Telling The Story Of A Victorian Lady, Layer By Layer

BY JAN HOWARD

A Victorian Lady took her audience back in time to the Civil War days of the 1860s during a program September 25 sponsored by the C.H. Booth Library.

Unlike a dry historical lecture with dates and places to remember, Kandie Carle uses her considerable talent as an actress and her passion for bygone days to create a performance that uses clothing as a means to bring a historical period and its people to life.

Beginning with the underwear of the Civil War era through the addition of layer upon layer of clothing, Ms. Carle recreated how a woman in 1865 would prepare for a formal ball. From corset to gloves, she described each article of clothing, its use, how it was worn, and when and where it was appropriate.

Throughout the hour and a half presentation, with humor and historical knowledge, she shared tidbits of information about the clothing, lifestyle, fashion, manners, etiquette, role of servants, and

(continued on page A-10)
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(continued from page A-1)

daily lives of the people who lived in that era.

Ms Carle, a resident of East Haddam, has been working in the theatre for over 20 years as an actress, dancer, and singer, from Shakespeare to musical comedy.

"Welcome to my boudoir," Ms Carle said in greeting.

Dressed in a dressing gown, Ms Carle told the audience that filled the library meeting room that her passion for performance and the love of vintage clothing and history began as a young child.

Her love for the past was inspired in part by her grandmother, she said, who taught her to sew. During those lessons, her grandmother would tell stories about her family.

"I was given a bedazzled bag and some tippets," Ms Carle said. "I knew that whatever I did, I wanted to know about the people related to me."

She started to collect items of vintage clothing, she said, "for the stories behind them," and to reproduce clothing from actual designs and patterns of the eras in which she was interested. She wanted to share her collection with others. She wanted to present history through the lives of the people she saw staring soberly out from those early tippets, to make them once again flesh and blood people who had lived active, interesting lives.

"I wanted to flesh out those folks for you, to color in those images for you."

For the past four years, she has been touring with her one-woman show Victorian Lady, which can touch upon any of the three Victorian eras, the Civil War period of the 1860s, the Gilded Age of the 1890s, and the Edwardian age from 1900 to 1910.

"In the 1860s there was more going on than the Civil War," Ms Carle said.

Attending a formal ball was not just for the rich, she said. "Think middle class," she said, noting she has seen an 1899 ball card for a Butcher's Association Ball in Alaska.

The Victorian era, which spanned from 1837 to 1901, was a time of social interaction. There was no radio or television, but there were cotillions and parlour games. "They had all kinds of social activities," she said.

Despite what you see in old photographs and tintypes, "People did not dress just in blacks, whites, and grays," she said. Fabrics were colored by vegetable dyes, and while not as vibrant as the colors we know today, they were colorful.

Clothing was not as tight as it is now, there were lots of hooks and eyes, Ms Carle said. Silks, brocades, and cotton fabrics were used for clothing of the period.

Preparing for a ball began with the hair, she said. In the 1860s, women wore their hair back with center parts. Braids and ringlets were popular. A curling iron would be put in the stove or over a candle to heat. To get it the right temperature, it was tested. "If it singed a piece of paper, you didn't want it near your hair," she said.

Women might add a hairpiece for a more elaborate style. They would either save their hair in a section called a "rat" or order hair pieces by sending a sample of hair to a mail order house.

Since facial hair was important to men of that era, they, too, might send a sample of hair to add a mustache or side burns.

Decorating the hair with flowers, ribbons, or feathers was very popular, Ms Carle said.

Removing the dressing gown, Ms Carle appeared in the underwear of the era, a white, cotton chemise, worn off the shoulder, with draw-string drawers to mid-calf, worn with white cotton stockings held up by garter strips, and flat, white satin dancing slippers.

The drawers were not bloomers, she said. "Bloomers were never underwear." Amelia Bloomer, a suffragette, had introduced Turkish trousers, later called bloomers, in an attempt at dress reform to replace the up to 45 pounds of clothing women were wearing.

Over the chemise, a corset was an essential garment to achieve the desired 17 to 20-inch waistline. They even wore them when pregnant. There were pages of them advertised in mail order catalogues.

Children wore corsets, not as foundation garments, but to encourage good posture. Even a two-year-old wore a muslin corset, with their stockings pinned to it, she said.

From three months to five years old, boys and girls were dressed identically. "Talk about equality," Ms Carle said.

"At age six, girls were dressed as mirror images of adults. They grew up using a corset." When boys were six, their hair was cut, and they began wearing short pants, called knickers. When they were considered mature, knickers were exchanged for long pants.

Because a household of servants could be employed for almost nothing, she said, a woman in a white-collar household became a manager, which made it possible for her to become more involved in social matters.

A lady's maid helped her dress, styled her hair, and made sure her garments were laundered. Ms Carle enlisted the help of an audience member, Kathy Gardner, to take on the role.

A bell-shaped hoop slip, decorated with rows of lace, was called "the mermaid". Ms Carle said. A white overskirt was worn over it, trimmed with rows of lace and decorated with flowers. The flowers were either pinned or basted on. They were taken off for laundering, then replaced.

"They used lace to the best of their ability," she said. "Queen Victoria loved lace and used it lavishly. It became important to women because they wanted to look like royalty."

A lace trimmed blue bodice had lots of hooks and eyes. "Oh, Miss Kathy!" she called. With the help of Ms Gardner, Ms Carle was soon fully dressed.

"Having earned your 25 cents a day," she told Ms Gardner. The lady's maid was the highest paid servant, she noted. "She was incredibly important. She would attend the ball with me. She was much more on call than other servants. She was lucky if she would have an entire day off."

"The lady's maid was also the one she said, "She would know things family members wouldn't know."

With the addition of earrings and bracelets with a floral motif and a red velvet cloak with a pink lining and hood, Ms Carle was ready for the ball. In a beaded reticule, the forerunner of the purse, a lady would carry coins, a vial of perfume, and smelling salts. "It could get quite hot at a dance."

Wrist length white kid evening gloves completed the ensemble. "They were tight to give the appearance of tiny hands," she said.

During evening events, women "showed a lot of skin," she said, with bare arms and low necklines.

Once at the ball, men and women found not just dancing for the first time and dance, Ms Carle explained. Someone had to introduce them. A man would not offer his hand to a lady without his hands covered, so, if he had forgotten his gloves, he would cover his hand with a monogrammed handkerchief. If the monogram showed, he wanted to know if she was better. If it was not shown, he was not interested.

Men and women had dance cards. If he asked her to dance and she accepted, each would sign the other's card. "If she turned him down, she couldn't accept a dance with anyone else," Ms Carle said. So, she added, as she hurried dramatically across the room, if a woman didn't want to dance with a certain gentleman, she had better be on the other side of the room.

"They had all sorts of ways of communicating; the monogram on the handkerchief, the language of the parasol," she said. "And the fan."

"A woman would go nowhere without a fan," Ms Carle said. "It was a tool of communication."

Young, single women would be escorted to the ball by a chaperone. But, while the chaperone was distracted, a woman could communicate with a young man by using her fan. The way the fan was held held different meanings. For example, held open, "Wait for me"; closing the fan, "I want to speak to you"; held across the forehead, "We're watched"; on the chin, "Kiss me", across the heart, "You have won my heart."

If a woman held the fan behind her back, Ms Carle said, "Looking at you, and from the audience, it meant "follow me." Stopping, she looked over her shoulder, disappointment on her face, and said, "In four years, it's only worked once."