

# Clothing - Women

## Clothing Guidelines

RGA's goal is to present an honest representation of the 19th century. Historically/authentically as accurate as possible. Completing a character or persona with garments, clothing, accoutrements and props that are in sequence with the era is what will make a presentation come alive. Seeing the appropriate clothing on all performers is not only educational but it is visibly appealing to the believability of the performance. These guidelines are to get you pointed in the right direction in researching and establishing your characters wardrobe.

## CLOTHING

For the time period, clothing is a bit more complex. Many vendors sell clothes that are 1895-1899 and sell them as 1800's clothing. This is deceiving because they do not give the exact year. Make sure when purchasing and/or making clothing you have researched the year styles in the time frame you are portraying. Women's clothing was determined, as today, on the activity, geography and everyday life of each woman. Also, there were many fabrics and patterns. Most fabrics were natural cottons, silks, satins and velvets. Florals, paisleys and stripes as well as solids in many colors were popular.

Bodices fitted below waistlines. Sleeves were generally slim and tight fitting with some sleeves with slight fullness at the shoulder. Collars are generally stand up or ruffle with lower necklines reserved for evening wear. Trains on skirts were popular for evening and home but shorter walking skirts also seen. Lots of drapery and two or more fabrics or colors considered a must. Bustles expand to maximum fullness around 1887.

What is NOT allowed in RGA is reconstructed prom dresses or polyester as well as zippers and velcro. Stay away from obviously nylon or polyester laces. Dresses and female clothing will have historically accurate materials as well as cuts and style.

**DRESSES:** The common dress worn by the average ranch or homesteader was a day dress. This can be researched and manufactured regularly at not a great expense.

**POLONAISE:** A style of dress that the bodice and overskirt are made as one piece appearing in the early 1870's and remaining popular through the 1880's. They could be very fancy or very simple.

A word to the wild women - Dance hall girls skirts should be below their knees with an evening style bodice. Soiled doves, if you choose to wear your underwear as a costume, know that you wouldn't be doing it downstairs or outside. That is a sure way to make

sure the “proper” ladies would run you out of town. Even among the not so proper there were rules to be observed. If you were walking down the streets you are expected to dress somewhat respectable.

**SHOES:** There are many styles, you’ll have to do a little research. Ball slippers and walking boots were made of many materials, ie, silk, kid, seal skin and leather. A good standard is leather high-top boots, lace-up or button top boots.

**ACCESSORIES:** Earrings - only French hooks and screw-on posts. Studs were introduced around the turn of the century. Clip-ons came in the early 1900s. Stay away from modern styles. Earrings were made of gold and silver and sometimes incorporated with pearl, precious or semi-precious stones.

Cameos were very popular in various colors as pins, necklaces and earrings.

Women’s watches were similar in style to men’s. Pocket watches were often put in a small pocket that was pinned to the dress. There were also some watch pins.

Hats and bonnets were worn very often. Styles are too varied to include here. Again, it is suggested you study to learn what was in style. They could be simple or adorned with ribbons, bows, feathers or even whole birds or wings. (We won’t expect you to use real birds as they did, just keep them real looking).

Glasses/Specks will be period.

Other hair adornments include ribbons, bows, flowers and feathers. Fancy hair combs made of tortoise shell, bone, ivory and wood were very popular and were usually very elaborate.

**HAIR:** Women usually had long hair. Shoulder length or a little below the shoulders was considered short but was sometimes worn. Very popular in the 1800’s were fancy curls and coiffures piled on top of the head. Hair pieces were often used to make elaborate hairdos possible.

Make-up is allowed (we’re too vain). Some women did wear make-up, especially soiled doves and entertainers, but it began to show up on the faces of women in cities also. They wore rouge and lipstick as well as a foundation and there are references to “darkening” the eyelashes. (It is interesting to note that rouge was often times made with beet juice and a foundation was made of flour paste! We are not suggesting you use these items).

Hands were often gloved, but if they weren’t, nails were either natural or French manicure.

There is much more detail too extensive to list here. Some suggested reference books are;

“Le Maitresse Couturiere-The Lady’s Dressmaker” and “Buttons and Bows” both by Marna Davis.

“Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harpers Bazaar” by Blum, a Dover publication.

“American Victorian Costume in Early Photographs” by Pricillia Harris Dalrymple, Dover plus many more.

The key word here folks is “RESEARCH“. Although the organization does allow some exceptions, the point is to strive for authenticity or as close as possible. After all, RGA’s goal is to present an honest representation of the 19th century.