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H O D E I S L A N D Y E A R B O O K



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From the Gibson Girl to the Flapper

BY VIRGINIA CONROY

OF all the talented artists who have gained fame and fortune by glorifying the American girl, two of the most outstanding were Charles Dana Gibson and John Held, Jr., whose drawings in the 1920's decorated the pages of *Judge*, *Life*, *College Humor* and *Collier's*. Comparing their work, the mind fairly boggles at the mysterious adaptability of the female anatomy, which in the time span of approximately a quarter of a century, could change from the billowing curves of the Gibson Girl to the knobby-kneed, flat-chested, shingle-haired flapper of John Held, Jr.

The answer was, of course, that women became ecdysiasts. Along with the crowning glory of shining tresses, they began to shed their clothes. Indeed, by 1928 the *Journal of Commerce* estimated that in the last fifteen years the amount of material needed for a woman's complete costume had shrunk from 19½ yards to 7. Most important, the sturdy boned corset that had pinched them in and poked them out in strategic places was said to have been first "parked" by the flapper for dancing and then flagrantly discarded altogether.

But in the dawning year of 1900 the corset was basic. Gould's Corset Shop on Westminster Street was selling the Rodano model for \$2 apiece and if you bought two pair, a third was thrown in free. Tilden-Thurber was advertising ladies' watches (to be proudly pinned on swelling bosoms) decorated in enamel, diamonds and pearls and in its ad reminding customers that the carriage entrance was on Matthewson Street.

Women wore black cotton hose at around 12¢ a pair, lisle thread 15¢, beige color slightly more expensive. This did not matter very much, of course, since only the tiny tips of their shoes peaked out beneath their skirts.

On the first page of the January 1, 1900 edition of the *Providence Journal* those three wily Scots, Callender, McAuslan & Troup (who, it was rumored, had come to Providence after the Civil War, sat on a bench by the Cove casing the town and dreamed up the Boston Store) were advertising their semi-annual, mark-down sale, which included 5,000 yards of fancy silks in fashionable checks, plaids and stripes from which Rhode Island ladies could choose.

And in the *Providence Business Directory* could be found thirteen columns of seamstresses to make them up. Included in this listing, of course, was that hardy perennial Miss Anna Mueller. Starting at 34½ Brighton Street and later moving to 220 Olney, she received the custom of fashionable females for over a period of fifty-five years. Her fabulous concoctions of lace, braid and beading have become heirlooms in many a Rhode Island family. But she guarded her secrets well, and more than one aspiring maiden apprentice, thinking to emulate a lucrative career, gave up in despair after weeks of being relegated to the monotonous task of pulling out bastings.

On August 30, 1902, at a celebration commemorating the Battle of Rhode Island at the old fort on Butts Hill in Portsmouth, a newspaper illustration of the story reveals the relationship of dress to deportment, as ladies wielded parasols, raised dainty hands to anchor enormous hats and delicately lifted their sweeping skirts above the grass.

By August of 1914 skirts had risen only slightly, perhaps to reveal a tantalizing glimpse of well-turned ankle. Providence matrons might decide to go down town shopping in a gown of French linen, washable crepe or fancy eponge in rose, copenhagen, maize or tango. The Russian tunic style was extremely popular.



The original Gibson Girl. Drawing by Charles Dana Gibson, courtesy of Mrs. Daniel W. Knowlton.

With rumbles of trouble in Europe one might start out on a hot summer's day with the prudent thought of stocking up at a sale of Welsbach gas mantles (upright and inverted) and abandon this admirable intention to take the children on a matinee sail to Newport aboard the good steamer *Warwick* from the Crawford Street wharf at 35¢ a head. There was also the popular moonlight excursion to be considered at the same price.

Makeup, hitherto only indulged in by fast women and actresses, was beginning to be mentioned in respectable publications. One could read in the *Providence Journal* that "The blond woman is improved by a slight accentuation of the eye-brows. The touch of rouge is applied last. Lipstick lends beautiful color to pale lips."

War had its direct effect on clothing in many ways, mainly in the saving of wool material for uniforms and overcoats. Men patriotically sacrificed the cuffs of their pants. With the Armistice a new woman emerged. All the work of the hardy 19th-century female pioneers for women's rights began to bear fruit. Freedom of thought and action was expressed in clothing and social behavior. Skirts started to go up and waistlines down, culminating in the silhouette of the John Held, Jr. flapper with hemline at the knee and the waist expressed by a band about the hips.

The Charleston came into vogue and parents who had followed Irene and Vernon Castle through a zoological spree of the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hop, Camel Walk and Lame Duck, gazed with consternation at the knock-kneed flying steps of the new dance, wondering what the younger generation was coming to.

Stutz Bearcats purred up College Hill, saxophones wailed at Rhodes and the rum runners and the Feds shot it out on the beaches of Narragansett Bay.

The flapper, so-called because she left her overshoes unbuckled and flapped as she walked, having discarded her girdle and having no way to keep up her stockings had to resort to round shirred silk garters above or below the knee which anchored her rolled hosiery. These garters were trimmed in lace, satin rosebuds or ostrich feathers, decorated with bells, sparkling stones or mirrors and some even contained lockets in which one wore the favorite boy friend's picture.

Skirts, having gone up to the knee, hovered undecided for a while. There was the robe de style for evening wear which went up in front and down in back. Daytime dresses boasted longer panels on the side. Finally, with the stock crash skirts took a downward plunge.

In fact, there has long been a theory that skirt lengths and stocks participate in some mysterious affinity. In the *Wall Street Journal* of May 11, 1967, the following appeared: "Skirt lengths and stock prices go up and down in a 'striking parallel' according to a Harris, Upham & Co. study. Hemlines rise in years that stock prices increase, and fall in years that prices fall, the brokerage firm's market-watchers and girl-watchers find."

There is no doubt that women's skirts will go up and down in the future as they have in the past and Rhode Island women will follow the fashion. In cycles they will swing from the ultra-feminine type, as once portrayed by Charles Dana Gibson, to a new version of the hoydenish John Held, Jr. flapper, and back again to dressing like a lady.

As a wise woman has said, "The more everything changes, the more it is the same." Indeed, if the ghost of Roger Williams could return to stalk down Benefit Street today and encounter a bevy of paint-smudged damsels from R.I.S.D., he might again make the same comment as he did of the native inhabitants in his book, *A Key Into The Language of America*, "Their Virgins are distinguished by a bashful falling downe of their haire over their eyes."



One of Held's Angels. Drawing by John Held, courtesy of Random House, Inc. publishers of HELD'S ANGELS, 1967.