

Dating Old Photographs Through Fashion

Costume designer and fashion historian Betty Kreisel Shubert shares her thoughts on how to solve the problem of dating old photographs

Shortly after I began writing my book, *Out-of-Style: A Modern Perspective of How, Why and When Vintage Fashions Evolved* (2013), I met the late Caroline Rober, past president of the Southern California Association of Professional Genealogists.

My book, which has over 700 of my own sequential illustrations, reveals the style clues that time-date clothes worn by men, women and children in the 19th through 21st centuries. Although it is filled with fascinating gems of social history, it can be used like an encyclopedia to match *your* photograph to a particular time frame.

So it was that Caroline Rober immediately validated my work in progress by saying, "I have bought numerous history of costume books, but none of them tell me what I need to know in a manner I can easily access, absorb and utilize... Your book is so easy to understand, I want to be the first to endorse it!"

Caroline sent me a family picture to decipher for her. It showed two women wearing tailor-made suits and big hats: gently shaped mid-length

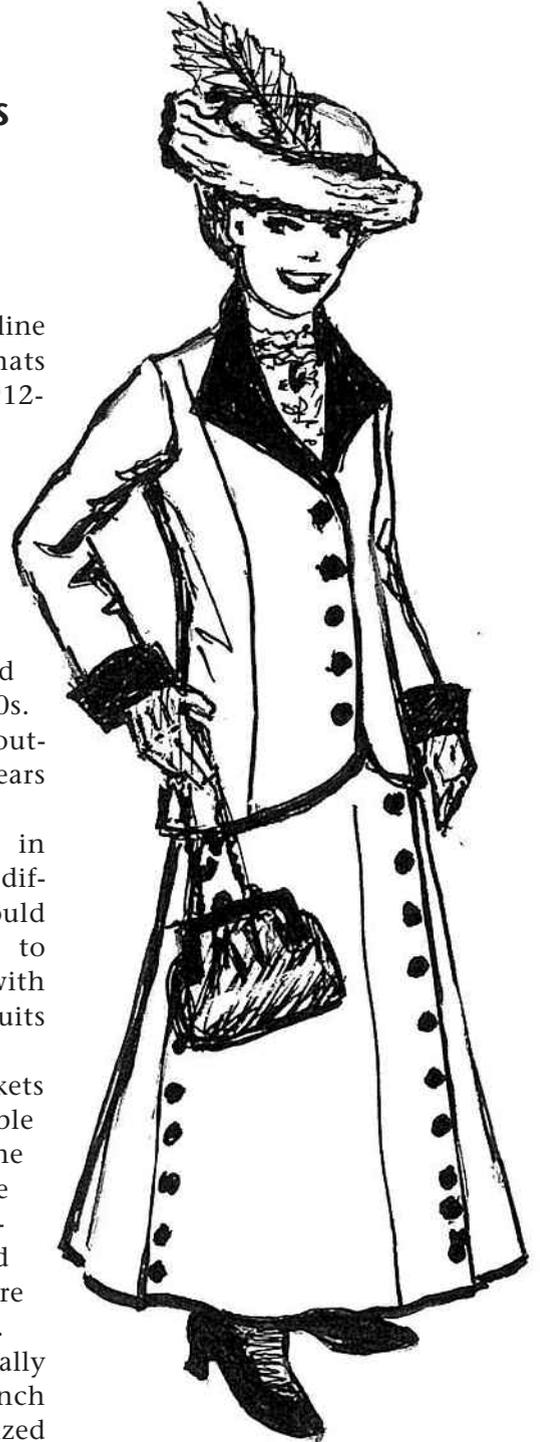
jackets with ankle-length, A-line skirts and large-brimmed hats which I dated between 1912-1914.

Here is how I came to that conclusion: Tailor-made suits (aka tailor-made *costumes* in England) first became popular in the 1880s. In various proportions and silhouettes, they continued in popularity to the 1920s. By 1909, tailor-made suits outnumbered dresses in the Sears Roebuck Catalog.

Suits became mainstays in women's wardrobes because different shirtwaist styles could change outfits from plain to dressy, as needed. Worn with or without their jackets, suits could span the seasons.

From 1900-1909, suit jackets which fitted over fashionable S-curve corsets, produced the S-curve silhouette (aka the *pouter pigeon* look). Shirtwaist blouses, which bloused over the tops of waistlines, are primary clues of those years.

After 1909, styles dramatically changed. Paul Poiret, a French designer, had revolutionized women's fashions with a high-waisted, natural silhouette and a shorter skirt that showed the



Tailor-made suit, 1912-1914.
(© 2013 Betty Kreisel Shubert)

ankle: The distortion of corsets was now passé for women. Suits now had gently shaped mid-length jackets; skirts were A-line and shorter, showing the shoe, and hats were larger.

Since suits could be worn for a long time and were expensive, an outfit could be quickly updated for the price of a new hat (or maybe, a remodel of an old hat). No one wanted to be *Out-of-Style* (inspiring the phrase "That's old hat!"). So the best way to date suits in those years is to recognize the changing shapes of millinery; that is how I came to the conclusion that Caroline's picture was taken sometime between 1912-1914.

Next, Caroline sent me another picture to date for her: This time it was a wonderful example of high-style vintage fashion. The woman in the picture was wearing a narrow-skirted gown with a short fitted jacket: long, upholstery fringe edged the draped apron overskirt which ended in drooping back bows over a mermaid train. Her hair was long in back, narrow at the sides, piled high on top with feathery bangs. This outfit and hairstyle could only have been worn between 1878 and 1883, but the woman thought to be in the picture had died in 1872! That meant the wrong ancestor was being tracked. For a genealogist, this was both disappointing and important to know.

At about this time, I attended a lecture. After a long, convoluted detective story about how she had deduced the date of the picture shown on the projection screen, which involved tombstone tracings and trips to dusty archives for records, the presenter triumphantly announced the date of the



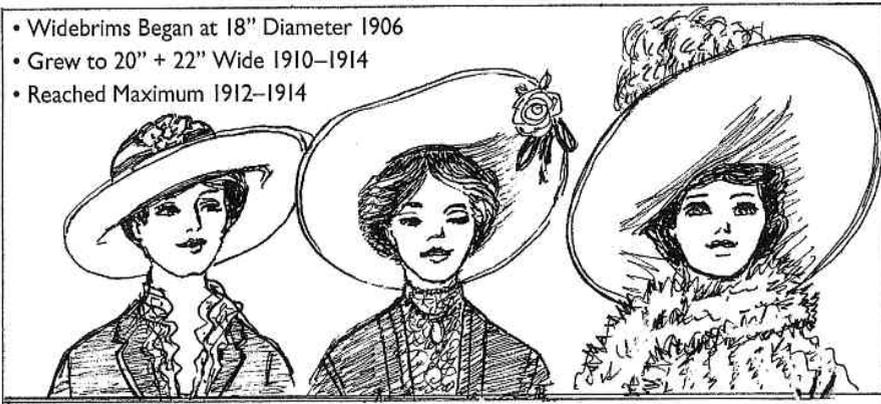
A narrow-skirted gown with a short fitted jacket as shown, and the hairstyle, could only have been worn between 1878 and 1883. (© 2013 Betty Kreisel Shubert)

photograph. I didn't have the heart to tell her she could have dated the picture by the shape of the sleeve caps!

The lecturer went on to show a slide of a woman wearing an enormous picture hat. The picture was cropped at the chest; draperies were behind her. The lecturer deduced that because of the draperies, the picture was taken in one of those newfangled Penny Arcade photo booths. So she dated the picture by the introduction of photo booths. I, on

the other hand, could tell it was 1914 because of the size of the huge hat; these had reached their peak of exaggeration at that time. Some of them measured 22 inches in diameter. I also thought that the draperies could have been in a living room *parlor* (a now obsolete word) or a photographer's studio. The hat was probably too large to enter and wear in a tiny photo cubicle and the camera could not have taken a complete picture of the entire hat at such a short distance.

- Widebrims Began at 18" Diameter 1906
- Grew to 20" + 22" Wide 1910-1914
- Reached Maximum 1912-1914



Evolution of the wide-brimmed hat from 1906 to 1914. (© 2013 Betty Kreisel Shubert)

Too bad the lecturer did not have access to page 235 of my book: She would have seen the same hat illustrated and dated as 1914.

One of my favorite case histories came to me from a reader of my *Ancestry Magazine* columns (available in online archives of *Ancestry Magazine 2008-2010* titled *Out-of-Style* by Betty Kreisel Shubert). The picture showed three women, two standing and an older lady who was seated. I could tell by the erect, vertical sleeve caps that the picture was taken between 1888 and 1892 (probably 1890-1892, because the women in the picture were not *avant garde* fashion types).

After 1892, vertical sleeve caps lowered, widened and mutated into leg-o'mutton sleeves

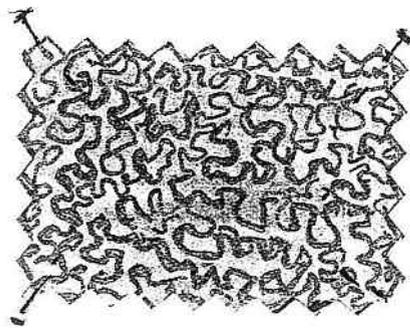
(developing into their most extreme proportion between 1895 and 1898).

I first saw the photo in question on my computer screen, but unexpectedly it printed out much larger. I now saw that all three women were wearing *First Phase Mourning Crepe* on their dresses. This meant that

someone close to them had died that year (Refer to the section in chapter 7 of my book, *How to Recognize Mourning Clothes in a Vintage Photograph*).

The older woman, who was seated, was obviously the widow because her skirt was made with a broad band of *mourning crepe* across it, plus more on her bodice. The other women had dresses made with somewhat less mourning crepe on their sleeves, collars and skirts.

An entire industry had developed in England for heat crinkling dull black, silk gauze into a rough textured fabric (like exaggerated crepe paper). The European spelling was *English Crape*. This unexpected information provided the date of death of the husband of the older woman sitting in the center of the picture.



First Phase Mourning Crepe. (© 2013 Betty Kreisel Shubert)





The predecessor of the bustle, the Transition Dress was worn from 1866 to 1872.
 (© 2013 Betty Kreisel Shubert)

Recently, on the Facebook page of Ancestry.com, I saw a photo of a dress with a long, wide skirt that had a two-tiered, apron overskirt. A soft wide belt ended in a bow in back. It was worn from 1866-1872. This was a *Transition Dress* that preceded the bustle. The top tier was later lifted, pulled to the back... VOILA... the birth of the bustle!

It was rumored that influential fashion designer, Englishman Charles Worth, who went to Paris to open the world's first couture dress salon, saw his laundress pull her top skirt to the back to keep it clean. He was inspired to create the first bustle. (Well, it sounds logical to me!)

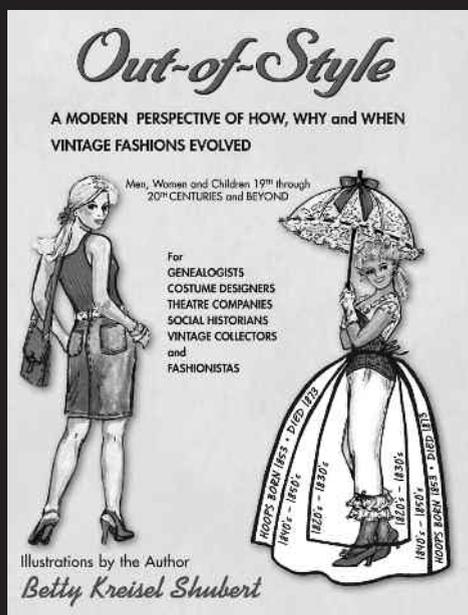
In any case, the Ancestry.com Facebook page dated this two-tiered dress "from the 1870s", which could have meant from 1870-1879. How much more informative to a tracking genealogist it would have been to know that it could only have been worn from 1866-1872. I rest my case... histories! ■

The illustrations have been excerpted from Betty's book.

BETTY KREISEL SHUBERT has designed clothes and costumes for Stage, Screen, TV Specials, Ready-to-Wear, Las Vegas Musicals and Disneyland, and much more. She has designed the uniform programs for major cruise lines, race tracks, and for hotels, restaurants and casinos all over the world. As a regular columnist for *Ancestry Magazine* (2008-2010), she wrote and illustrated a column for genealogists titled *Out-of-Style*.

Out-of-Style

A Modern Perspective of How, Why and When Vintage Fashions Evolved



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To see Betty's bio, book excerpts, sample illustrations, etc. and where to order, visit www.OutofStyleTheBook.com.

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