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When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear

1-1-2006

Part Two: The Influence of Education. Introduction: Private Clothing for Physical Education. Chapter 7, Trouser Wearing: Early Influences.

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Warner, Patricia Campbell, "Part Two: The Influence of Education. Introduction: Private Clothing for Physical Education. Chapter 7, Trouser Wearing: Early Influences." (2006). *When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear.* Paper 9.
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PART TWO

THE INFLUENCE OF *Education*

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INTRODUCTION

PRIVATE CLOTHING FOR *Physical Education*

In Part One we saw the rise of various outdoor games, sports, and pastimes that became popular in the nineteenth century. The clothing that women wore for them was, as we have seen, simply the fashion of the day, suitable for mixed company. A few minor modifications allowed for the physical demands, if any, of the activities. If women got into trouble over the clothing they chose to wear, it was generally because they overstepped the limits of acceptability. Invariably, the difficulties arose when they wanted to wear trousers, as with the bicycle bloomer. Throughout the entire nineteenth century, men—and many women, too—had difficulty accepting women in pants and enjoyed ridiculing them. The reportage on women wearing the bloomer was peppered with almost as much rhetoric against them as for them, and certainly the most memorable images were the cartoons that laughed them to scorn.

In Part Two, then, we will look at the developments that helped women finally overcome that hurdle—developments that paralleled in time the rise of the sports and games discussed in Part One. It was a slow process. Most of the clothing that emerged, all based on Amelia Bloomer's costume, was hidden from view in private homes, in spas, even in the new gymnasiums that were being built. Ultimately, though, it found recognition within the confines of women's higher education, where for the first time women were encouraged to wear practical clothing for exercise in segregated educational communities, more or less away from men. This new type of trousered dress, designed to answer need, was the clothing of physical education. By its very nature, unlike the clothing for sport, it was private clothing, never meant to be seen in public. Subversion was probably the farthest thing from the minds of the women who instigated this new kind of dress, but subversive it was—and, as is often the case with subversion, it was ultimately successful as well.

The chapters that follow describe the second prong of our story, the development of the clothing that today we call sportswear. As we saw in Part One, which dealt with the public arena, the atmosphere of the time was ripe for change. Women were eager to be outdoors, to be active, to be doing. But the next part of the story provides the key. Without it, the sea change in women's dress in the early twentieth century could not have taken place. Acceptance of new ideas about clothing had to begin somewhere, and as we have seen, it certainly wasn't about to happen in the public sphere. If anything could have brought it about, it would have been the bicycle craze, embraced with such enthusiasm by all classes everywhere. Yet even its widespread popularity could not

break down the rigid expectations and limitations in the matter of dress. It would take a completely different venue to bring that about—the venue of women's education.

Many of the same factors, trends, and people that helped to stimulate interest in sports also affected the thinking about women's education at the time. Indeed, many of the reformers worked in more than one arena. Here, then, we will meet again a number of the people to whom we have already been introduced. Rather than being strictly parallel, though, the two developments weave back and forth, touching from time to time. Finally, they came together as a whole in the middle years of the twentieth century.

One fact remains constant throughout both parts of the story: women of the nineteenth century lived in an atmosphere rigidly controlled by the separation of male and female roles and the attendant conventions that formed what has been called the cult of true womanhood. Every aspect of both men's and women's lives fell within this framework, and for the most part, all were happy to have it this way. It would be presumptuous of us as twenty-first-century observers to criticize this arrangement. It was simply the zeitgeist of the era.[1] *But because of this separation, even in the privacy of women's institutions of higher education, certain niceties were observed. As Ellen W. Gerber delicately commented in* The American Woman in Sport, *the physical education programs of the nineteenth century "required dress and activities that the women teachers thought were best performed in female seclusion." But performed they were, in spite of—or perhaps because of—women's knowledge that they would never be allowed this freedom "outside." A Vassar graduate remembered playing baseball at the college in the 1870s and recalled that "the public, so far*

as it knew of our playing, was shocked, but in our retired grounds, and protected from observation even in these grounds by sheltering trees, we continued to play in spite of a censorious public."[2]

Not every school eliminated all men, of course; close family members, even "diplomatic cousins" were occasionally permitted. Lizzie Southgate Parker, in her essay "Physical Culture at Smith," written in 1890 or 1891, noted that "frequently during the class the platform of the gymnasium was filled with visitors, the masculine element being confined to fathers and uncles, with a very limited supply of cousins who might by extraordinary diplomacy secure admittance."[3] *On the other hand, another alumna reminisced many years after the fact that all she remembered about a basketball game held among the Smith girls in the early 1900s was the crowd of Amherst boys in the balcony. But that was later; in the early days, men were forbidden entry altogether. This freed the Smith girls from the self-consciousness that they might feel playing in front of young men while wearing the strange clothing developed for sports—clothing designed not to be seen outside the gym.*

Reference after reference throughout this entire period attests to the separation of private and public, the need to guard women from male view while doing exercise (and therefore wearing exercise clothes). In fact, some of the most ardent advocates of the Victorian ideals of true womanhood were the teachers of physical education themselves. They believed that a woman "should always preserve her inborn sense of modesty and innocence; she must never be seen by the opposite sex when she is likely to forget herself," meaning, as Gerber explained lest it be misinterpreted by later generations, that she was "caught in the emotional excite-

ment of an important contest."[4] *To aid in the adherence to such ideals, directors of physical education mandated that skirts must always be worn over gymnastic costumes when the girls walked to or from the playing fields or outdoor courts, or crossed public streets. This would hide their "irregular" gym clothes from public view. (Shades of the skirts worn over the bicycle bloomers.)*[5] *No small matter, this, as we see from gymnastics teacher Gertrude Walker's plea in her "Report of the Department of Physical Culture in Smith College, From 1886 to 1888" at the alumnae meeting of June 19, 1888. After a list of requests, she added, "We ought also to have dressing-rooms furnished with lockers, so that the young ladies could dress and undress in the building and in this way escape from the exposure that so many are now obliged to risk in going to and from their boarding places." Whether she believed in her own argument or used it only because she understood her audience so well, we will never know. We do know, though, that her eloquence proved effective. The alumnae went to work raising funds for the new gymnasium, stung, no doubt, by the realization that their alma mater was "surpassed in . . . facilities by Vassar, Bryn Mawr, and even some seminaries."*[6] *They planned events ranging from "begging boldly," to selling commencement poems, to having Mark Twain read from his works at Smith.*[7] *And they were successful: in 1890, the new gymnasium opened.*[8]

Mount Holyoke College also required the cover-up skirt. As the unknown author of a "History of the Physical Education Department" remembered: "During this time [the turn of the century] skirts had to be worn over the bloomers whenever a student walked on campus. I believe this was a college policy but the physical

education director [whose name was Lord] was blamed for it." The students even went so far as to compose a ditty that went, "Who is on the Lord's side, Who will wear a skirt? . . . For she's as mean as dirt."[9] *Clearly this was not a popular policy with the students, but it remained in effect nonetheless. At both Smith and Mount Holyoke, the only place the girls could wear their gym suits was in the gymnasium. As Lizzie Southgate Parker remembered, "These hours were thoroughly enjoyable when once we were in the gymnasium, but it was always an interruption to be obliged, in the middle of the afternoon, to array ourselves in the gymnasium costume . . . and to return to 'citizen's dress' before tea."*[10]

To underscore just how seriously this separation for modesty's sake was taken, we turn to the most exciting event of the Smith school year, the basketball game between the sophomores and the freshmen. Although it was momentous enough to merit complete coverage in the Boston Globe, *it was an event for girls only. Senda Berenson, the basketball teacher, posted an unequivocal note on the gymnasium door, which can be found today in the college archives. It reads flatly, "Gentlemen are not allowed in the gymnasium during basketball games." To remove men was to remove a major source of self-consciousness. And to remove self-consciousness was to open up possibilities for creativity, growth, change, and freedom.*

The approach as we see it played out here was confined strictly to the gymnasium, but as it broadened to undergird the entire educational environment for women, it offered a whole new atmosphere, not simply in their activities and their clothing for it, but in their thinking, in their lives. The women's colleges particularly encouraged women's growth from the beginning. These

schools were an intriguing, even daring mix of the traditional and the experimental, of the conventional and the extraordinary. But they made educated womanhood their goal, rather than merely being willing to add women, almost as an afterthought, to the schools already educating men.[11] *Of course, the women's colleges remained firmly embedded within the Victorian realm of women's sphere; but even there, because of their self-imposed isolation, they were willing and able to experiment with new ideas, whether it was to do with curriculum—offering Latin and the classics as well as the new sciences such as zoology to women, unheard of elsewhere at the time—or exercise and new games. Nowhere else could women blossom so fully.*

Because of this, change could finally take place.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

TROUSER *Wearing*

Early Influences

Trouser wearing in the West was a jealously guarded male prerogative and remained so for over five hundred years. Over the centuries, women adapted many styles and items of clothing from the men of their time, everything from doublets and ruffs, to Cavalier beaver hats, to redingotes and spencers, to starched collars, ties, boaters, and bowlers—even high heels. But the one thing they could not touch, it seemed, was any kind of bifurcated garment, or trousers. As we have seen, each time women appeared in public wearing them, they were ridiculed to such an extent that they just gave up, sensing, no doubt, that other more worthwhile battles could be fought—and won—elsewhere in the continuing war between the sexes. Why men felt the need to protect this sartorial right above all others is not entirely clear, especially when the history of pants is not particularly noble. Perhaps then, as now, men were leery of the power of women, and giving them this very visible equalizer might prove too dangerous in the delicate balance of the world. It is a question that may remain forever unanswered.

Trousers—ankle-length, straight-cut tubes that loosely encased each leg—were humble in origin, worn by male peasants and countrymen centuries before anyone else in the Western world thought of adopting them. Sailors began to wear them, probably in the seventeenth century, certainly in the eighteenth. Loose-fitting—covering the knee but not the ankle—and

usually mass-produced out of cheap cloth, they became known as "slops."[1] Another surprising application, and one that may have had some influence if only because of its early appearance and ultimate longevity, was in the popular commedia dell'arte, in the costumes for Harlequin, Pierrot, and a number of other characters who were customarily dressed in straight pants.[2] Just as the actors portrayed stock characters reacting to stock situations, so too their stock costumes identified them to the audience. Several male performers wore straight trousers rather than the breeches or tights that harked back to the fifteenth century. It is interesting to contemplate where these loose pajama-like outfits came from in an age when the fashionable body was confined and displayed in tight doublets intricately tied to hose and leg-revealing breeches. Now, some four hundred years later, we can still recognize the commedia characters by their costumes, which have changed surprisingly little. Remarkably, too the costumes look acceptable to our twenty-first-century eyes—much more so than any breeches and tights would. Antoine Watteau, that wondrous recorder of theatrical performers at the beginning of the eighteenth century, portrayed Pierrot in paintings many times, but another of his works, *Iris*, a painting of children dating from sometime before 1720, may show the influence of the theatrical costume. It depicts a little boy, seated, playing a recorder-like pipe and wearing an altogether extraordinary outfit for its time, a silk jacket cut short, tailless, and loose, like the later men's frock (*le frac*), and straight-legged trousers that just cover his knee.

It was not until the 1770s that trousers moved up in society, and even then, they were for little boys only. But these little boys had powerful mothers, aristocratic and highly placed in that eighteenth-century world. European royal family portraits began to show little boys in straight trousers rather than knee breeches as early as 1778, as in *Four Grandchildren of Empress Maria Theresa* by Johann Zoffany. Five-year-old Prince Louis of Parma wears a silk hussar's suit, complete with decorative frogging closures on the little jacket, but with trousers that come to just above the ankles. As Diana De Marly suggests, wearing these at his age would imprint him for adulthood; he would want to wear them for the rest of his life, "and so would the rest of his generation."[3] The little hussar was first cousin to the dauphin of France, the son and heir of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI. Several portraits of that doomed little boy dating from the 1780s, just before the Revolution, depict him wearing elegant versions of

another little trouser outfit called a skeleton suit (or *matelot* in French). This had long straight trousers that buttoned onto a short, rather loose-fitting top, and was belted with a wide sash. It was worn with a crisp shirt underneath, with a ruffled open collar. Up until that time, until they were "breeched," little boys had worn the same skirts as their sisters, even if their outfits had more sober, masculine details. Thus, although white "baby dresses," which were also revolutionary, had appeared at mid-century, this was the first time children's clothing had broken away from the custom of dressing little boys to look like miniatures of their fathers. Although the royal children's outfits were made of silk and velvet, the basic form was wonderfully practical, and was adopted by many women for their little sons to wear in the years between diapers and breeches. The costume historian Doris Langley Moore called it "the greatest sartorial event of the eighteenth century" because "it was the first time comfort and convenience had been the basis of any fashion, at least in the present cycle of history."[4]

Scholars credit a number of influences for the emergence of this new clothing. Dating from the 1760s, Rousseau's philosophy of the natural man, with its attendant "back to nature" movement, called for, among other things, freeing children's bodies from tightly binding clothing. Other thinkers such as Winkelmann and Goethe rediscovered classical life and simplicity, and they too helped bring about this simpler form of children's clothing through the zeal of their followers.[5] In addition, John Locke had advocated "comfortable and functional clothing for children"; his influence may explain why it is generally accepted that the new skeleton suit was English in origin.[6] Locke notwithstanding, the style fit perfectly into the Anglomania that gripped all of Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This fad for things English introduced many casual, sporting, country styles throughout the fashionable world of the time: men's frocks, redingotes, spencers, and so on, to say nothing of English styles of women's dress. Certainly by 1782, when Gainsborough painted a series of individual portraits of George III's family, including each of his thirteen children, three-year-old Prince Octavius was depicted wearing a skeleton suit.[7] Marie Antoinette, too, in all likelihood encouraged its use through her penchant for playacting at rural pleasures in her Petit Trianon at Versailles. Certainly, she was one of the first mothers to dress her son in it, and the

numbers of family and mother-children portraits dating from when the dauphin was small would have ensured ready copying.

Ironically, the French Revolution's aversion to all things aristocratic also helped. In fact, the revolutionaries became known as the *sans-culottes*, meaning "without *culottes*," the French word for breeches, which were the trousers of the upper classes. Rejecting the knee breeches of fashion, the *sans-culottes* wore the straight-legged pants, or pantaloons, of the lower classes. Slowly, after the Revolution played itself out, pantaloons took over for men, taking more than a generation to finally nudge the knee breeches of the eighteenth century off the fashion map altogether. This history of bifurcation for men never ceased, then, but the garment took on a longer, looser, straight-legged form, often anchored under the shoe with a stirrup in the early years of the nineteenth century. It never looked back, after the 1820s becoming the menswear trouser of the past two centuries.

Little girls fell under influences of the "natural" movements of the late eighteenth century, too, although they did not have as far to go as boys did. The simple white baby dress had appeared among the upper classes, sometime around the 1750s, worn by toddlers of both sexes. It was new in its simplicity, and it was new in its fabric. Made out of cotton, it was easily washable, but was an expensive luxury in those years before the Industrial Revolution.[8] Many portraits of family groups show little children wearing this dress, some running and playing, distinguished by sex only by the color of the sash at the waist.[9] In the French style, girls wore pink sashes, boys blue. The little dresses invariably had a simple, unadorned neckline, straight short sleeves, and a long gathered skirt that fell almost to the ankle; three or four rows of growth tucks as a border provided the only other decoration on the dress. Later in the century it was this dress that little girls wore as companion outfits to the skeleton suits of their brothers. As the century advanced, the little sleeves became puffed, the waistline rose, and in general the dress foreshadowed the dress of adult women at the turn of the century. As the skirts became shorter and the muslin sheerer, active little girls (or perhaps their mothers) found that they needed something to preserve their modesty. It should be pointed out that up until this time, women had worn nothing under their chemises. Their underwear consisted of a simple chemise or shift, a pair of stays, and stockings rolled and tied at the knee with a ribbon. They believed that letting air circulate freely around

the lower body was healthy. Drawers did exist, but really only for actresses on the stage, which of course gave the undergarments as dubious a reputation as their wearers had.[10] Even as early as the turn of the nineteenth century, long before Victorian prudery set in, exposing the legs was unthinkable. As Phillis and C. Willett Cunnington state, "For us there is a certain irony in the fact that the wearing of drawers by women [previously only a male garment] was considered extremely immodest."[11]

Sometime around 1803, particularly in England, trousers for girls, adapted from their brothers', appeared in the form of pantaloons that were meant to be worn underneath the lightweight dresses. At first they were hidden under the skirts, but as these rose, the pantaloons stayed ankle-length and finally became visible. These, then, were the first trousers actually meant to be seen that were worn by females in the West. Whereas the little boys' pantaloons were very plain and masculine, the little girls' had lace and tucks to tie them into the overall design of the dresses they accompanied. And as women's fashions followed the lightweight, high-waisted, airy styles of children's dress, women too began to wear pantaloons.[12] Finally, fashionable women were wearing trousers, if only for underwear. And not only were they English in origin, but they were introduced and worn for exercise as well, at least according to Pierre Dufay in 1906: "In 1807 there came from London the fashion for pantaloons for girls. Jumping exercises were practised in England in the girls' schools: it was for that that they wore the pantaloons."[13]

The Cunningtons tell a wonderful story about how these pantaloons gained their stamp of approval in society—and in the process give us a perfect example of fashion diffusion. (The story also reveals that royal teenagers two hundred years ago had much the same impulses teenagers have today.) Quoting a journal of 1811, they say "the invidious garment" was "being adopted by 'the dashers of the haut ton,' and when Royalty, in the person of Princess Charlotte, not merely wore them but freely revealed the fact, its future career was assured." The fifteen-year-old daughter of the Prince Regent, later George IV, she was very popular and "modern,"

> being forward, buckish about horses and full of exclamations very like swearing. She was sitting with her legs stretched out after dinner and shewed her drawers, which it seems she and most young women now

> wear. Lady de Clifford said, "My dear Princess Charlotte, you shew your drawers." "I never do but where I can put myself at ease." "Yes, my dear, when you get in or out of a carriage." "I don't care if I do." "Your drawers are much too long." "I do not think so; the Duchess of Bedford's are much longer, and they are bordered with Brussels lace." "Oh," said Lady de Clifford in conclusion, "If she is to wear them, she does right to make them handsome."[14]

Some twenty years later, drawers were customary underwear for women, even though the fashion of the time had become much more elaborate and restrictive, for children as well as adults. Fabrics were heavier and stiffer than they had been at the turn of the century, and often they were dark and somber in color. By the 1840s, the upholstered look in clothing mirrored the burgeoning Victorian materialism that in turn reflected the rise of the prosperous industrial middle class by now enjoying the comfortable fruits of the Industrial Revolution. But the pantaloon, that sensible garment introduced in the lighter and more carefree period of the Empire and Regency to cover the extremities of little girls and women who insisted on wearing the sheer muslin dresses so popular at the time, remained. By now, it was a necessary part of women's underdress. Small wonder, then, that with its history of children's wear and underwear, it was rejected in the next decade, when, newly fabricated, it became the element of the bloomer costume that most offended.

The introduction of the pantaloon for children at the turn of the century was one influence that helped contemporary eyes accept the look. Another was the craze for "the Oriental," a term that included everything from the Middle East to Persia, India, and China. Although it came into full force in the eighteenth century, the contacts and therefore the links between Europe and the East had begun with the rise of Islam and the entry into Spain by the Moors in the eighth century. The Crusades brought back ideas, luxuries, and dress influences for the two hundred years of their duration, but the major link to the West came with the expansion of the Ottoman Turks to the borders of Europe, particularly Venice and Vienna, between 1380 and 1580.[15] At the beginning of the seventeenth century, two great European maritime nations, England and Holland, established their

East India companies, furthering the contacts and links with countries deeper within Asia. Although the English company grew and expanded throughout the century, it achieved stronger status only in the eighteenth century, when its power and authority in India deepened.[16] With the growing interest of the West in the East, primarily through its trade goods, things Eastern or Oriental became more and more fashionable. And the class that ran the company was the class that first adopted the look of the East—thus the eighteenth-century crazes for Chinese porcelain, for chocolate, coffee, and tea, for cotton chintzes and palempores,[17] even for operas set in exotic locales, such as Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782). It meant, also, a fascination with the clothes of the Orient.

Many upper-class Europeans had their portraits painted wearing clothing influenced or borrowed from countries east of Europe. Turkish dress elements such as the turban and the wrap coat and pantaloons worn with a wide sash encased English and French bodies, as captured by the leading portraitists of the day, among them Liotard, Aved, Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Copley.[18] Other artists, such as Angelica Kauffmann, painted more general subjects while dressing their sitters in *turquerie*.[19] It had vaulted into English society's awareness when Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote of her travels in Turkey in the early eighteenth century. She not only described the clothing of Turkish women but also brought some of it home and had her portrait painted wearing it, including the trousers that were so much a part of Turkish women's dress. According to Aileen Ribeiro, she set the fashion not just for portraits *à la turque* but for masquerade *à la turque* as well.[20] The foreign dress lent itself to fashion. Elements of it, mixed with European styles, appeared in fashion plates of the late eighteenth century under the guise of "circassiennes" or "levites," and turbans became part of women's fashion wear towards the end of the century. As for men, they relished their undress, their *déshabillé*, in the form of caps or turbans to cover their shaved heads at home when their wigs were put aside, and their "nightgowns" or banyans, which they wore for leisure for at least a century and a half.[21] Samuel Pepys, for example, noted in his diary entry of March 30, 1666, that he wore his India gown for his sitting with the painter John Hales.[22] All this, of course, argues for the enormous popularity of a new and different look.

By the nineteenth century, after Napoleon's incursions into Africa, the French painters Ingres and Delacroix captured the exoticism and mystery

of North Africa and its culture and customs, including enticing portrayals of the seraglio or harem. Ingres began as early as 1808 with his painting *The Valpinçon Bather*, which, though of a nude, strongly suggests the Middle East through the turban wrapped around the sitter's hair. (This pose and even the striped cloth was revisited fifty-four years later, when Ingres was eighty-two, in his famous painting *The Turkish Bath.*) Another well-known work was his *Odalisque with a Slave* of 1840. Whereas the main subject was, once again, nude, the servants wore the clothing of North Africa, complete with Turkish trousers. While Ingres painted nudes, Delacroix, his contemporary and one of the earliest artists to espouse the Romantic, depicted the clothed body. He visited Spain, Morocco, and Turkey in 1832, and returned to France with a portfolio of watercolors and drawings that he later used as the basis for some one hundred paintings. He documented in Romantic, vigorous, and imaginative works the dress of both virile men and languorous women, rich in color and exotic in detail. One, *Algerian Women in Their Apartments* (1834), clearly shows the Turkish trouser, with its baggy, full pants gathered at the ankle or the knee and worn beneath a tunic or bolero. It was that trouser, of course, that provided the model for the more generically applied term, used in a broader sense throughout the rest of the century, to describe any gathered trouser form. And these paintings, shown in Paris, would have been seen widely by the people who mattered most for our purposes—the people who could influence fashion.

Orientalism in its newer interpretation had crossed the English Channel during the early nineteenth century, taking its most remarkable form in the whimsical and exotic architectural excess of the Regency period, the Prince Regent's Royal Pavilion at Brighton (1808). The Orientalism adopted at this time, far from being a true borrowing of another culture's design, was instead a lavish and jubilant amalgam of all influences from points east (or south) of Europe. As we have seen, this movement had started in the later years of the eighteenth century, but it took flight in the fancy dress balls that were a popular form of aristocratic entertainment during this time and throughout the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, while Prince Albert was still alive. Ladies were recorded as having worn Turkish costume, daring in the extreme because of the trousers they were required to wear for "authenticity."

Here, then, we see that trousers for women in the guise of Mrs. Bloomer's reform dress did not just appear out of nowhere at mid-century, only to be dismissed by a narrow-minded and judgmental public because they were too new, too shocking. The idea had been around for a long time. It was the application of that idea to women's daily dress, as we have seen, that caused all the problems.