

Mrs. Roosevelt's gown, I presume

CSU grad solves cloth mysteries

By JAN KNIGHT-SINNER
The Coloradan

If you think sleuthing is the exclusive domain of Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie, think again.

Because when a Smithsonian Institution costume conservator approaches a first lady's gown, no seam is left unscrutinized, no bead left unanalyzed, no bodice left unstudied.

And when Polly Willman explained her job to 200 people sitting in the Lincoln Center on Tuesday afternoon, she described her tasks with a reserved passion that rivaled Watson's staid admiration of his detective boss.

One of Willman's major cases was to change the notion first ladies' gowns must always be exhibited.

"It's *finally* no one's intention that costumes be on permanent display," she said. "We rotate to protect them."

Through a series of slides, Willman described how the original exhibit of first ladies' dresses, established in 1914, contributed to the gowns' deteriora-

tion.

Mannequins wearing the dresses stood in the western sunlight for 40 years, fading the lime green of Lou Hoover's frock and destroying the heliotrope of Lucretia Garfield's gown.

The exhibit was moved twice between 1954 and 1987, when it was closed.

Since then, Willman's primary charge has been to record the frocks' condition before carefully storing them away.

She photographed the dresses from all angles and recorded their condition in pages numbering in the hundreds.

She's analyzed fibers, dyes and threads, looking for signs of alteration and originality.

She's cleaned the dresses with a vacuum, covering its hose with a piece of muslin. She then sent the soiled swatches to a laboratory. Analyzing the dirt identified where "dust problems" were and helped museum workers design less troublesome exhibit rooms, she said.

Willman also meticulously packed every gown before sending it off to the museum support center in Maryland, the Smithsonian's laboratory.

At the support center, Willman again scrutinized the costumes

before packing them in individual drawers.

Willman said she encounters surprises from time to time.

The investigation of Edith Roosevelt's inaugural gown at first revealed the first lady was dishonest when commissioning her "American-made" frock: An inner label identified Worth of Paris as the designer.

Upon further probing, however, Willman found the gown was probably altered a few times — and the label was a sign of Roosevelt's frugality.

"The Paris label migrated from one gown to another," she said. "And although the gown had been altered, it may have as much historic value because it represents something (Edith Roosevelt) valued doing."

Willman works in the National Museum of American History, an arm of the Smithsonian. She is a former Fort Collins resident and graduated from Colorado State University with a bachelor's in textile sciences in 1974 and a master's in historic costumes and preservation in 1979.

Tracking down the history of the gowns attracted her to her job, she said.

"It's very much a sleuthing, mystery-oriented job," she said.



Special to The Coloradan

SPECIAL CARE: Polly Willman, costume conservator for the Smithsonian Institution, treats a gown that belonged to Mary Harrison McKee, daughter of President Benjamin Harrison. Willman and her assistant, Marianne Yudes, are vacuuming the gown to remove dirt.

Coloradan
May 3, 1989