The News-Times
NEWTOWN

Dressed and *distressed*

'Victorian Lady' discusses perils of corsets, no deodorant

By Sybil Blau
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Corsetiere.

One hundred years ago, this word, French in origin and sounding like the title of an old pirate movie, was probably known by every adult American.

Why?

Because a corsetiere was the person who fitted children, women and men for corsets, those closefitting undergarments that gave support or the desired fashionable figure.

An example of a corset and how it shaped the hourglass figure of the 1890s belle was related by Kandie Carle as she presented "The Victorian Lady," her one-woman show, at the C.H. Booth Library last week.

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Carle, an actor who has a passion for history and a flair for sewing, combined all three talents to research, write and produce this performance. She has also toured with it for the last four years.

According to a press release, she is the owner of "a vast collection of authentic Victorian and Edwardian clothing and accessories from the mid-ninetieth century to the turn of the twentieth century."

Her presentation is, in a way, a reverse of a striptease. Carle begins the program in period undergarments (the word "underwear" doesn't do justice to the beauty of the clothing). She adds layer upon layer of the clothing of the chosen period until fully dressed and accessorized. Along the way, she explains how,

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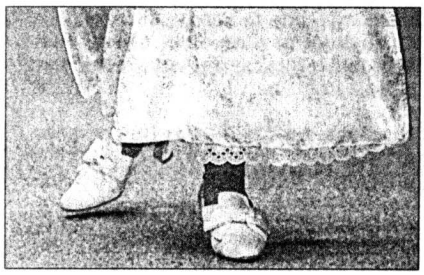

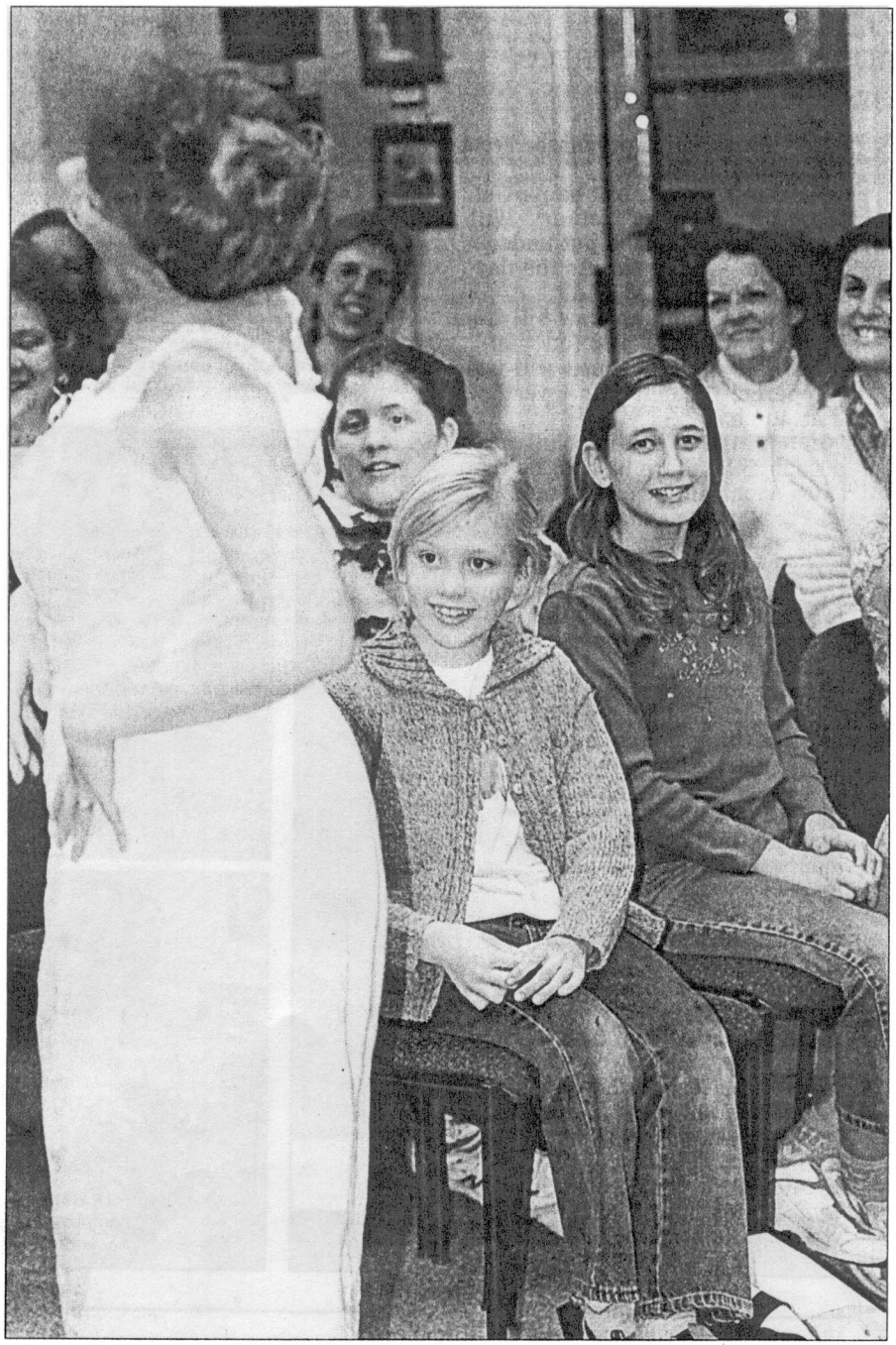

"Victorian Lady" Kandie Carle starts out in undergarments and progressively gets ready to attend a ball. Right, Madeline Keane, center, and Megan Sajovic enjoy the start of the performance at the Booth Library in Newtown. The photo at the left shows Carle's bathrobe hemline and her vintage reproduction shoes.

OVER →

▷'Victorian Lady' dresses for the ball

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when, why and where each piece would have been worn.

The fashion example for this show was a single, middle class woman about to go to a formal ball — a dress-up occasion for which one gown did for the whole season, said Carle. That was the mode.

Such a woman, who of necessity had a lady's maid for dressing and other intimate functions, began getting ready from the head down.

"Anyone know what this is?" Carle asked the audience of 80 people. "Does it look like a rat's nest?"

In fact, it was a "rat" — a collection of hair that was inserted on top of the head, pinned in place and then wrapped with the woman's hair to give her that Gibson Girl look.

A "rat" was de rigeur at that time. Middle class and other women wore a shawl-like garment around their shoulders when they combed or brushed their hair. The hair that fell onto the shawl was collected, saved and ultimately made into a rat, Carle explained.

Such packages of hair were made into many shapes so that different hairstyles could be achieved, she reported.

Lard was used to keep the style neat and in place, she said.

"There was no mousse or hairgel or spray. Men and women also used pomade and Macassar oil on their hair."

Women, especially for formal events, decorated their hair with combs (Carle's glittered with rhinestones), feathers and flowers.

Makeup was not worn.

"Aside from a little strawberry juice on the lips and charcoal on the eyelids, Victorian women never wore makeup," she added with some sarcasm. "Only fallen women and low class people wore makeup."

After the hair was done, a woman began the task of putting on undergarments.

First would come what began as bloomers and ultimately became known as drawers.

Bloomers are named after Amelia Bloomer who first wore them during the historic women's convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y., in 1848.

She didn't invent them.

"The garment, loose fitting trousers tied at the ankles, originated in Turkey and were comfortable compared to the 45-pound ensembles middle class women of that time wore," Carle said.

However, bloomers bit the dust for a while because when a woman wore them — as trousers — she was ridiculed. They effectively diverted attention from the point the female speaker was making.

By the 1890s, bloomers were back. They were used for those daring women who rode bicycles, played tennis or went swimming. As time progressed, they were worn under skirts and became shorter and shorter. Finally, they earned the name "drawers."

"Anyone know why?" Carle asked the audience.

"Yes," she said to someone. "You're right. They were held in place with a drawstring."

The next article of clothing a woman put on was a chemise. A chemise was a highly starched slip, usually made from cotton, and decorated with lace.

Nowadays, young women, when they find such chemises in vintage clothing shops, think they are gowns and wear them as such, Carle reported.

"They don't know what they're really wearing. They seem to think because it covers a lot of the body, it must be a gown."

Stockings, "typically of colored silk," came next.

These were thigh-high items, usually held in place with garters.

At this juncture, Carle momentarily left off to speak about the contraption men used to hold up their hose.

Viewing a picture of this thing from a Sears catalogue brought a gasp and laughter from the audience. They saw a form of suspenders to keep up men's socks.

Slipped on over the head and draping the shoulders and upper back with four pieces of elastic straps attached to the tops of the hose, this item looked more like a punishment then something that could be comfortably worn.

"Shoes for formal occasions were either white or black and of a good material," she said, as she modeled a white brocade pair.

"They were never worn in the street, but were brought to the ball and put on there. Boots were worn in the street," she explained.

Drawers, chemises, stockings, shoes. What next?

The corset.

"In 1895, the hourglass figure — full bosom and full hips — was the thing," Carle said. "However, it was shape shifting and restricting because it was supposed to be worn tight."

Regardless of that tightness, a corset was worn by both sexes and manufactured for children ages three *months* and up.

"It was not as hard to wear as we think because they were used to it," she said, "but, because they shaped some people the way they were not meant to be shaped, wearing them did cause medical problems for some."

On top of all this came a petticoat, a two-piece gown (the bodice and skirt were interchangeable with other outfits), jewelry and a nosegay.

"Don't forget, there was no deodorant," Carle related.

Above from left, Madeline Keane, Megan Sajovic, Haley Keane, Emily Weber and Renee Rushefski follow the "Victorian Lady" around the room.

Near left, Kandie Carle places a "rat" into Renee Rushefski's hair.

Far left, Carle enjoys a moment of levity with the audience as she prepares for the ball.

Photography by Douglas Healey