

What Women Wore: League of Women Voters Centennial Fashion Show May 3, 2019

In 2011, fashion designer Daphne Guinness observed, “Fashion is not just about trends. It’s about political history... You can see defining moments that were due either to revolutions or changes in politics.” Today, as we kick-off the Missouri League of Women Voters Convention and continue the celebration of the St. Louis and Missouri Leagues’ centennials, we are going to do just what Daphne proposed: take a look back at the milestones in our local and state Leagues’ histories while tracing the changes in the clothing worn by our predecessors. At first glance, the two may seem incongruous, but with the help of the Volunteer Board of The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis over the next 30 minutes we’ll quickly see how fashion IS political. In fact, the League was often ahead of its time, demonstrating progressive ideas long before many other organizations or groups even entertained them. So, sit back, relax, and step back in time to the early years of the twentieth century.

The Beginning

The date is March 25, 1919, just four months after the end of World War I and still a year and a half before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The location: the Statler Hotel here in St. Louis during the Jubilee Convention of the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association. At the podium is suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt.

She is dressed in the style of the New Woman, an archetype that burst into popular culture around 1890, as bolder, more active, more outgoing and outspoken than ever before **as modeled by Dorothy in a 1918 green and gold costume from a private collection.** The layers and bulk of Victorian and Edwardian style along with constricting corsets in favor of a slimming corset—much like today’s Spanx—and single layer of petticoats. Necklines lowered from the chin to show a bit of collarbone, sleeves bared the arm to the elbow, and hems rose scandalously above the ankle. This freer, looser style allowed more freedom of movement, which women’s advocates like Carrie needed as they traveled across the country speaking in favor of women’s suffrage.

At many events they wore white, one of three official colors of the movement in the United States, along with purple and yellow. Why white? Many theories abound. White was the color of the closely-related temperance movement, plus it is traditionally associated with innocence, purity and maidenhood, so it may have been intended to symbolize the purity and high-mindedness of suffragists' goals.

Sensing their long-awaited victory would soon be at hand, Carrie proclaimed:

Every suffragist...will hope for a memorial dedicated to the memory of our brave departed leaders, to the sacrifices they made for our cause, to the scores of victories won.

She will not be content with resolutions of self-congratulation; with speeches of tribute; nor will any suffragist propose a monument built of marble which only a few would see and fewer comprehend. What then shall it be? I venture to propose a memorial whose benefits will bless our entire nation and bring happiness to the humblest of our citizens.

What vainglorious proposal is this, do you ask? I propose no marvel; merely the most natural, the most appropriate and the most patriotic memorial that could be suggested – a League of Women Voters to "Finish the Fight," and to aid in the reconstruction of the Nation....

Let us raise up a League of Women Voters—the name and form of organization to be determined by the voters themselves; a League that shall be non-partisan and non-sectarian in character.

Seven months later, the Missouri League of Women Voters was founded, followed on November 13, 1919, by the St. Louis League. Interestingly, the prevailing opinion at the time was that the League would only be necessary for about five years until women grew accustomed to voting.

The first big project of the St. Louis League was a “Citizenship School” to help teach women what to do with the vote now that they had it. It met in three sessions a day for five days, with evening classes offered for employed women. Men could attend, if they chose. These classes were supported by the public schools and taught subjects such as citizenship, suffrage history, public speaking, parliamentary law, and publicity.

Four hundred and fifty paid to attend these classes in 1919 alone. They likely wore a tailored suit while learning, as it was a staple of every woman's wardrobe. A skirt and blouse pairing was one of the popular, but looser fitting dresses were also common and would continue to evolve into the 1920s. Think Coco Chanel, with her short, straight skirts or ones with soft pleats, tailored blouses worn untucked, but belted at the hips, covered by collarless, boxy jackets. With these, women wore a close-fitting hat or headscarf and flat, strappy sandals.

1920s

During the Chicago convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, held February 14-16, 1920, the national League of Women Voters was officially founded. The women attending the convention may have dressed **like Helen, who is wearing a red dress with a black coat from the recent Rep production of *The Play That Goes Wrong***. By fall of that year the St. Louis chapter had developed a Colored Division and an integrated board, likely the only one in town. Not long after, when the board was meeting at a downtown hotel, they were told the African American members would have to use the freight elevator. Edna Gelhorn, president of the League, state, and the local chapter, responded “Then we all will!” The Colored Division became a standing committee in 1922 and remained that way until the mid-1940s when the membership was fully integrated. That same year the chapter ended their affiliation with Federated Clubs, which prohibited Negro membership.

Wearing day suits— and sometimes high-waisted, wide-legged trousers that ended at the ankle—the ladies of Missouri went out into the community, beginning a tradition we uphold to this day, but which was unheard of at the time: non-partisan adult citizen education through meetings, forums and informational services. They also supported women for jury service, amended state child labor laws, began production of a Voter’s Guide and developed study groups to understand

current problems such as unemployment insurance and reciprocal trade agreements, which would prepare them well for the crises to come in the 1930s.

But at night, many young women transformed into the flappers we associate with the period. It is said that they were born in reaction to the horrors of World War I, which made people all too aware of the fleetingness of life and then led them to want to live life to the fullest. These bobbed-haired, gin-drinking, cigarette-smoking molls partied in straight cut sheath dresses with spaghetti straps or a round or V-neckline. Hemlines sometimes shockingly exposed the knee, but then fell below it over concern about the distraction to men. Waistlines were low, from the natural waist at the beginning of the decade to the lower hips and upper thigh by 1926.

1930s

But, like all good parties, the Roaring Twenties had to come to an end. Deflation and depression took their toll on the country and the League, with some St. Louis groups, such as Clayton, Richmond Heights, and University City, disbanding for a time or merging with the St. Louis group.

In fashion, clean lines and home dressmaking became more popular with austerity of the Great Depression **like the pink and green dress Michaeleen is wearing and the authentic crocheted dress she is carrying.** Both are from a private collection and from the 30's. Dresses and skirts, waistlines rose to the natural waist while hemlines dropped to the calf. Sleeves were short and knitwear in teal, brown and bottle green was in for young women. For adult women, the wide-leg trouser suit was the height of sophistication, cut to accentuate shoulder width and flatter hip curves. Rayon and the 1938 invention of nylon provided a cheaper alternative to silk.

The League turned our attention to adult institutes on taxation and government and lectures on “the boiling cauldron of Europe” and the meaning of fascism through weekly radio programs with news and expert interviews. For these efforts, we won an award from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation in 1935 for “educational work on problems of American foreign policy.”

Closer to home, the Social Security Act passed with League-supported provisions and permanent voter registration for St. Louis and St. Louis County became a reality. But the biggest project of the decade was the work we did on a merit system campaign which lasted from 1934 to 1941. Traditionally, political activity was rewarded with programs in public service. We fought in favor of the merit system, under which jobs and programs instead went to the most qualified. The result was a strong public understanding of how local government really worked and the passage at the 1941 polls of an amendment favoring the merit system.

1940s

World War II dominated the beginning of the next decade. The League officially joined the war effort in 1942 with War Service Units that educated citizens about government. Working women, especially those in factories, wore government-sponsored three-piece uniforms of trousers, a top and an apron.

Those who remained at home and working for the League campaigned for non-partisan courts in Missouri as well as a new state constitution. When they gathered in newly-formed neighborhood units to discuss local issues they may have dressed like **Martha, who is wearing a dress and a purple coat from a private collection.** Those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale wore clothes that were refashioned and reused, while even the rich wore simple designs that used a minimum of fabric. Blouses were simple, made of gossamer material and favored bows. Bulky shoulder pads and Raglan and dolman sleeves were paired with knee-length skirt suits, and separates were a thing for the first time as rationing necessitated clothing that could double for work or play.

August 14, 1945, V-J Day, marked the end of the war and its rationing of raw materials. As a result, fabric was again available, and hemlines fell below the knee, with long skirts and dresses in style. For those wanting to feel more casual, long dungaree-style culottes and one-piece siren suits fit the bill.

In the wake of the war, the League supported the creation of a UN Charter, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Locally, we were in the vanguard of Civil Rights, developing a

Civil Rights Agenda and studying city inequalities as early as 1948. In 1949, we began work eliminate segregation in all publicly-supported schools.

1950s

With the horrors of war becoming an ever more distant memory, the country experienced a period of boom, with the economy, housing market and birth rates all on the upswing. Fashion reflected this heady optimism **like the costumes Bonnie and Cindy are wearing from The Rep's production in September 2018.**

Luxury fabrics were back, as were details like pockets, faux fur and lace trims, and colors from bright to ice-cream shop pastel. Capri pants were the new ladies fashion trend. Pleats, especially accordion, knife and kick, made skirts easier to walk in, while dresses and separates had full skirts with netted underskirts that ended just below the knee and were cinched at the waist with a belt.

If you've seen the Amazon series the Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, you'll be familiar with the iconic swing coat, an A-shaped design of cashmere, wool, or tweed with a large collar and oversized buttons. Sleeves were flared three-quarter and the hemline came to just below the knee. Wrap coats with wide tie belts and shawl collars were a subtler, yet fashionable, alternative.

In the midst of the post-war baby boom, state and local League members campaigned for the establishment of a Missouri Human Rights Commission. In St. Louis, we pressed for the creation of a Metropolitan Sewer District and conducted an International Trade Fair and Survey. Once television began to catch on, we adopted the medium for call-in programs about issues of the day as a service to voters. We also began holding Freedom Agenda forums and publishing information on Individual Liberties publications, all of which earned our chapter the LaGuardia Award for achievement in municipal affairs in 1958.

1960s

After a period of peace and prosperity, dramatic conflicts like the Vietnam war and Cuban Missile Crisis and the rise of the hippy drug culture divided the country, resulting in opposing political and fashion styles. Clothing became a means of showcasing one's lifestyle choices, politics and attitudes **as shown by Donna in a 60's flowered dress from a private collection.**

In an era of increasing political activism, "easy-to-wear and easy-to-care" became the mantra, with constantly changing styles that reflected a variety of values and viewpoints. The 60s are said to be the decade of the demise of the hat and rise of cosmetics and hair products.

On the runway, art and fashion met in bold block colors, stripes, psychedelics, geometric prints and kaleidoscopic colors. Textiles and styles from eastern countries like India and Morocco, were popular. Miniskirts and baby doll dresses with brightly colored tights showed off a progressive, sex-positive attitude.

For those who didn't want to show so much skin, smock dresses with Edwardian necklines and knee-length hemlines ruled the day. By the end of the decade, fueled by the technological marvel of the moon landing, futuristic fashion was a trend. With asymmetric shapes and cutouts, in gold, silver and white materials, these clothing choices embraced a universe of endless possibility.

Whether hippie, mod, or traditional, the women of Missouri were busy. As frontrunners in environmentalism, they supported water pollution control amendments as early as 1961 and by the late 1960s were involved in the drafting and passage of state environmental legislation, including clean air, energy conservation, hazardous waste, solid waste and water control acts. The other big issue of the time was civil rights. By 1965, the St. Louis League campaigned for fair employment practices, public accommodations and fair housing, and formed an Inner City Committee to go into inner-city areas to inform, educate, and register voters.

This decade was one of change for the League itself. In the early 1960s many of the local St. Louis groups merged to form larger chapters with the League of Women Voters of Metropolitan

St. Louis was formed in 1966 as a coordinating organization for the local leagues, bringing us much closer and better uniting local efforts.

1970s

By the 1970s, both politics and fashion became more subdued and gender inclusive, **which Julia shows wearing a navy and yellow jumpsuit from a private collection.**

At the same time that they wore fashions in browns, yellows, and oranges, with ethnic influences or androgynous in style, the ladies of Missouri welcomed men as members for the first time and established a desegregation with busing study committee. In vintage clothes from charity shops, slogan t-shirts, bellbottoms and platform shoes, or kaftans and oversized dresses, we supported the Equal Rights Amendment, welfare reform, environmental issues and property tax reform.

And when we won an Emmy for “outstanding achievement in broadcasting” for the 1976 Presidential debates, our representatives likely accepted in dresses with lacy necklines and cuffs or updated siren suits with wide lapels and gathered shoulders.

1980s

If the 70s were subdued, the 80s were the polar opposite. An obsession with wealth and excess where more was more held the nation in its thrall. In 1981, we formed a single St. Louis County League, uniting the North County, Central County, Southwest and University City Leagues into the organization we're familiar with **today and League members dressed like Pat and Pam in their smart suits with those perfect shoulder pads, from another private collection.**

Wearing our wide-legged, shoulder-padded power suits and using the experience we were gaining the workplace, we sued the state for Missouri reapportionment so that our representatives were elected more fairly. We won, and the following year districts were formed.

Other members with big hair, bright oversized sweaters, denim, and animal print shirts reached out to the first MTV generation (and their parents) through televised public affairs programs and candidate forums, and the St. Louis City League began a weekly cable TV show called “Impact on the Issues.” As far as we were concerned, there was no such thing as too much public education.

1990s

Spurred on by a booming economy, the 1990s were a decade of technological innovations with computers and cell phones growing in popularity and increased usage. By the end of the decade, the internet would be commonplace and change our lives forever.

In retrospect, the 90s feel like an unpretentious decade with a chill vibe, which was reflected in its fashion. The first major fashion trend was the “grunge look,” which grew out of the music scene of the Pacific northwest and featured plaid flannel shirts paired with stone-washed or acid washed denim. Street style fashion was sporty and retained the oversized look of the 80s, often beginning with track suits, **like the one worn by Helen from a private collection.** And denim, printed t-shirts and oversized sweaters in bold colors were also popular. By mid-decade, the iconic movie *Clueless* made young women mad for chokers, bright plaids, and pastel slip dresses. By the end of the 90s, low riding jeans and crop tops, often referred to as “belly shirts,” showed off skin and asserted a strong third-wave of feminism.

While the fashion may have been laid-back, the League was not. We kicked off the decade with a major effort for gun control and a focus on reproductive rights and health care reform. By mid-decade, campaign finance reform was a priority and we successfully got it on the ballot in 2000. Just when Prince’s song “1999” was going into full rotation, our Amicae Brief in the Blue Cross Blue Shield case resulted in a multi-million-dollar foundation to assist uninsured and underinsured Missourians. Our joint Amicae Brief with the National League to remove term limit language from the Missouri ballot was also successful. Not a bad way to end the twentieth century!

2000s

A new millennium brought with it a sense of endless possibility, but it was short-lived as our lives and country were changed forever on September 11, 2001. Plunged into a war in the Middle East and then affected by a recession the likes of which hadn't been seen in nearly one hundred years, the first decade of the twenty-first century was a period of turmoil and uncertainty we all remember too well.

However, as in all previous times of unrest, the League carried on, fighting for funding for public education, access to quality, affordable health care, including mental health, renewable energy standards, and children's safety – all the while sporting cargo pants or skinny jeans and layered colorful shirts.

In 2003, we testified at the state legislature about energy efficiency with the Missouri Clean Energy coalition, which we co-founded. In 2004, we co-sponsored the March for Women's Lives in Washington D.C. Throughout the decade we slipped into our boho dresses or maxi skirts with paisley blouses and layered long necklaces and bracelets to attend FOCUS planning meetings and present at community concerns forums.

At the end of the decade we donned our hipster high-waisted skirts with knitted shirts, accented with oversized glasses and scarves to join the Missouri Sunshine Coalition in favor of the free flow of government information and the Pew Center on Global Climate Change to collect information about how Missouri is addressing climate change.

2010s

Finally, we come to the present decade, one that will draw to a close in only seven short months. We live in the digital era of social media and technology, Netflix and hashtags. Just like its technology, this decade's fashion is different than so many before it; designers no longer have the influence they once did so personal style reigns. Now we come to our chapter and state meetings wearing whatever we like, reimagining styles from past decades with a contemporary twist. This could mean reviving the chokers, hoodies and sporty outfits of the 90s, but with a

monochromatic glam and elegance. Or wearing a romper from the 1940s or 1970s but in a fun, colorful print rather than head-to-toe monochrome.

Nearly one hundred years after the League was founded, we're still staying true to our original purpose by registering voters and supporting election reform, early voting, and absentee voting. In 2012, we co-sponsored candidate forums at the Missouri Black Expo ahead of the election and defeated the voter ID law in 2014, as well as on appeal in 2018. As we've done since 1961, we're fighting for the future of our planet as part of the Missouri Clean Energy Coalition and by supporting the CLEAN Missouri and Raise Up Missouri campaigns.

In 2016, we began our look back at our history with our Celebrate the Vote event to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the 1916 Golden Lane silent protest because both major parties refused to address women's suffrage in an election year. We continue commemorating our history this year, and will join with the nation in the centennial celebrations of the Nineteenth Amendment next year.

As we peer into the next decade, we're facing issues heretofore unimaginable, such as voter influencing on social media and election hacking by foreign powers. But we will conquer them just as we have economic depression, war, and a host of social ills: with determination, non-partisan study, forward-thinking attitudes, and indomitable fashion sense, ready to inform the citizens of Missouri of the issues as they arise. Carrie Chapman Catt formed our organization out of concern for female voters, and over the last one hundred years, these have evolved to include the concerns of all voters. She would be proud of what we accomplished, yet at the same time urge us on to even greater success. As we begin our next century, let us keep her advice in mind: "To the wrongs that need resistance, To the right that needs assistance, To the future in the distance, Give yourselves."

In closing, we would like to thank the Volunteer Board of The Repertory Theatre for bringing these wonderful costumes to the party. One of the best ways to show your gratitude is by attending one or more of their production in the 2019-2020 season. Brochures describing the season are on the table in back.

Thank you for attending tonight. We hope you enjoy the rest of the convention.