

Buffalo Tales

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TIED AT THE WAIST: THE EVOLUTION OF THE APRON

BY DONNA RICHARDS

Long before pioneer women entered Buffalo County, women from Europe, and possibly their ancestors, wore aprons. We have seen the apron transform from a needed item of clothing to a decorative accessory. From the 12th century to the present time, the apron has continued to be

a practical and functional part of a woman's wardrobe. Whether settling or traveling on the prairie, women used their apron as a third hand. Aprons were made of white cotton that had been woven and sewed by the women who wore

them. If time and material was at hand they might have made two. Daily chores could not be started until an apron was tied around the waist. Depending on where she was at the time determined how the apron would be used. The family used only 3 pots to cook: a bake kettle (Dutch Oven), frying pan, and a tea kettle. Sugar came in loafs (hard, cone-shaped). Main meals were breakfast

and supper (prepared at camp sites). Lunch was usually leftovers eaten during the noon rest stop. "Hard Tack" or sea biscuits were eaten by all emigrants. If kept dry it could last for up to two years. Pioneers would make their own or purchase large quantities at the

various outfitting towns along the trail. These tasted like thick, hard, unsalted crackers. Milk could be put in a chum on a wagon in the morning. The jostling during the day would turn the cream by the time they stopped for the night.

When traveling across

the prairie, women gathered buffalo chips or kindling to start the fires for preparing meals by using their apron as a pouch to hold small pieces of bark, sage, or chips. They were used to strain muddy and bug-infested water that would be boiled over a hot fire, and set aside to cool. Retrieving kettles from the fire was a hot job, so once again the white cloth tied around the waist was put to use as a potholder.



Once an apron was soiled on one side, it would be turned over and used until it could be washed -- usually few and far between stops.

Many times the apron was used as a towel to dry dishes, hands, and faces. Those big aprons wiped countless perspiring brows, shielded many shy children from strangers, and dried the tears of sadness and the fear of the unknown.

By the time wooden houses and sizeable farmsteads dominated the

from everyday household items such as towels and feed or flour sacks.

When World War II ended, the apron had come into its own as a symbolic uniform for women. As women were forced out of their wartime jobs, they embraced aprons and all they stood for: the bond between a parent and child, survival, friendship, opportunity, and challenges. The homemaker was considered a legitimate and respectable occupation.

In the fifties, aprons were at their



county, aprons had become a necessity. The skirt, when held from the bottom, was handy for gathering eggs or bringing baby chicks inside to warm by the fire. Vegetables from the garden were carried from the garden to the sink. When a child needed comfort or encouragement, it was wrapped around them.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, aprons were used by hard laborers, such as machinists, weapon makers, factory workers, carvers, and leather smiths. Material was expensive so aprons and cloths were cut close to the body to save fabric. Women during this era made aprons

of height of popularity and a woman could have many decorative aprons to match her outfits or even to match the tablecloth. Colorful fabrics took the place of "just white" aprons and women were able to make more than one. It was common for women to have many types of aprons for gardening, hair cutting, cleaning, laundry, entertaining and, of course, cooking.

Bright colors were in vogue and women would collect aprons ranging from full work aprons to sheer half aprons decorated with rickrack, sequins, ribbons, pompoms, cross-stitch, ruffles or smocking. Even

though ready-made aprons were available, many women chose to sew their own. They were considered a work of art and showcased a woman's homemaking and sewing skills.

Aprons remained popular until the early 1970s when the era of the domestic diva ended. More women waited to get married and start families, choosing instead to focus on careers and life outside the home. Except for the utilitarian apron, the apron had all but disappeared by the 1980s.

Maybe future generations will be able to see these fascinating art-ifacts (called an apron) through a glass window in a museum collection. The description will read something like this: "a piece of cloth or leather worn on the forepart of the body to keep the clothes clean or defend a person from injury." Those who used them, however, will remember their sentimental value.

Aprons are very nostalgic. You cannot help but wonder what our ancestors were doing when they wore them? What were they cooking? Aprons bring back the memory of Grandma or mother standing in front of a stove stirring a pot, while a pressure cooker hissed and spit in the background.

Aprons are symbolic of hearth and home. For many women, their grandmother's and mother's aprons hold loving memories of holidays or potlucks at the town hall, stockings filled with candy at Christmas, fabulous food served by apron-swaddled women, happy to show off their cooking skills and exchange gossip, and hungry family and friends dying to dig in. Values and traditions from gentler, less complicated times are remembered.

Aprons are a tangible connection between the past and present - a common denominator we can share with our predecessors and continue to pass on. Aprons are a historical item to be preserved. It may not seem important, but in truth our use of the apron is fading away. It is just a simple piece of cloth, but its existence in local history is significant.

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.
 Phone: 308.234.3041 Email: bchs@bchs.us

Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

2008 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2008: Dan Speirs, Barb Riege, Bob Stubblefield, Dr. Mark Ellis

Term expiring June 1, 2009: Janice Martin, Lee Sanks, Mary Kenney, Gary Straatmann

Term expiring June 1, 2010: Jim Cudaback, Janice McGregor, Sharon Mason, Jolene Ward

Officers (1 year term)

President.....	Dan Speirs
Vice-President.....	Barb Riege
Secretary.....	Sharon Mason
Treasurer.....	Janice McGregor

Upcoming Events

Saturday, Dec. 6th through Sunday Dec. 14th: 21st Annual Christmas Tree Walk 1-5 pm daily with extended hours on Friday the 12th from 1-7 pm

View dozens of decorated trees displayed in each building while enjoying refreshments and music.

Don't forget to bring your loose change for the "penny wars." Pennies are positive votes while quarters, nickels, and dimes are negative votes. Join in the enjoyable tradition!!!

Check our web site for updates: www.bchs.us

2009 Buffalo County Historical Society Calendar of Events

Saturday, February 21 2-5pm: Cake Fundraiser

Sunday, April 19 1-3pm: BCHS Annual Meeting

May Date Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Mrs. David Anderson born May 11, 1849 (2009=160th)

Saturday, May 30: 24th Annual Wagons West Celebration- Music from 10-7 pm and Exhibitors from 10-6pm

Sunday, June 14: 2nd Annual 1/2 Marathon. Buffalo County Stampede-reg is at 6 am-race begins at 7

June Date Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Mrs. William Nutter born June 16th, 1835 (2009=174th)

Friday, July 3rd 9-10:30: Members Only Night (watch city's fireworks)

Saturday, July 11 10-6pm: Family Farm Days

Thursday, July 23 6:30-9pm: 3rd Annual Trivia Contest

Thursday, July 30 (through Aug. 29th): Smithsonian Harmonies

August Date Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Ms. Fannie Graves born August 1885 (2009=124th)

Saturday, August 1: time TBA. Musical Talent Contest followed by the Fiddle Contest

Saturday, August 15 10-3pm: 5th Annual Genealogy Open House with spotlight on One-Room School w/ a picnic!

October Date Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Maud Marston Burrows in 1864 (2009=145th)

Saturday, Dec. 5 - Sun. Dec. 13 1-5 pm daily: Open to the public: 22nd Annual Christmas Tree Walk***Special Night: Friday Dec. 11th from 1-7pm: Public Official Lighting at 6:30 pm

December Date Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Sarah Oliver born Dec. 1, 1832 (2009=177th)

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting the BCHS!

Jennifer

Director's Report

Hello, all BCHS members!

I hope the summer is treating you well! The Society is buzzing with excitement and the museum has been fortunate enough to host several guests, so far this year. The museum guests are most impressed with how much there is to see here and are surprised and eager to learn about our upcoming expansion plans.

We hand out packets to all guests that come in. The packets include a membership form, an engineer letter, a volunteer application, a current calendar of events, a 2009 calendar of events, the Society's wish list, an evaluation form, and a game piece (a fill-in puzzle with words representing the Trails & Rails Museum).

These packets are also used when I go guest speaking and when we have a booth around the area.

We have had great response with evaluations; donated items to help with the wish list; new visitors to our events; and even some new volunteers.

The Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum is a volunteer organization and our survival is dependant on volunteers. There are many opportunities for volunteers. We can find projects to match your interests.

If you like:

- researching...the archives can always use your assistance in answering inquiries.
- gardening...we have several flower beds and outside display areas that could use your TLC.
- writing...the Society's newsletter, Buffalo Tales, is always looking for more Buffalo County-related stories to preserve and share.
- interacting with guests...we always need volunteers to serve as tour guides...both our every-day visitors, as well as scheduled bus tours (adult and school-age)
- working with your hands...we have maintenance projects for all levels of expertise (i.e. fixing hand rails; resetting the out house that Mother Nature played with; painting; tightening the faucet on the sink; etc).
- paperwork...we are still working on our inventory of the buildings and are now in need of someone to come in and match index cards to a donor sheet
- event planning...we have a very fun calendar of events. Each event needs a chairperson and several volunteers to assist in lining up places, prizes, entertainment, and other volunteers.
- researching, writing, and submitting grants...then you have found a great home here. We would love to have a volunteer grant writer assist us in reaching the goals of the Society to better enhance the visitor's experience.

We will find the right project for your interests, even if you have one hour a month or one hour a week (or three hours every Tuesday, etc.).

Thank you, for supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society! Our mission is to preserve Buffalo County's rich history and educate everyone we can about both the stories and how to preserve their treasured items.

I look forward to working for you and my door is open for your suggestions and questions

Sincerely,

Jennifer



Trails & Rails Museum
Buffalo County Historical Society
710 West 11th Street Box 523
Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Visit us at
www.bchs.us

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