

WEDDING TO REMEMBER

Silk, & lace: Brides resurrect wedding gowns across generations

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Ellie Van Houtte/Town Crier

Longtime Costume Bank volunteer Mary Kay McCarthy gingerly inspects a vintage bridal gown, part of the shop's unique collection of dresses dating back to the 1800s.

After the altar, bridal gowns follow an uncertain path into history. Some are carefully cleaned and tucked into keepsake boxes, others set aside in a distracted moment.

Decades later, when a new generation of women assess their options, family gowns offer sentimental appeal but can be encumbered by the stylings of a bygone era and the damage done by time. When a bride-to-be unearths or inherits an antique gown, it doesn't always come with a user guide – or even a clear date and backstory.

Volunteers at the Assistance League of Los Altos' Costume Bank have a unique view of this process, as women often bring in decommissioned dresses and the stories that

accompany them. Los Altos resident Mary Kay McCarthy, a four-decade volunteer at the Costume Bank, gave the Town Crier a behind-the-scenes tour of the antique gowns that have entered the shop's collection. She provided basic tips for guessing when a dress was made and preserving it over time.

Opening the vault

The dresses in their vault show success stories – the delicate netting and beading that can survive for a century, when cared for. But many families have also seen the flip side – the blackened lace and yellowed silk born of storing dresses in unprotected locations. Other difficulties can't even be planned against. Many antique dresses are cut to a waist size so tiny that modern brides shrink back in horror. One descendant's treasure is another's donation garment.

McCarthy recalls the time a woman dropped off a collection of her mother's clothing at the Costume Bank, only to be followed days later by an alarmed sister bent on retrieving the family gown.

"We found it for her – it was a happy ending," McCarthy recalled.

Most Los Altos residents have unknowingly spotted a Costume Bank wedding gown. The princesses in the Festival of Lights Parade sometimes wear donated contemporary bridal wear, dyed to fairy-tale hues. Older dresses that carry the handwork and rare fabrics of a bygone era go into the Costume Bank's protective storage. That collection offers a whirlwind tour of what to expect from each decade's wedding relics.

The great-grandmother of one of the Costume Bank's teenage volunteers wore a floral-print gown at her wedding in 1911, with hand-embroidered cotton. Hand-sewing shows up throughout the collection, with fabric flowers, pin tucks and embroidered veils. Many of the Assistance League's early dresses come in two pieces that hook together at the waist.

"A woman might sew her skirt at home and send the bodice out to somebody who could sew well," McCarthy explained.

Clues to bygone eras

When McCarthy evaluates a dress for clues to its era, she studies the material, looks for handwork versus machine sewing and evaluates the silhouette. Dresses from a century ago and earlier are typically fitted at the waist and built to accommodate corsets and petticoats, with high necks and fine netting. You can find a bodice rigid with whalebone in their collection, and a skirt hem weighted to fall smoothly below the ankles.

In the era of corseting, McCarthy said, "everybody did it, so you just didn't think about it."

Over a base of underpants, stockings and garters, women in the late 1800s and early 1900s layered extra fabric for visual effect and convenience.

"They'd wear two or three or four petticoats, depending on the fullness they wanted," McCarthy said. "In some cases, it makes it easier to walk because the petticoat pulls the skirt off the ground."

Waists dropped in the 1920s, only to rise again in the '30s and '40s.

"The 1920s style had that straight-up-and-down look with no waistline and an emphasis on the hips," McCarthy said. "A lot of the dresses were very body-fitting. But even in the '20s, women weren't hanging out of anything. In the 1940s, you see beautiful satin you can't get anymore. They were very elegant, very covered up."

Zippers came into common use, and nylon – developed in the late '30s – started to appear.

The '50s saw the birth of a ballgown era, when full skirts would spring out from tiny fitted waists and cap sleeves.

"I was married in the 1950s, and my dress had lace over taffeta and long sleeves," McCarthy said.

Back then, she added, undergarb had evolved from the corsets of yore but was still structured – "We would have worn what was called a 'merry widow' underneath."

The 1960s saw a throwback to the more Victorian styles that persist today, in the same period hemlines sometimes crept up in shift-style dresses. Full-length dresses – copying Napoleonic or Queen Anne styles – sometimes sported high collars. By the 1970s, peasant necklines proliferated, a style you can spot now in the secondhand market on sites like Etsy and eBay.

The puffy sleeves, organdy and off-the-shoulder V-necks and sweetheart necklines of the 1980s don't appear to have hit the collective wave of nostalgia yet. Neither have the iridescent beading, slit skirts and strapless styles of the '90s. For now, they are often consigned to the parade float and a neon dye job.

For more information on the Assistance League of Los Altos and its Costume Bank, call 941-2610 or visit losaltos-assistanceleague.org.

Caring for a dress across decades

The splashes and spills of a wedding might appear colorless as they occur but can mark fabric over time. Champagne and sweat are two notorious offenders.

- Warn a cleaner you're bringing in a vintage dress if the gown already has a history. Many delicate pieces require hand cleaning.
 - Clean gowns carefully and promptly, before stains set in.
 - If you hang a dress for display, use a padded hanger to protect fabric at the neck and shoulders. Beading can shred under its own weight when stored upright. Don't hang a dress by fragile shoulder loops or cap sleeves.
 - Store dresses gently folded in acid-free tissue paper in an acid-free box intended for archival use. Avoid plastic containers, which can emit discoloring fumes and trap moisture.
 - Store the gown somewhere protected from extreme temperature changes and humidity. Avoid attics and basements.
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