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Performance artist with a passion for the past

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EAST HADDAM – Kandie Carle is a woman with a passion for the past. At an age when most kids were cruising the malls, Carle was rummaging through thrift stores and antique shops for vintage clothing and accessories.

Her love of by-gone days was inspired, in part, by her grandmother. She taught Carle to sew, and, during their lessons, would tell stories about her mother, Carle's great-grandmother, and her life at the turn of the century. She also gave Carle, then 12, what would become the first pieces in her collection of Victoriana: A beaded handbag and some old photographs.

Carle eventually became interested in making her own reproduction clothing, which she has carefully researched for authenticity. She has amassed, over the years, a 200-volume library relating to the Victorian/Edwardian eras.

Everything is made "as non-anachronistic as possible: No velcro and no zippers," Carle says. "I'm lucky to have sources for 1890 patterns." The patterns, however, come without instructions, and, she admits, "It's a lot of guesswork."

During high school, Carle discovered another passion – the theater. Her acting career took her on the road, "going where the jobs are," but her hours away from the stage were spent in antique malls, scouting for bargains. And if there is a story associated with the item Carle is purchasing for her collection, she wants to hear it.

"I try to get as many factual stories behind the articles I've collected," she says. She has found a unique way to share those stories through her one-woman show, "The Victorian Lady."

Catherine Avalone/The Middletown Press

Kandie Carle, known as "The Victorian Lady," left, a performance artist from East Haddam, put on an interactive clothing demonstration for a tea recently at an East Haddam Twelve Doors of Christmas event.

"The Victorian Lady," which Carle developed three years ago, indulges her passions for acting and Victoriana, while showcasing her skill as a seamstress. The program brings to life, through an interactive clothing demonstration, the "fashion, society, leisure and arts" of the Victorian age, a time which spanned the years from the middle of the Civil War up to the early 1900s. About a quarter of her presentations are done for the public, like her holiday appearance at East Haddam's Twelve Doors of Christmas, while the others are for specific organizations, clubs, societies or retirement communities.

Preparation for the program is extensive. Carle has to carefully clean and iron the pieces of vintage or reproduction clothing she will be bringing to the show. She also spends an hour doing her hair in a style appropriate to the period she will be representing.

"[And] I'm my own 'techie'," Carle explains. She brings everything by herself, including the backdrop for the program, a dressing screen, a trunk, hat boxes and three garment bags of clothes.

The introduction to the program itself should dispel any notions that the presentation, although historical in content, might be the least bit boring. Carle opens the show wearing a silken dressing gown, which she removes to reveal ... underwear.

But, being Victorian underwear, "I am, of course, completely covered," Carle says, adding that she sometimes does a little dance, a modified "can-can," which adds humor and offsets any embarassment the garments may have caused.

Then, piece by piece, starting with the corset, she begins the time-consuming task of dressing herself in the fashionable attire of a middle-class Victorian woman. According to Carle, most women of that time period required domestic help to assist them to dress. She selects her own "maid" from the audience to lace her into the corset and to help with other details as she assembles her costume.

As she dresses, Carle keeps the attention of those in attendance with interesting anecdotes about Victorian life. Some historical "re-enactors" portray a specific character, but Carle prefers to present herself as an "everywoman," although she will mention people of note relating to that time.

She also points out that she is a performer, not a lecturer, and prefers an interactive audience, encouraging questions at any time throughout the program.

Corsets are often a topic of discussion. People are curious, Carle says, about whether or not women really had to have an 18-inch waist. She explains that Victorians were corsetted from infancy, and that both boys and girls wore corsets, although they might be called "braces." It was not so much a fashion statement, she relates, as simply what they considered an undergarment.

Despite the large amount of knowledge she has acquired over the years, Carle occasionally is stumped by a question from the audience, as she was recently when a young girl asked what time school started.

Carle had to tell her she didn't know. Although diaries and letters she has read from that time mention school, she did not recall any references to the hour of the day it actually started.

A typical program featuring "The Victorian Lady" runs an hour or an hour-and-a-half, but the questions often continue long after the show has ended. Members of the audience have even offered Carle family clothing items and she has received gifts of vintage clothing in the mail from people who have seen her program.

"You know you've made an impact when someone is willing to give up something like that," Carle says, obviously moved by the generosity she has experienced. "I didn't know I'd touch people in that way."

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