

Looking at a picture of a crowd at the opening of a Swedish store in the 1960s I noticed that most of the people—and they were women, primarily—were wearing hats. That led me to think about clothes, not a subject that is often on my mind.

Years ago, though, my sister and I talked about how there were a few women we knew of our mother's generation who never wore slacks, jeans, or other pants. There weren't many. But, a few years earlier, all of the women in that age group were almost exclusively in dresses and skirts. They had only begun to wear pants during our growing up years.

That crossed my mind when I looked at the scene of the hatted, dress-clad 10 women in the picture. And, as my thoughts skittered from one thing to another in rapid and not always logical sequence, I began to see—in memory or in a few pictures we have—my mother's dresses in the years we were small. She did wear slacks and jeans in later years, but I don't recall her in pants when we were little. Oddly enough, I do remember a rather skimpy red and white two piece bathing suit.

Usually, in the pictures taken here at home, my mother was wearing a house dress and also an apron. There is one photo, though, of my mother without the apron. She is sitting on the step outside the house. I am next to her, short, chubby legs crossed, and my sister, four years older, is standing up. My sister is neat in matching shorts and blouse, I am dirty, in a dress, and have bare feet. I was probably three years old. Our mother, though, looks rather stylish, in a cotton dress of stripes. I can make myself think I remember the dress, but that might be a trick of memory. But, as I recall, it was green and beige with maybe a little brown. Our mother's dark hair was curled and perfectly styled. I knew she had done that herself, and it is a skill that was apparently not heritable, considering my own inability and lack of interest in such things.

She is wearing pumps in the picture, the kind that people used to call Cuban heels, something, I suppose, in keeping with the times. I know we had company that day, a couple from the Grand Rapids area who had recently been married. The man had been a neighbor when he was a young bachelor, and he had brought his bride to meet our family. I think it was she, Lena, who took the picture that day.

Most women of that time and this area wore what they called "house dresses," cotton, washable print garments that they

routinely covered with aprons. Most of these dresses had what were called “self belts,” meaning a fabric belt of the same print as the dress. These dresses needed ironing, and they appeared in the tightly rolled bundles of “sprinkled” clothes in the basket on ironing day, along with children’s clothes and the husbands’ blue chambray work shirts that were standard on the farms in our area.

There was always a “good” dress or two in the closet, but these were only taken out for occasions away from home. And, among my mother’s hangers, there was also a skirt, a special garment she had sewn herself to wear to the square dances that our folks enjoyed. It was a “circular skirt,” made with plenty of swing, and it was an arresting print. The material was cotton piqué, crisp and fresh, and the background was pure white. Scattered on the material were large, bright red chrysanthemums and green foliage. It really was an unusual print. I don’t know where my mother had purchased the material. But, I do recall seeing it fly around her when “Swing your partner” was the call of the dance. And, it looked good on my dark-haired mother.

As we grew up, though, our mother, like most other women of that time of transition, began to wear mostly slacks. But, even in her eighties, she donned fashionable dresses for church and other occasions, and she always had a way of looking quite stylish. I didn’t inherit a bit of that.