

In Brief

Ever wonder why women were never smiling in photographs from the 1800s and 1900s?

Because many of them couldn't breathe.

Woman of the time wore about 5 pounds of undergarments, including a petticoat, corset, waist slip and knickers, according to the Web site www.brasandunderwear.com.

Historical undergarments like those listed above will be on display in Old City Cemetery's newest exhibit, which opens with a reception and guest speaker at 3 p.m. next Sunday. Articles on display cover a 100-year period, from about 1840 to 1940.

"It's amazing how beautifully made these things are," says Jane White, director of Old City Cemetery.

In case you're wondering what underwear has to do with the cemetery, White has one word for you: corsets.

Today we joke about suffering for our beauty, but back in the day, corsets caused all kinds of damage, including deformed rib cages and spines, shortness of breath, poor blood circulation, weakened muscles and injury to internal organs that could, in some cases, even lead to death.

Corsets, which were made of rubber, steel, whale bones or fabric, were designed to push the bust up and out and cinch the waist in - White says a 16-inch waist was considered perfect.

Let's pause for a minute here. Do you realize how small 16 inches is? According to various studies, the average waist today is between 31 and 34 inches. Now, imagine your waist being sucked in to almost half its size.

"Everything was to make (the waist) look smaller," she says.

And women weren't the only ones suffering. Men, children and infants wore corsets, too.

"They would start molding their bodies young," says White.

Before 1828, women needed help lacing up their corsets, but that year, laced corsets were replaced by mechanical ones, which had an arrangement of small pulleys so women could do it themselves.

Despite reports about the various health risks associated with corsets, they continued to be worn well into the early 1900s.

"The main point, I think, is that ... the designers, just like today, (were) continually trying to remold the female body into the ultimate shape," she says. "But the ultimate shape changed every 10 years."

Needless to say, corsets and knickers are a distant cousin to today's skimpy bras and thongs, which have become significantly smaller and more lightweight.

Underwear styles have obviously changed over the years, and as skirt lengths shortened, so did underwear.

"Women's underwear has followed fashion a lot longer than men's," says Michael Kleinmann, chief operating officer for Freshpair, an online underwear retailer.

As women joined the workforce during World War I, they started wearing calf-length dresses that made it easier to move around and required less bulk underneath.

"Things have become simpler and less constrictive," says Becky Shumate, a Civil War re-enactor who will be speaking about sewing techniques at Sunday's reception.

The first bra is a drastic departure from today's versions. Created in 1914, it was made of two handkerchiefs and a piece of ribbon, and its purpose was to flatten the bust and create a more boyish figure. Hardly what the masses are looking for now. Today's current quest for cleavage has produced bras padded with gel, water and underwires.

"In the 20s," White says, "everything was flattening."

Corsets were still around, but were more comfortable and flexible because they were made with elastic, very similar to girdles worn today. A chemise was typically worn underneath a corset to protect it from perspiration and bloomers were worn on the bottom half.

The first shaped bra, the Kestos brassiere, didn't come until nearly 10 years after that first flattening one. It had fastening buttons, darts under the bust and elastic backing which provided more support and didn't flatten the chest.

Hemlines were above the knee at this point - think flappers - so petticoats were shortened and eventual

ly became known as slips. The use of slips decreased later on as skirts came with lining in them.



PRESS COVERAGE

In the mid-1930s, bras with cup sizes and padding were introduced after manufacturers realized that not everyone had the same bust size.

The bra backlash came in the 1960s, when women burned them, but they were back in by the next decade, just in time for the introduction of the first push-up bra. (Fun fact: the first sports bra was made in 1977 by sewing two jock straps together, according to www.belisse.com).

White says the exhibit is a testament to how our attitudes have changed right along with the styles of the underwear - including stockings.

While we don't think twice about throwing torn stockings away, back then, White says, "people saved stuff and mended it."

If You're Going

-- WHAT: Old City Cemetery's exhibit, 'Beneath the Surface: Uncovering the Ups and Downs of Historical Undergarments'

-- WHEN: Opening reception 3 p.m. Jan. 29

-- WHERE: Cemetery Center Community Room, Fourth and Taylor streets

-- COST: Free

-- INFO: (434) 847-1465, or www.gravegarden.org

About Freshpair

Freshpair is a leading Internet retailer of men's and women's intimate apparel, offering hundreds of styles of bras, panties, t-shirts, boxers, briefs, socks, sleepwear, and more. From full-figure to petite, shapewear to thongs, boxers to briefs and everything in between, we are the ultimate destination for intimate apparel shopping. Freshpair.com carries many of the major brand names including 2(x)ist, C-IN2, Calvin Klein, Wacoal, Chantelle, Le Mystere and Bali.