

Feature



My Great-Grandmother's "First Day" Dress *Lisa A. Ashton*

A vintage family photograph inspired a historical costumer to recreate the dress that great-grandmother wore on the "first day" after her wedding.

My fascination with Victorian clothing began with a single photograph. It was one handed down in my family, since I became the keeper of such memories, and hung on my own wall at least 10 years before I felt an impulse to research it and find out more about my ancestry. The photo is of my great-grandmother, Gussie Kravitz, just married in her "first-day" dress.

Jewish weddings traditionally do not allow photography during the service or in the synagogue, so a photograph was made of the couple the following day, the "first day" of their marriage. (Remember that for a young couple with little money, having a photograph made at a studio, as this photo clearly is, was an event of note). Gussie is wearing a lovely two piece dress, staring at the camera with a clear, straightforward gaze. The original photo is on a carte de visite with the photographer's name and city on it—Odessa (Ukraine). I always felt a



connection with this photo, from the time I was very small, because of a strong bond with *her* daughter, my Grandma Celia (I never met Gussie-- who died in 1931, before my own mother was born).

We know little about Gussie, just that she was born in 1876 near Odessa, Ukraine and had several siblings. (Ukraine in the 19th

century was firmly part of the Russian empire). She married and bore four children before her husband died in about 1904. Sometime around 1906 she emigrated to the United States with all four young children. I have two later photos, neither of them as interesting as far as fashion, that show her with her children. This photo could date from as early as 1892 to as late as 1898.

A photo in Victorian times was almost always a serious and exciting event; generally, one went to a photographer's studio, stood before a backdrop, and looked serious. Only very rarely do we see anyone smile or look happy. It would have been an even more important event for a family of limited means, like my family (they were Jews in the rural area around Odessa, Ukraine). Any family that remained in Ukraine was almost certainly extinct by the end of WWII.

It was a milestone to research and re-create this outfit and moment in time—I felt my own patterning and construction skills were advanced enough to attempt it. The initial difficulty for me was how to get started at all, when I had no experience with Victorian styles; in fact, the only historical costumes I had done up to that point were early Tudor court dresses. So I was starting from scratch. There was no one left in my family who could recall any history of this photograph.

My first step was to get some idea as to the date of the photograph, so I could research patterns to start with, knowing that some significant modification would be required. Knowing her year of birth to be 1876, I speculated that the photo was from 1895-1896, since very early marriage was not the custom of Jews living in the shtetl near Odessa. (A shtetl was a Jewish community or village, often on the periphery of a towns or city, that was essentially self-sufficient). As my research progressed, and I learned about Victorian dress of the mid-1890's, I felt confident that those dates were accurate, based on various features. The next



Probably c. 1901/02, still in Odessa, Ukraine. My Grandma Celia may be the baby on Gussie's lap.

From my collection: This photo, c. 1889-92, displays a similar very snug cuirass bodice with a center front closure and the small sleeve puffs, that are hallmarks of the style I was attempting. The sleeves are also very fitted.

The photo, from a studio in Lancaster, PA, may well be from a Mennonite group, based on the utter lack of decoration and the cap with hanging tails the woman is wearing, as well as the gentleman's style of facial hair. She is clearly wearing a petticoat and based on fullness of the skirt, no bustle.

Center front closures were by far the most commonly seen, usually with visible buttons, although invisible hooks and eyes were not unknown.

Also note the sleeve length, short to modern eyes, but very consistent with my dress, and in this case, without decoration.

step I took was to join the [H-costume forum](#) online, and post the photo where the members could view it and comment.



There were a number of interesting comments about the dress, which I saved and used to expand on my research. I highly recommend this forum for historical research: these are some seriously knowledgeable folks. Their comments helped me to look at the photo and the dress more critically and analyze each detail. This in turn enabled me to date the dress and even describe a plausible history for it, as well as fill in many cultural references.

I started on the Internet with some of the historical pattern companies, and finally settled on two patterns from [Truly Victorian](#): TV 460 (from [Patterns of Time](#)) for the bodice, and TV 221 Victorian Skirt pattern,



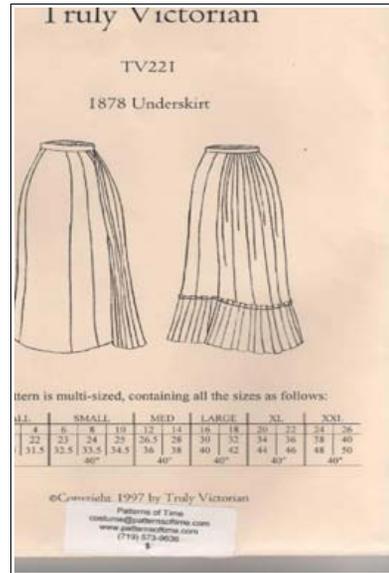
Probably c. 1906, just before immigrating to America; Celia is on the left and my great-aunt Bessie right.

which was plain, but had significantly more gathering in the back, while being smooth in the front. I was visualizing the dress with more volume in the rear, since I could not specify the exact date of the dress. In fact, discussing the elements of the dress that might place it in a specific period interested me and taught me the most about Gussie and the circumstances she came from.

I naturally began wanting reference books (being of a generation that tends to books rather than sole reliance on digital sources), and once obtaining these began to pore over the various photos and familiarizing myself with some of the essential elements of each period of Victorian fashion. (Many of these references are available pre-owned from Amazon.com, and that was a huge help to me in starting a reference collection).

From these, and from very close examination of MY photograph, I began to see similarities and differences. My biggest concerns were: 1) how to modify the bodice to achieve the smooth front and proper fit, and 2) how could I possibly re-create the fancy lace appliqué work visible on the bodice and skirt?

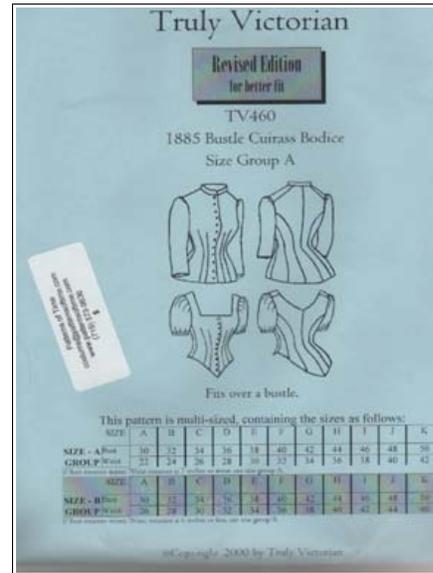
Closer observation revealed some discrepancies, such as why did the appliqué work on the bodice mismatch the skirt hem appliqués? These and other discrepancies of fit and tailoring pointed to the conclusion,



The patterns I began with underwent significant modification, but yielded some wonderful permanent patterns. I have turned the bodice pattern into a "Victorian-style" coat to knee-length in at least 4 incarnations and the skirt has been made for at least 3 costumes (one was an alien reptile wearing it!).

that this dress had been re-made from a dress as much as 20 years older, either a family hand-me-down (very understandable from the point of view of a family without significant means) or even a dress that the photographer had on hand for customers to wear for their "special photograph".

As for Gussie, her dress does not seem to be tailored for her; it seems too snug in some spots and the sleeves seem too short (although I found that was a popular length in the 1880's-- but that would be far too early a date for this photograph). The sleeve caps with the small "poufs" would place it in the early 1890's and are the most "fashionable" aspect of the dress. After about 1893, sleeve shoulder puffs became voluminous before they shrank again.



Dating the dress proved a cluster of discrepancies—trying to assign a date to each element made for quite a collage of time periods. However, this very inconsistency left me some leeway with construction techniques.

I believed that the embellishment work was composed of pre-fabricated appliqués that were set in place and tacked on. The hem appliqués were probably also manufactured and applied, these were certainly available in the United States at that time, although what might have been available in Odessa, I was unable to determine. I was unable to find anything at all similar for my needs, and at the time I built this project, did not own an embroidery machine and thus could not contemplate manufacturing my own lace appliqués. I will discuss the actual construction techniques further along.

The irony of it was that I had to lay out and hand-sew all the embroidery designs for the bodice after diagramming them and making up tissue patterns. For the hem appliqués, I worked out the actual dimensions from the photo and did each piece with soutache braid and freehand machine satin-stitch, on a single layer of tulle, over a tissue paper "tear-away", to achieve uniformity with multiple appliqués. It was messy—in a sense, her outfit decoration was probably much easier than mine, over a hundred years later!

The two-piece dress became popular around the 1860's (although the skirt was frequently sewn in to the bodice at the waist in that early period), and later we began to see a longer jacket/bodice over a matching skirt (sometimes an overskirt/underskirt combination), as well as a one-piece "day dress". I doubt there is a full bustle to this outfit; the Late Bustle period is accepted as about 1883 to 1891, but since I believed this dress to have been remade from an earlier dress, it could be that any extra fabric was re-used. And certainly by the mid-1890's a single skirt was well established, although those skirts were often interlined with



whatever fabric was on hand, even re-used fabric. (I interlined my "practice" outfit with cotton fabric that I disliked. My subsequent skirts were always interlined, to help them drape properly. The bodices, of course, were completely lined.)

I also agonized over the unusual horizontal wrinkle/hip bulge—was it an inexperienced seamstress? Was the skirt lengthened from the original, and fabric added at the top so as not to disrupt the hem appliqués? Is the skirt waist too low? Is it somehow from the lower edge of a corset?

Another aspect I puzzled over—where is the jacket closure? The center front seems extremely smooth, the embroidery lying flat, without any indication of an asymmetric front closure. Back closures were quite uncommon then, and I found NO references at all to for a side jacket closure. Given her economic status, it's unthinkable that she had a maid to help her dress, although there certainly could have been a family member. I felt it *was* a center front closure and set out to design one that was undetectable.

From my collection: Another photo, c. late 1890's, to demonstrate the smaller sleeve puffs and fitted bodice with fitted sleeves. This dress has white decorative cuffs and a white lace collar over a mandarin type collar, and a typical center-front button closure. A tiny charm or watch depends from a button on the bodice.

The skirt shows decorative deep symmetric pleats and has a relatively low waistline. There appears to be the hint of a bustle in a contrasting light color (possibly the wide strips were used to tie it on?).

This dress demonstrates many vertical elements, with the overall effect of making the lady seem tall and slender.

One of the clearest clues that it was a refashioned dress lies in the jacket/bodice embellishment. The embroidery at the chest and shoulders appears to be of a piece, with looping designs and vertical flow so that the left and right sides' appliqués meet at the center front waistline and seems very integrated, and these designs are also consistent with the repetitive loops seen on the sleeve cuffs. But at the center front waist, the design breaks up—there is a short gap, then the remaining trim defining the hem seems unrelated to the trim above, somewhat more ornate but less graceful. There are several possibilities: that is was originally a very short peplum bodice which had significant length added to it, and required some trim to disguise that change, seems the most likely. (Was the fabric added from a bustle that had been removed?)

Construction of the Dress

The Corset

As I formulated an analysis of the dress and its details, I initiated a pathway forward. I knew I would need underthings, as this was my very first attempt at authentic historical costume. So I went again to the Internet and settled on the patterns for the undergarments. From Past Patterns, I bought the Madame Foy Skirt Supporting Corset. This corset is known as early as 1862, with patent dates through 1867.

The corset pattern was American, but I believed it possible that something similar existed even in Odessa. The skirt-supporting

cane reed along the back hem is actually helpful, and the corset is more easily adjustable than most, with its two sides being laced, and shoulder straps that adjust and can buckle on the lateral chest. The front closure, made with a lapped placket over the metal clasps, offers a very smooth center front surface—what I was attempting to achieve. Both the outside and the lining are sewn simultaneously—a new technique for me. I used cotton twill.

When I made this corset a second time, I added an interlining to the outside pieces for strength, and additional bones for greater support, as well as making self-bias binding.



Swatches for the outfit: top left: tan cotton twill for the corset. bottom left: brown synthetic blend crepe. right: rose-brown wool crepe.

Fabric Choices

There is no record of the color of the original garment. And learning about the types of photo processes that would have existed in the 1890's, it's difficult to predict with certainty how each photographic method translated colors. To preserve the charm and nostalgia of the photo and the dress, I wanted fabric within a framework of sepia tones with black embellishment.

A real wool fabric was my ideal choice, as it would have been known and obtainable in Ukraine at that time (as would linens, and cottons from America; having a silk dress would

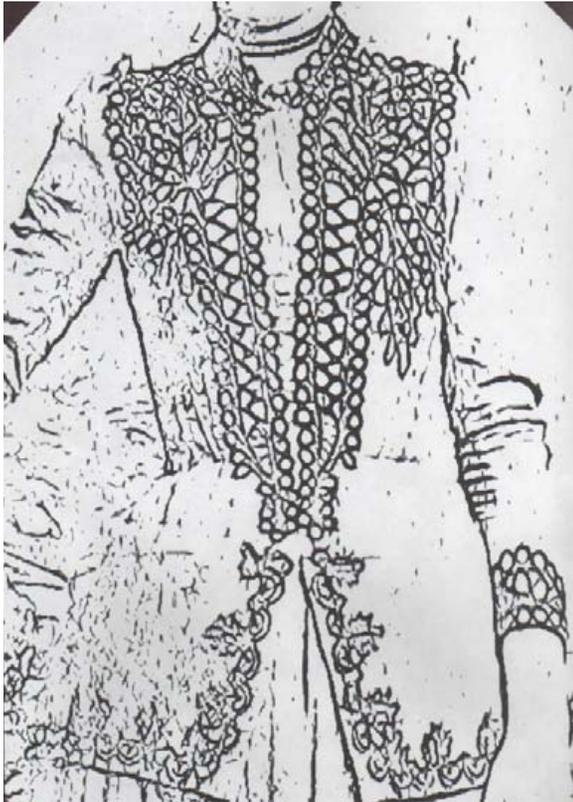
have been *much* more unlikely, given her economic status). For texture, I wanted crepe. After buying a dark brown synthetic crepe, I was fortunate to find a real wool crepe in a lovely rose-brown, a far more desirable color, also at an affordable price. The chemise, drawers and petticoat were all plain white cotton.

Construction and Embellishment

I will skip over the basic patterning and sewing steps, making and fitting a mock-up, since those are well understood, and explain working out and creating the lace appliqué designs, first, for the bodice. As the close-up photo at left below shows, a complex design on the front is mirrored from right to left, with a small interval centrally that narrows to meet at the waistline. My completed bodice front is on the right.



To reproduce it exactly, I used a feature of the photo program I was using at that time called “outline effects”, which gave me a black and white drawing of the part of the photo I wanted. This enabled me to be able to pattern the braid embroidery closely.



I used a black soutache braid, which could be closely looped, on the front and back of the bodice and on the cuff embroidery. For the design around the bodice hem, I used a black pre-made trim, and found that by cutting pieces of it and looping them above the hem, it would create the look of the dress.

A great deal of measuring went into patterning the embroidery to ensure that the designs started and stopped correctly and certain “pivot points” landed at the right place. The above left photo demonstrates how the designs were created on tissue paper patterns that were cut to match the actual pattern pieces (those old unused patterns came in handy!), and then the pattern designs were drawn onto the tissue with a black marker, and pinned onto the bodice (before it was finished with the lining). Then the soutache embroidery was sewn by hand. The final step was to tear away the tissue paper—this required using a tiny forceps at some places!

I had started off thinking I could machine sew on the soutache embroidery trim, but as detailed as my diagrams were, to maintain the correct scale, it became clear it would work better by hand. The interlining of the crepe acted as a perfect stabilizer. The exception was the trim on the bodice hem, made up of both the loopy trim itself and folded, clipped segments added at intervals. This had to be applied to the completed garment in order to space it correctly, then required hand-sewing through the outside



and interlining, while not catching the lining.

The hook-and-eye closure tape was placed and sewn in prior to the embroidery process, so as to lay out the designs perfectly symmetrically, while still leaving the narrow open space. Donning the bodice is easy—and does not require a second person for the closures.

The photo above left shows the design I created for the bodice back; I have no way to know if it even had embroidery, but staying with the “leaf and loop” shaped patterns seemed safe. Another interesting note: the appliqués actually overlap onto the shoulder puffs (another argument in favor of pre-made appliqués).



One incomplete, and one completed hem appliqué on tulle base, drawings for flower embroidery still visible on piece at left, and satin-stitched in place on right.



The design is drawn on paper and then traced onto tissue paper to be sewn onto the layer of brown tulle.

From my collection : This mid-1890's portrait is an example of pre-fabricated lace appliques applied in a pattern (the appliques are also beaded). They adorn the collar (which has an interesting rather asymmetric pointed closure rather than usual squared-off ends), as well as enhancing the deep "V" of the front, with its fill-in tucked fabric.

The hem appliques (left) were a bit more complicated to manufacture. First the design was drawn to scale via measurements. Then the design was, as previously, traced onto tissue paper. Next, a single layer of brown fine tulle was tacked to the tissue paper. The "loops" were machine sewn with black soutache braid, then the small flower shapes were machine embroidered "freehand" inside the larger



circles near the bottom. Then the tissue paper was torn away with forceps.

These sheets of embroidered tulle, once the tissue paper foundation was gone, were very carefully tacked onto the skirt hem with same color thread, so that it was as invisible as possible. Having an interlined skirt really helped make them secure.

A delightful effects of historical costuming and its related investigation, is feeling as if I were actually a part of the period itself. The joy of this type of



From my collection: Not the most beautiful or tailored dress of that time, and probably also a re-fashioned dress, this demonstrates the use of the type of looping designs of braided trim. Note the designs on the sleeve cuffs, the mandarin collar, along the waistline, and over the decorative lapels. The photo probably dates from about 1895, based on the large sleeve puffs.

costuming is that there are many historical designs which are easy to sew and build, so anyone can get started with basic skills, which expand as one proceeds. In fact, there are many more resources and even patterns available than even 15 years ago, about the time I began to develop an interest.

The particular beauty of re-creating the Victorian period in clothing is that there are still many extant artifacts, books and authentic photographs of the period that are quite readily available. In the woods where I hunt, I find many half-buried glass bottles, some dating back over 50 years; flea markets, estate sales, and sometimes the family attic are good first sources.

To illustrate this article, for example, I am using photographs and tintypes that I myself have collected from flea markets and yard sales. I have only been collecting for 2 years and have not spent an exorbitant amount—and have limited myself to (mostly) photos of women's dress. I learned

The four background photos are from my documentation for "Back in Time — A Sepia Photo Portrait Victorian Day Dress c. 1894 Odessa, Ukraine" at Costume-Con 23 in 2005.

(top left: Chemise, from Laughing Moon Mercantile, Ladies Victorian Underwear #100

top right: Madame Foy Skirt Supporting Corset, #720: Past Patterns, patented 1862, reissued 1867

bottom left; Cotton Petticoat (no pattern)

bottom right: Completed dress outfit (I made the beaded pin at the neck front closure from a beaded sepia glass cabochon with a picture of flowers)

center: [Photo](#) by Greg Bradt is from the [ICG International Costumers Gallery](#), Pettinger Collection (search: "Back in Time" for more photos).



a great deal about the photographic process, what was available for which period; and have learned to date photos (most of which come with no identification or dates) by their clothing to within a few years.

There are many books out with photo illustrations, (and I list some at the end), but it's truly wonderful to stand at a flea market and go through a box of old photos and "cartes de visite", looking for the ones that speak to you. I have also acquired many Victorian era books—cook books, domestic books, old Harper's Magazines, medical texts and herbals, children's stories-- again for very little money and providing a great deal of entertainment.

Bibliography

- **American Victorian Costume in Early Photographs:** Priscilla Harris Dalrymple, Dover Publications: 1991
- **Authentic Victorian Dressmaking Techniques:** Kristina Harris: 1999 (re-publication of "Dressmaking, Up To Date", first published in 1905, with new introduction)
- **Victorian Costume for Ladies 1860-1890:** Linda Setnik, Shiffer Publ.: 2000 (nicely organized by decade, also gives great info about details such as hairstyles, even laundry!)
- **Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazaar 1867-1889** Dover Pictorial Archives: Stella Blum: 1974

And some other sources that I love, although not used in this article:

- **Who Wore What? Women's Wear 1861-1865** Juanita Leisch, Thomas Publ.:1995, THE BIBLE for anyone interested in Civil War Era Women's Clothes. This book gave me a really fundamental way of evaluating my photos and of looking at Victorian dress.
- **Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion 1840-1900**, Joan L. Severa, 1997

There are innumerable websites, for looking at patterns, for getting information about types of photography available through the Victorian period, for general information, for museums that have galleries about these fashions, for accessories such as jewelry and other artifacts.

There are also many website that are geared toward specific decades. There is also Ebay, great for looking at old artifacts, photos, hair brooches, Victorian houses and furniture, ad infinitum.

Afterword

I've been asked about what kind of hat Gussie would have worn. Jewish Eastern European tradition at that time was that, when a woman got married, her head was shaved and she wore a wig for the rest of her life. It may have been some sort of proto-Biblical thing that no one but her husband was supposed to see her hair. That side of my family was not, to my knowledge,

Orthodox Jews, so that may not have been the case for Gussie.

Although she is not wearing a hat in the photo, I did create one to go with the costume, so that she could take it off as part of the presentation of the costume on stage. I chose a simple 1890's hat, but ended up thinking that it looked better on the pattern envelope than it did finished; I was not enamored of it.

The dress that I've described is my first Victorian outfit, from Costume-Con 23 in 2005. There are many more, including my research into what Lizzie Borden was wearing the day of the murders. Hopefully, your interest has been piqued!

Lisa A. Ashton is a Science Fiction & Fantasy and historical costumer who started costuming after attending Noreascon in 1989. Over 20 years later, she is still trying to design and build that perfect costume that will make people gasp in wonder. Other passions include beading, hunting, stamp collecting, gardening and canning, and collecting authentic Victorian photographs to study fashion history. As a Physician Assistant in Emergency Medicine for the last 25 years, she has had many opportunities to hone her sewing skills on her patients. Lisa is Program Director for Costume-Cons 29 and 30. Visit her [web site](#) (still under construction).