



Appropriateness and Parental Approval of 1920s Fashion for Small Town Women:
“We pretty much all looked alike!”

Carrie Cox, Western Kentucky University, USA

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While descriptions of high-end, ready-to-wear fashions of the 1920s are plentiful (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015), were everyday women living in small towns in the U.S. wearing these same 1920s fashions? Did ordinary women living in ordinary places adopt the spectrum of 1920s fashion trends commonly associated with cosmopolitan lifestyles? Were the shorter, revealing dress styles of the 1920s representative of social change in the lives of small town women? Literature and film have often perpetuated the stereotype of “flapper” women as promiscuous and rebellious youth caught in the looser moral climate of the twenties (Burton 1990; Scheiner, 1990; and Saville, 2003). However, such images may have led to generalizations about 1920s costume and lifestyle choices that may not fully apply to less cosmopolitan women.

To better understand these issues, the author conducted an interview study in 1995 to document 12 women’s recollections of their 1920s fashions while residing in the small town of Columbia, Missouri. These women, who were teenage or college-age in the 1920s, were asked about their dress, where they acquired their dress, and public reaction to 1920s fashions. These face-to-face interviews allowed women to share their experiences in their own words (Ives, 1980). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the constant comparative method to inductively derive themes (Glaser, 1967).

These data show that “what” small town women wore in the 1920s and “where” they acquired their clothing are interdependent issues best understood within the context of the child/parent relationship. Because they were wearing clothing their mothers made for them (not ready-made fashions), their fashion choices were “parent-centric”. The vast majority said that being “fashionable” was not of primary importance; however, looking “appropriate” was of utmost importance. These women’s’ recollections of their fashions centered on five key topics.

First, they described changes in dress styles as being less drastic or “shocking” than popular culture depicts. Eleven of the 12 women reported no recollection of public opposition to shorter dress/skirt lengths. They recalled the 1920s shift to strait, low waistline dress styles. As one woman critiqued, “That was an awful style. The women all realized it!” Second, the women said that having separate school dresses to wear, in addition to “a nice church dress”, was essential to looking appropriate. Third, the women described dressing in sweaters, skirts, and middy blouses in the 20s, which allowed for fashion variety. Fourth, a key fashion recollection was the uncomfortable, binding bra intended to minimize the bust and their great distain for the trend that “flattened you out”. However, they conformed to it primarily because accentuating the breast was considered “immodest”. Finally, when asked if there were any clothing styles considered “indecent or immodest” for women to wear in the 1920s, the women emphatically declared, “Pants!” They recalled wearing knickers for recreational activities and strenuous work around the home.

These interviews document the 1920s’ clothing and fashions trends that remained in these small town women’s memories 70 years removed. Most importantly, these women help reframe fashion history with an alternate account of the “roaring twenties” placing “appropriateness” and parental approval as paramount to fashion choices among small town women.

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