

FORT COLLINS

Fabric of history woven into CSU textile collection

By Coleman Cornelius

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Linda Carlson has a favorite garment in Colorado State University's Historic Costume and Textiles Collection: a simple linen chemise.

Handmade in 1801, the ecru slip appears plain and unremarkable compared with the many striking textiles in CSU's historic collection.

But Carlson, collection curator, favors the 200-year-old undergarment for its ability to put history in perspective: It was worn when Thomas Jefferson was president, at the time of the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

A symbol of the country's dramatic western expansion, the slip later traveled West with the woman who owned it and eventually was donated to the CSU collection.

"This is the stuff that makes history come alive," said Carlson, a lecturer in CSU's Department of Design and Merchandising. "It gives you a whole new picture of history."

The chemise is among some 10,000 items in the university's Historic Costume and Textiles Collection, which dates from the late 1700s. The collection, valued at \$2.5 million, is vital to research and to the study of apparel design and production.

CSU recently landed a federal grant of \$31,000 to help preserve the textiles collection for future researchers and university students, Carlson said.

The grant, from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, will pay for museum-quality storage cabinets to house about half of CSU's collection. Most of the university's older textiles will be stored in the special cabinets.

A matching gift from the estate of Virginia Webster, a former Fort Collins resident and longtime collection supporter, will aid the project.

The collection of donated items, which covers 1,700 square feet, already is kept in temperature- and humidity-controlled rooms. But the new metal cabinets, equipped with individual filter systems, will provide extra protection for old and delicate garments, Carlson said.

Beverly Sheppard, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, said her agency's conservation grants help institutions "care for their collections so that future generations may share the treasures that are our artistic, historic and scientific heritage."

At CSU, that means preserving clothing that reflects Colorado history. Many garments in the CSU collection were worn by people who settled here during the 1800s, when Colorado became a U.S. territory and, later, a state.

For instance, a loden-colored wedding dress, constructed with silk taffeta and mother-of-pearl buttons, was made in 1880 for a bride from a prominent Fort Collins family, the town's first jewelers.

With its bustle skirt, intricate pleating and unusual color, the dress contrasts with today's white wedding gowns. "It would have been smashing," Carlson said as she handled the garment with white gloves.

The collection gives students a sense of people and history unmatched by textbooks, Carlson said.



A dress from the 1920s, probably worn by a Denver socialite, is made of dyed chiffon and adorned with glass beads and rhinestones.



Linda Carlson, curator of CSU's Historic Costume and Textiles Collection, holds a 1880 loden-colored wedding dress, made with silk taffeta and mother-of-pearl buttons for a prominent family.

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