste, and irish linen, which last longer and are entirely better for you. Better yet, explore corsetry. This is entirely too large a subject to address here, you will have to do your own research. Suffice it to say a properly fitted corset or stays of natural cotton, either unboned, or boned with light steel or reed splint will alleviate back problems, provide better bust support, and allow your body to breathe the way it needs to, in addition to improving digestion and posture. I know some will be appalled and believe I am crazy to even suggest corsetry. Please do your own research and

know that most of the "common knowledge" is actually myth, propagated by the fashion industry of the early 20th century, which harkened to the extremes of corsetry in the late 1870s & 1880s, and claimed medical validation based on these extremes. These extremes were not the rule, they were the exceptions, and were related to society's loss of femininity referenced above.

2. STAND AND SIT UP STRAIGHT. This is the biggest difference between the fit of our clothing and that of our forebears. We slump, slouch, hunch over, and laze about, inhibiting our lung's ability to take in fresh air and our back's ability to carry the weight of our bodies. This major difference is the reason we can be fooled into thinking our ancestors over-corseted. They are actually standing up straight, when we think they are being forced to do so. This is entirely a myth. Good posture was once practiced everywhere; today, we hardly know the meaning of the word. EXERCISE, of course, is a fashion asset, and certainly includes dancing, running after the children, gardening, walking the dog, as well as your daily work: making beaten biscuits, hoisting firewood or a heavy cooking pot, tending the sheep, &c., &c., as long as it is undertaken with joy and strength of mind. What need had our ancestors of Atkins, when there was the joy of Friday night dances and work in abundance?

3. WEAR ONLY WHAT FITS. How do you know when your clothing really fits? Some questions to ask yourself:

- a. **Does it feel good?** Does it look good? Do you smile when wearing it? Then it probably fits. Does it gap open, fall unevenly, or slip about on your shoulders or hips? Then it probably doesn't. Does it pull, bind, or pinch? Ditto. If you are unsure about an item, look in the mirror. Did you catch yourself in an unconscious frown? This can be a surprise; many times a garment that is beautiful on the hanger becomes a terrible sack or constricted cell when donned. Take it off; if it cannot be altered, donate or toss it out.
- b. **Look at the hemline.** This is a very subtle thing, but if the hem does not hit you correctly, the entire line is thrown off. I have had to sigh and put away otherwise perfectly acceptable garments simply because they were too short and hit me at the wrong place on my knee or calf, but had too little hem to let out. Better that than the garment speak ill of you. A general rule is, the narrowest points on the leg are best. For short styles, this will be the narrow part of the knee, for very short styles (which I realize most of us do not wear, but for open-mindedness' sake), that would be the narrowest part of the thigh, before it widens out. For long styles, the narrow part of the leg just above the ankle, and for mid-length styles, that would be the narrow part where the shin-muscle joins the shinbone. A tip on salvaging a garment with an otherwise too-short hemline that you just cannot bear to get rid of: try wearing it over a longer petticoat, so the lace or ruffle falls below the shorter garment.
- c. **Assess the color.** Color, in my opinion, is part of good fit. If a color is not flattering to you, it matters not whether the proportions are right, you will never look well in it. Discover your best colors and stick by them. Doing so will simplify your life greatly, and minimize the time you spend in shopping and building your wardrobe. There are entire books written on this subject, I will not attempt to repeat their wisdom here.
- d. **Assess your body type or style.** Then learn what shapes balance that style, and stick by them. Like color, there are many available reference articles and books that include information about body type, go check them out. Basically they will offer typical classes based on shape –"apple" or round, "pear" or triangular, &c., &c. –and ways to make these body shapes appear more balanced. Assess your silhouette in the mirror, wearing a simple garment that fits well. Define your good points; assess your less-flattering ones by taking stock of what flatters you and what does not. If you have an "apple" shape, you may be more comfortable and look best in garments without definition at the natural waist. The raised waist, or no-waist silhouette such as we see in the princess-style, may make you happiest.
- e. **Assess your entire current wardrobe,** keeping the basic rules of good posture, natural fabrics, and good fit in mind. Donate or throw out items that do not comply with

these rules, unless they do have some hope of being re-made into something useful (such as toss-pillows from a skirt that has lovely fabric, a child's garment from something you can't wear, or take the cast-offs to your sewing room if they may be made to fit you or someone else with adjustment or alteration).

5. KISS -- KEEP IT SIMPLE, SWEETIE. *Simple does not mean boring, fake, or lazy. Simple means suitable for you in every way. Simple means if you discover something that suits you, then make or buy it in multiples. It is not the number of clothing items you have, but their suitability for you, that is important. Nothing unsuitable is ever simple, no matter what its claims for ease of care or good value. Simple does not mean baggy, boring or plain, it means the summation of suitability that includes good fit, good fabric, and good lines. While frills and silly details that detract from your natural confident beauty are obviously not what we are after, tasteful, interesting details such as collars, cuffs, or a great pin or set of earrings, certainly simplify your task in making the impression you want to make simply by limiting the length of time it takes to get dressed in the morning because you know it works. Along those lines: do you really need to wear makeup every single day? Experiment with merely applying an excellent moisturizer on clean skin and drinking plenty of water, getting enough sleep, and eating the right foods. No makeup on earth has yet been invented that can adequately cover the lack of these, nor can add as much to your outlook and appearance as the right amount of each.*

6. INSIST ON YOUR CLOTHING MADE WELL, *with natural fiber linings, high-quality fastenings, an extra stitch or two for strength wherever the garment must take wear. Quality will repay you many times over by lasting longer and fitting better than cheaper goods. Good clothing can be re-made by changing the length of a hemline or sleeve, altering a neckline detail, &c., and thence give you twice or three times the wear. This technique is what allowed our ancestors to keep the same garments 10 to 20 years or more. If you have decided to make or alter your own garments, start with a good assessment of your measurements vs. the ones on the commercial pattern you have chosen to make. Make sure you adjust the pattern wherever your measurements vary an inch or more from the pattern measurements. Choose your pattern size by the bust or hip measurement, whichever is larger, and wherever possible, combine sizes for the best fit. A class in fitting techniques is a wise investment: it is knowledge you will not outgrow, but build upon for the rest of your life. And, if sewing is not for you, consider that the services of a good tailor or seamstress are an equally wise investment.*

7 LOOK AT YOUR WAISTLINE *–If you are taller or shorter, narrower or wider than the norm, raising or lowering the waistline on garments anywhere from 1 1/2" to 4" above or below the natural waist (which is 1" above the navel on all but the most long-waisted women), give several things: the illusion of proportionate height to weight, a balance between bust & hip/stomach size, and the ability to move more freely. Unfortunately, many garments that rest right at the waistline do not allow for natural expansion and contraction of the stomach and intestines throughout the day, and therefore can contribute to the constricted feeling we may get after meals, so may actually be unhealthy to wear. In addition, for all but the most perfect figures, the waistline is not the most flattering place for pants, skirts or belts to ride as this horizontal adds inches and the appearance of pounds to what is immediately above and below it.*

8. LIGHT COVERINGS *of sheer, natural material are cooler than bare skin, and also can insulate on cooler days. Try it, you'll see. Therefore, a scarf or head covering of Irish linen, sheer cotton lace, or silk will both keep you warmer on breezy days, and protect you from the sun's blazes on hot ones, as well as keeping your hair clean, out of your eyes, and protecting it from dulling ultraviolet light. A light shawl of fine wool or linen will also do the same for your neck & shoulders. And see? How graceful you suddenly feel, and appear!*

9. DEVELOP AN APPRECIATION FOR PERSPIRATION. *It is the body's natural ability to regulate its own temperature. How did our forebears do it? They "sponged off," several times a day if need be, with clean water. They changed clothes two or three times a day, having*

garments for morning, afternoon, and evening, hanging up the old ones to air out and dry before putting them away, turning them inside out and hanging out in the sun or on the grass to banish odors, simply and naturally. Sunshine and chlorophyll kill bacteria. Spritz underarm areas with clear vodka to kill germs that cause odors. (OK, I know many of you will clamor "My great-grandmother had one dress for everyday and one for Sunday." That may be true, but it is an example of your great-grandmother's poverty, and was not the norm. I would wager that when Grannie was young she came into the house, took off that dress, and especially in summer did her hardest, messiest chores away from prying eyes because she was clad only in her linen shift and petticoat. Most folks had 3-4 well-made day outfits, 1-2 sets of work garments, and 1-2 for Sunday/visiting/special occasions, and changing & airing those garments as the heat of the day came and went was part of what made the garments last. But this, as other things I mentioned here, is an entire topic unto itself).

You may find that dressing more simply and following the above nine keys to more comfortable clothing allows you to find and explore your feminine side again. It has been far too long that women have been stripped of both the comfort and femininity that is rightly theirs. No matter if you are short or tall, wide or narrow, it should be a simple matter to dress comfortably in garments that are flattering and tasteful. The ladies from whom we are descended had more natural experience, better choices, a more sharply defined sense of what was appropriate for their bodies, and hence a much better time of it in this regard than we do by far today, with all of our so-called fashion "choices."

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