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### Freedom of Movement: The Development and Disappearance of the Corset in Succession with Women's Agency, 1860-1920

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Sarah J. Phelps

Freedom of Movement:

The Development and Disappearance of the Corset in Succession with Women's Agency, 1860-1920

Women's fashion is always changing and always moving to the next trend. What was fashionable one day could be out of fashion the next. Colors, silhouettes, styles, fabrics all could be in one week and out in the next. This was not always the case. Before the 1860s fabrics were limited, and certain colors were so scarce that that only royalty wore them. There was no mass production, everything was made by hand, making products take long amounts of time to turn out to customers. Standardized sizing did not exist, meaning everything was measured and made to fit the client.<sup>1</sup> The most frustrating characteristic was that fashion was stagnant, not just with innovative or evolutionary changes to garments, but fashion also caused its female wearers to be stagnant. Trapped behind heavy, tight, unbreathable garments, only those who had the time and money to not move could wear fashionable outfits. Nothing promoted movement. That is until 1860 with new undergarments giving ladies limbs the freedom to move, leading to the accelerated changes to the corset to follow the need to move. Between 1860 and 1920, the Victorian and Edwardian eras of fashion, a need to move would encourage the corset industry to move by adapting the style and materials used for corsets with movement in mind.

It started with the invention of the sewing machine allowing for mass production. With mass production came a new industry that marketed itself to the lower and, growing, middle class. Suddenly the corset was more than just a supportive undergarment hidden by heavy layers.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Smith, "Market Development, Industrial Development: The Case of the American Corset Trade, 1860-1920," *The Business History Review* 65, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 96.

In this period corsets became expressive and colorful, with dyed fabrics and threads for colorful embroidery, allowing customers to not just purchase a corset that fit their bodies but also fit their personal styles. Lace and decorative ribbons made of silk or satin started dotting the top and bottom edges of corsets continuing to make them more interesting to look at, allowing more and more focus on undergarments and how they looked.<sup>2</sup> This caused working women to start buying corsets, which had not been done before because they lacked the time and money to go and purchase them. That created a need to cater to women who moved. Starting with reinforcing corsets, then moving to making corsets specific to sporting activities, finally choosing to make them out of non-constricting, stretchable fabrics, and to cover less and less of the body to allow for a range in motion. This was also the time of new scientific thinking and discovers that would influence discussions centered around health. With health being a hot topic, discussions started about making women's dress healthier.<sup>3</sup> This caused reform movements and clothing exhibitions that were completely centered around healthy and comfortable dress, causing the corset industry to move with the interests of their consumers.

As the topic of healthy clothing and its creation became popular simultaneously sports, dances and other outdoor activities became popular past times. The corset manufacturers in response made a new line of corsets for women who wanted to enjoy these pursuits while still having undergarment support. These new pursuits included bicycle riding, dances like the tango, and sports like tennis, baseball, and croquet.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the need for structural garments that could also be used for strenuous activities that called for movement, the industry moved in the

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Salen, *Corsets: Historical Patterns & Techniques* (Los Angeles: Costume & Fashion Press/ QSM, 2008), 70-77.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Ewing, *Dress and Undress: A History of Women's Underwear* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981), 88-95.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Edward Cave, New York Tribune, *The Great Outdoors*, March 18, 1917.

direction of adapting to the need to move. This would lead to the gradual abandonment of the corset.<sup>5</sup> The corset industry would move to undergarments, that while constrictive by today's standards, would allow the body to move with the newfound freedoms.

By the start of the Victorian era, 1860 to 1900, corsets had been worn since the seventeenth century and had changed form multiple times but never as rapidly as after 1860. In 1860 the popular silhouette of ladies' fashion featured large protruding skirts, a tightly laced corset to give the illusion of a small waist, and a pushed up bust. This voluminous skirt was achieved not by layers of petticoats but instead by an invention called the crinoline. The crinoline was a metal cage that held out skirts and achieved the same volume as several petticoats with dramatically less weight. The crinoline was the first part of a ladies' undergarment fashion that would be mass produced and give some freedom of movement by no longer constricting the legs with layers and layers of fabric. With mass production the crinoline could be popularly worn and sold to people beyond the upper and middle class. Crinolines were cheap and easy to make while also not needing to be sized allowing all shapes and figures to enjoy the new weightlessness and freedom to a women's legs. However, it would not be until 1870 that mass production of the corset would take place. Between the years of the mass production of the crinoline to the mass production of the corset, corset makers would come to understand the rising demands for readymade clothing.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of the crinoline did not mean the disappearance of the petticoat however, petticoats would still be used because of the length that crinolines were made. Crinolines were

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<sup>5</sup> Shelley Tobin, *Inside Out: A Brief History of Underwear* (Great Britain: The National Trust, 2000), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 94-96.

often short and did not touch the ground, instead the crinoline stopped between the knee and above the ankle. The crinoline would not last long, only from about 1855 to 1865, because it had major dangerous and life-threatening flaws. Due to the outrageous width of the crinoline women would knock things over walking past, be knocked over themselves if a strong wind picked up the skirts, get snagged or caught on machinery or doorways, and could even catch their skirts on fire if they were not careful when moving past a hearth. This caused many embarrassing moments and accidents that resulted in injury or death. Near the end of its life span the crinolines outlandish size would slim down to have a flat front and lightly protruding sides and back still giving women the ability to move their legs freely while also inspiring the next change in style.<sup>7</sup>

The next invention to change the shape of skirts and also be worn over the corset was the bustle, used from 1870-1900. Instead of creating volume around the body in a giant circle like the crinoline did, the bustle swooped the skirts to the back of the body creating a large rear at the back of the dress. Like the crinoline, the bustle was worn over the corset and was used by all classes with differing degrees of materials and designs. The homemade and cheapest bustles were made of fabrics like cotton or horsehair canvas and usually were just stuffed pads that the skirt could be draped over. The most expensive and intricate bustles were a cage like the crinoline that sat on the rear being well crafted enough to compress when a lady sat and then springing back to shape as they stood back up. Like crinolines, bustles also gave freedom to the legs without any of the means to injury which caused them to last much longer than the crinoline had.

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<sup>7</sup> Ewing, 69-76 and Tobin, 14.

With the skirts new shape due to the bustle, this meant a change to the corset to help flatter that new shape. Corsets started to have longer curved fronts that followed the shape of the stomach and high busts to push the chest closer to the chin to create cleavage and make the chest look larger. Tight lacing also prevailed with clothing hugging the body to help accentuate all the curves that were created from the corset constriction. A large bust, small waist and large hips was the only figure a proper lady could have. This would be known as the 'wasp' waist because the shape the tight-laced corset and bustle created mirrored the shape of wasps. This 'wasp' waist style would continue into the 1890s and inspire the next strange contouring shape the corset would make.<sup>8</sup>

After the constriction of the 'wasp' waist corsets came the push into the S-bend corsets. Coming around the beginning of the twentieth century, the S-bend corset forced a woman to stand with her bust forward and her hips thrown back. This would be known as the 'Pouter Pigeon' chest and would be satirized as the kangaroo stance. The way to achieve this new silhouette was by tight lacing corsets and an introduction of the new straight busk. The busk is the part of the corset that flattens the stomach and around 1890 would open and close down the center front to make getting in and out of the corset much easier. Before the splitting of the busk, the only way to properly get in and out of a corset was to completely undo or redo the lacing. This made tight lacing of the corset almost impossible without assistance because of the time and energy it took. The splitting of the busk was one the many innovations that made the corset available to all classes and give the industry a larger number of consumers for the corset industry to pander to.

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<sup>8</sup> Ewing, 77-87 and Tobin 22.

By this time the bustle was no longer in use, and petticoats would be replaced with the much lighter slip. With the straight front of the corset made by the busk also came the straight A-line skirts. All of the volume and flounce that was popular with petticoats was now replaced with the sleek and straight A-line skirt. A change to the corset to add the new silhouette was to make them much longer going completely over the hips instead of stopping at them or just above them as done previously. They would also more generally start to sit under the bust instead of covering and pushing up the bust as in previous corset generations. With the corset now sitting under the bust it allowed for more upper body movement and less restriction on the ribs, while still synching the waist. This allowed for the next invention of corsetry, which was bust bodices. Worn with the corset, it was boned just like a corset and usually padded to aid in keeping the bust up while also making the bust appear larger than it actually was. The bust bodice would also help inspire the first brassiere, made in 1903, that would eventually lead to modern bras.<sup>9</sup> This would be the first time that undergarments would be separate pieces and were not as compressive on the chest like with the previous tight-laced corsets.

As constricting as the S-bend corset was it was not the only corset of the 1900s. Activities such as bicycle riding, tennis and dances like the tango were all very popular and called for a lady to be able to bend at the waist.<sup>10</sup> This is where ribbon corsets would come into play. To allow women to move in their new activities, these corsets would be made with ribbons, either silk or satin, stacked in horizontal rows with minimal boning at the sides of the corset that usually could be buttoned into place. These corsets were also short covering just the waist, but still provided some shaping by keeping the busk to avoid protruding stomachs, the lacing to keep

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<sup>9</sup> Ewing, 105-112 and Tobin, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ed. Edward Cave, New York Tribune, *The Great Outdoors*, March 18, 1917; Wichita Daily Eagle, *War on the Corset*, July 13, 1899; New York Tribune, March 18, 1917.

the body held tight, and back boning to keep a straight back. Although they were much less constricting and allowed for much more movement, the shape of a lady's figure was still a high priority even though she was now doing activities that would require nothing inhibiting the waist's ability to bend. The need to move would not stop there, however, as dancing and other



Figure 1: Silk Ribbon Corset, 1900-5. Salen, 83.

sports continued to be popular activities for women. The corset became much more pliable.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1920s the corset had changed again to the point that it was not even seen as a corset. It would now be replaced either by the corselette or the girdle. The corselette was a combination of both the brassiere and the corset covering from breast to hip, generally made from soft materials like cotton and elastic that allowed the body to move but still held everything in place. The girdle, also being made of much softer and more elastic fabrics than the corset, was a band that only went over the stomach and was also called a belt. With women fully on the move there was no longer the production of the extremely stiff and boned corset. The shape was still being conformed but instead by elastic and synthetic fabrics. Busks would no longer be in use and there were even advertisements for the roll-on girdle. This was the time of the boyish figure and to get this look women would use brassieres or corselettes that flattened the bust and then girdles to make the body appear as if it was following a straight line. Unlike previous silhouettes fashion moved completely away from curves, busts and round rears and instead went for the flat and straight box like look. Women could finally move with this new style of undergarments.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ewing, 113-121 and Salen, 78-89.

<sup>12</sup> Ewing, 122-151.

One of the first major innovations that affected the popular use of corsets and the corsetry industry, beginning in 1860, was the introduction of new dyes and fabrics. Before the 1860s when fabric had to be dyed it had to be done with natural pigments found in plants and fungi, usually a long and tedious process. In 1858 a man named William Henry Perkin discovered the first aniline dye in a shade of purple, a color that was previously so rare it was only used by royalty. By 1860 this shade had become a fashionable color along with the colors magenta and solferino.<sup>13</sup> With an easy to make and use dye suddenly women's undergarments started being dyed and sold to everyone in colorful new varieties. It started first with the petticoat. After the introduction of aniline dyes, it was customary for every woman to have a colored petticoat. As ladies had to lift their skirts up to step up, sit down and walk through doorways the petticoat would be seen showing off the bright new colors underneath. After the introduction of a dyed petticoat, having undergarments in fun and expressive colors took off. It became unfashionable for a woman to not have a dyed petticoat or corset.



Figure 2: Black-and-Yellow Flossed Corset, 1890-1900. Salen, 71.

Dyed fabrics meant dyed threads making colored embroidery the next installment into corset decoration. It became customary to start adding brightly colored embroidery to corsets, usually along the top of the corset and down at the bottom. The embroidery was not only a sort of decoration it was also there to help strengthen the corset in the places it needed the most which was at the top of boning cases.<sup>14</sup> Under the

<sup>13</sup> Ewing, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Salen, 70-75.

intense strain of tightlacing whale bones would periodically either snap from the pressure or poke through the tops or bottoms of the channels that held them in place. To handle the breaking of bones there was usually an extra piece of tightly woven ribbon known as twill tape attached to the inside of the corset. This would add strength and protection from the snapping of whale bones at the waist while also being another layer of shaping. The colorful embroidery floss acted like the twill tape but instead of protecting the breaking of the boning it instead it reenforce the edges so bones would stay in place as ladies moved. This was especially popular with corsets marketed towards the working class. Because they moved the most, they were the most likely to have corsets that needed that extra strength and reinforcement.

When it came to the popular fabrics of the 1880s the new decorative and fun fabrics were satin, silk, and lace that started to be used in ladies' undergarments. Before this, corsets were made with generally bland and colorless fabrics like jean, tightly woven linen or stiffened cottons that provided the tough support needed for a strong corset but none of the dramatic flair that would become popular.<sup>15</sup> Satin and silk, once introduced, would be used as an outside layer to the corset to cover the bland fabrics that were still used to make the corset stiff. Then to add further to new fun and flounce of a satin or silk covered corset, brightly colored or even embroidered ribbons and lace were added. For the most fashionable women, with the most disposable income, their corsets were being made of stiffened colored satin with lace edges and silk ribbons.

With all these new decorations the corset and other undergarments were suddenly appealing to the eye becoming a new way for the fashionable lady to express herself. Never

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, 95.

before had it been so accepted and even encouraged that undergarments be aesthetically pleasing. They were only supposed to be functional not fashionable but that all changed in the Victorian Era.<sup>16</sup> With the popularity of colored and decorated undergarments, undergarments began to be made for show. These for show undergarments would not be called lingerie until 1902. Corsets were no longer just for practical use. They had become playful, tantalizing, and expressive making them more marketable to the consumer.

Seeing the popularity of brightly colored undergarments, the corset industry made its next big step in appealing to the consumer. This was the ready-to-wear fashion and mass production of corset products. This is thanks to the sewing machine that was originally made and patented in 1830 by Barthelemy Thimmonier but would not come to popular use until the Singer sewing machine was patented in America in August of 1851.<sup>17</sup> Even with the invention of the sewing machine, mass production of ladies' undergarments would not be seen until 1860 with the popularity of the crinoline. The production of the Crinoline was the first attempt at mass production of women's garments. This was because it did not have to be sized to fit multiple bodies. It was not meant to touch the ground so there was not a height requirement, and the only point of attachment to the body was at the waist so the ties just had to be long enough to fit around any size waist. There would be a small gap between the crinoline mass production and the corsets with corset companies nailing down patterns that could easily be mass produced.

It was not until the 1870s and 1880s that corset companies moved towards volume production. Corset companies would understand the demand for ready-to-wear corsets and created patterns, materials, sizing charts and allowing their corset to on fit as many women as

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<sup>16</sup> Ewing, 81.

<sup>17</sup> Ewing, 65-67.

possible while also appealing to personal taste in fashion.<sup>18</sup> Before volume production and standardized sizing, to buy a corset, a lady would have to go to a professional corset maker, be carefully measured and discuss materials and pricing. Then that corsetier would have to create a unique pattern based on her measurements and preferred style of corset, create a mockup garment, have her be fitted in the mockup, and adjust any imperfections. Then the corset could be made before finally getting to the customer. This took a lot of time and money, making corsets only accessible to ladies who had the time and money to do this, mainly those in



Figure 3: 'Pretty Housemaid' Corset, 1890. Salen, 59.

the upper class. With growing middle class there was suddenly a larger market to appeal to. Corset companies seeing a new market to sell to, experimented with standardized sizing so effective and stylish corsets could be bought and created quickly.

Once the market had successfully appealed to women of the middle class the next move was towards the working class. One of the most popular corsets to be marketed towards the working class was called the 'Pretty Housemaid' Corset of the 1890s.<sup>19</sup> This corset was produced by corset company Symington, and it was supposed to be affordable, strong enough to handle the movements of working woman and not break, while still staying fashionable. Advertisements for this corset appealed directly to the working class by saying it was the "strongest, cheapest corset

<sup>18</sup> Tobin, 32 and Smith, 95.

<sup>19</sup> Salen, 59.

ever made.”<sup>20</sup> It had a spoon split busk with a 4 1/2in steel busk protector that allowed women to get into her corset without assistance and made sure that the busk would not snap under pressure from movement. It came with minimal whale boning only in the upper half to push up the bust and shape the waist, the bottom half made of a strong machine cording that would mold to the hips. It came with all the decorations and flairs that were popular at the time, but minimally done. It was made in a golden almost brass looking color with one fine layer of orange lace at the top of the corset and blue and golden machine embroidery flossing. The flossing would be minimally used only appearing on the sides where the only bones that traveled the full length of the corset were. The flossing would only be found at the top and the bottom of these boning channels. Being cheap, sturdy and following the era fashionable designs made this corset a top seller in the market.<sup>21</sup>

Like the “Pretty Housemaid” corset, most advertisements for corsets emphasized how affordable it was to buy corsets. Understanding that the working class would look for quality and price first before focusing on how it looked, they made sure to use language accentuating the prices. Using descriptive words like “Tremendous Under-Price Sale”, “Desirable Bargains”, and “Largest, cheapest, and best selected stock of goods ever offered to the people of the west”<sup>22</sup> to advertise their products. To prove their prices were low, advertisements would list out the prices for each corset. After listing prices, they would guarantee both quality and price. Some would go as far as promising a full refund if their corset broke or did not satisfy with in a certain amount of time. Such as, Warner Brothers when advertising their Coraline Corsets stated “\$10 reward will

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<sup>20</sup> Salen, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Salen, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Evening World, April 30, 1913; Sunday Herald, *King's Palace Special Sale of Ladies Furnishings*, October 4, 1891; The Journal, *Ober & Hageman*, May 5, 1881.

be paid for any [illegible] in which the Coraline breaks with six months ordinary wear.”<sup>23</sup> Then finally they would bring up colors, sizes, and styles. Advertising them as ‘Healthy’, ‘Flexible’ and ‘Unbreakable.’ Ober & Hageman, a goods store in Kansas, advertised the Balls Health Preserving Corset they sold in their store with the endorsements of physicians, having them write a small bit on the health preserving qualities of the corset and then signing off on their statements.<sup>24</sup> Another example of this is from the King’s Palace Sale advertisement that declares, “75 pairs of Solled Corsets that range in price from 50c. to \$1.50 per pair. Special price, 35c. Early callers get the pick so do not delay. It has never before been offered in this city. An elegant quality Sateen Corsets for 39c. in all colors.”<sup>25</sup> Understanding their consumers, the corset manufacturers would find a new way to sale their products to their consumers by going straight to their homes.

To push the corset market further and appeal to more women, corset companies started sending out catalogues that allowed women to purchase a ready-to-wear corset in the mail. The mail order corsets that became popular during the 1890s were a huge stride in the market’s modernization. Once companies started to appeal to working class women the next step was to expand the market further by advertising corsets that could be ordered from a catalogue, at low prices, and shipped directly to customer.<sup>26</sup> This helped bolster the ready-to-wear corset and made it so corset companies were able to appeal to women who did not have the time to go visit a shop. For the first time consumers could measure themselves at home and buy a corset. To aid the catalogue shopper, companies provided instructions on how to self-measure and advertised in

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<sup>23</sup> The Sun, *Warner Brothers’ Coraline Corset*, March 11, 1882.

<sup>24</sup> The Journal, *Ober & Hageman*, May 5, 1881 and The Sun, *Warner Brothers’ Coraline Corset*, March 11, 1882.

<sup>25</sup> Sunday Herald, *King’s Palace Special Sale of Ladies Furnishings*, October 4, 1891.

<sup>26</sup> Evening World, *The Gimbal White Sale*, April 30, 1913.

plenty of colors and sizes for women to find the corset they needed. If somehow there was not a corset that came in a size or color that a lady liked, these catalogues also sold patterns to the corsets allowing any women with the knowledge and a sewing machine the ability to stay fashionable with a well-fitting corset she made herself.<sup>27</sup> Catalogues, advertisements, ready-to-wear and mail order corsets were only the tip of the ice berg when it came to the lengths manufactures would go to make and sale their products to the public.

Once corsetry factories understood the appeal of mass production, they branched out into creating their own synthetic fabrics, owning the market on whalebones, creating new machinery to make corsets, and even inventing their own types of boning as the whale bone market fluctuated. Between 1870 and 1880 as the market on whale boning fluctuated, corset makers had to create their own materials to bone their corsets. Some would turn to plant-based products that were strong but could also flex and curve to the body. Plants like Japanese bamboo, rattan cane, and Mexican istle were used for having these needed features. They would take these plants and cut them into small strips that they would then braid and weave together to get strong but flexible boning. These manufactures was ready to start doing what ever it meant to stay afloat in the economy and if that meant making their own materials they were going to do so.

By the late 1880s, some companies started looking into using steel wire to create boning.<sup>28</sup> By the 1890s the Strouse Adler company successfully patented steel boning and called it ‘Watchspring’ boning, now known as spiral steel boning.<sup>29</sup> Steel boning would become so integral to corset companies that to keep up with demand, corset factories created entire departments that would make the boning on site so they would not have to stop production

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<sup>27</sup> Tobin, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, 121.

because of lack of materials when making the corsets. One of the largest companies, called Warner Brothers, took this department a step further and developed the other necessary metal parts, like clasps, hooks, and eyelets, on site bringing in about 2,500 tons of various metals each year.<sup>30</sup> Companies were ready to do anything to keep themselves relevant to their consumers and the next hill they had to get over was the public interest in science, health, and the Dress Reformers.

After the Civil War there was a shift in public expectation of the role of mothers and women in general. This new expectation was that mothers should be educated so they could better mold their children to be smarter, well-rounded citizens. With the rise in women's education, they joined in the area of science. Like most things were, sciences and the different scientific pursuits were gendered, having separate spheres that men and women could study in. Botany, geology, and ornithology are an example of some of the sciences that were considered women's science.<sup>31</sup> Periodicals and books made specifically for women became popular because they allowed women to join in scientific discussion, but still being excluded by men's scientific circles. One of these books was *The Young Lady's Book: A Manuel of Elegant Recreation, Arts, Sciences and Accomplishments* and it laid out exactly how women could engage in science and the different topics they could safely participate, for example embroidery, photography, archery, and most of all botany.<sup>32</sup> Nature and natural sciences were the easiest for women to study and join because there was already the idea that nature was connected to womanhood. This new interest in science and scientific discussion would influence the ideas of women's health and dressing healthy.

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ed. Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Science in Context*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 237.

<sup>32</sup> Lightman, 237-239.

Through new scientific discoveries and the popularity of scientific discussion, the corset influenced a whole dialogue about women's health and different, even radical, reforms that could be considered both healthier and fashionable. During the 1870s, the topic of lady's health exploded into the mainstream as medical professionals started to denounce tightlacing for its mutation of the body. There had been many studies and calls for a change in how tightly people dressed before 1860. One such medical professional that was against tight dress was Dr. Andrew Combe. He was an advocate against the use of tightlacing and a proponent of dress reform. Combe advocated for only certain types of fabric to be used against the skin for health purposes.<sup>33</sup> One of the most popular advocates for 'healthy' fabrics used against the skin was Dr. Gustav Jaeger a Professor of Zoology and Physiology. In his 1878 book Dr. Jaeger would go on to study the benefits of health when only wearing clothing made from wool. He saw wool as the secret that cured his own chronic ill-health, excess weight, indigestion and much more. Dr. Jaeger's studies on healthy woolen clothing would explode in popularity in Britain after the owner of a grocery firm found his study fascinating and started marketing Jaeger woolen products after securing the copyright.

By 1884 Jaeger started manufacturing sanitary all woolen clothing. They produced mostly undergarments, such as corsets, petticoats, chemises, and even suspenders, because those were the items that would be close to the skin. This included a pure wool corset called the Sanitary Woolen Corset, that Jaeger explained as needing "no force in order to preserve the shape" and that ladies "do not therefore lace too tightly."<sup>34</sup> These corsets were advertised as "flexible, elastic, durable, with watch spring steels"<sup>35</sup> and were made in undyed sheep's wool

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<sup>33</sup> Ewing, 88-95.

<sup>34</sup> Ewing, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Ewing, 98.

and featured removable steel boning for cleaning. Jaegers' woolen products were not the only fabric picked up by the he advocates of health dress, there was also Mr. Lewis Haslam and his creation of Aertex, a breathable fabric that was thought to properly



Figure 4: Rational Dress Reformers, Ewing, 92

regulate temperature and allow the skin to breathe. Like Jaeger, Haslam created a whole line of undergarments that were thought to be healthy for the wearer, and even cure some illnesses, even though all the creations still followed the same fashionable styles of all other clothing they were advocating against women wearing.

From this topic would spawn the trend of 'Hygienic' or 'Healthy' dress and in 1880 a group set on destroying restrictive styles of dress for both men and women called the Rational Dress Society was created. Unlike the Doctors previously mentioned the Reformers called for the dismissal of the corset in normal dress, not just banning the practice of tightlacing. They were also set on finding healthy, unboned, alternatives for those who did not want to fully throw out their corsets. This meant doing away with the fashionable figure completely as well as the accepted ladies' undergarments. Still trying to stay fashionable without looking 'freakish,' the Rational Dress Society condemned tightlacing, high heels, tight or constricting garments, crinolines, and corsets, and set a limit that underwear should not weigh more than 7 lbs.<sup>36</sup> It proved a difficult balance though for the Reformers, with a fear that they would just look "like a

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<sup>36</sup> Ewing, 88-92.

bag of jellyfish tied around a string.”<sup>37</sup> Until this point the only way women would be seen as desirable, graceful and elegant was due to her tightly laced waist, large volume of skirts and the high heels she wore. When faced with the debate of whether the corset should be worn or not Mrs. Kilton, a reformer from the Denver dress reform, said in response to being told women would look slouchy, “they will simply have to learn to stand up and walk gracefully. Think of the comfort and ease and cleanliness!”<sup>38</sup> To aid in their campaign the Reformers voiced their opinions of dress in a newspaper called *Gazette* that only published for a year, and their local newspapers.<sup>39</sup> Even though the public was interested in dressing better for the body the Dress Reformers took it too far. Their opinions proved to be too radical in their demands for both men’s and women’s dress and could not gain a popular following even though most women were ready for the next change in how they dressed.

Even though the reformers were not able to gain a popular following, their radical views sparked fervent debate in newspapers across America. The Reformers became tied to the debate of whether women should be allowed to wear bloomers, because of their ideas on reforming the petticoat and skirt to not weigh as much. After the bicycle became popular to the public in the 1880s, bloomers would gain popularity for the ease they provided ladies when bicycle riding. Created by Mrs. Bloomer in 1850s they would go on to gain popularity thirty years later.<sup>40</sup> Bloomers would go on to spark public debate because of how they were seen as unladylike, manly, undignified, and immodest. Churches would even go as far as banning anyone from wearing them to services or promote their female members to wear them. In a article talking about the bloomer craze and debate they would gather statements from different Reverends and

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<sup>37</sup> Wichita Daily Eagle, *War on the Corset*, July 13, 1899.

<sup>38</sup> State Journal, *The Rational Dress Club*, May 9, 1894.

<sup>39</sup> Ewing, 94.

<sup>40</sup> Ewing, 63-65.

members of the public for their opinions on women wearing bloomers and riding bicycles. Rev. Father Wilson, who was against wearing bloomers, declared “that he would refuse to even speak in public with any bloomer girl and would not even compromise himself by recognizing her should she speak to him.” Rev. T.B. Hawthorn, also against, stated, “If there is any object on earth which makes [ineligible] in the realm of unclean spirits it is a ‘society woman’ in masculine habitments, straddling a bicycle and prepared to make an exhibition of her immodesty on the thoroughfares of a great city” and thought that “the bloomer craze was born of infidelity.” However, on the opposite side of the argument was Rev. John W. Shorten who thought “bloomers were a very sensible costume for to wear when bicycling” and would even applaud their use.<sup>41</sup> In the public sphere the debate proved to be just as back and forth. Some husbands would go on to say they would divorce their wives if they were ever seen wearing bloomers while others actively encouraged their wives to wear them.

Somehow in this messy debate the Rational Dress Society would be wrapped in whether they recommended bloomers or not. The article even states “Dress Reformers have been wrestling with their hobby enough to know that women won’t be preached or persuaded or frightened into dress reform.”<sup>42</sup> They were not even participating in the debate they simple did not want to

have skirts that were more like sails than clothing. All the Reformers asked for was the use of “a



Figure 5: *The Latest from Australia* (from *London Sketch*), *The Sun*, 1895.

<sup>41</sup> Sun, *New Women’s Garb*, September 1, 1895.

<sup>42</sup> Sun, *New Women’s Garb*, September 1, 1895.

rational dress skirt, a comfortable fitting blouse or waist, using no whalebone or stiffening of any kind (whether in the form of a corset, under waist or dress waist): shoes with common sense heels.”<sup>43</sup> They did not promote bloomers but with bloomers moving into public dress and them being a more comfortable and practical option for women to wear they became linked together.

Although the radical ideals of the Rational Dress Society were not widely accepted, the idea of healthier dress was, and it became a part of popular culture. Corset manufactures and corset retailers made it very clear to their customers that they were selling items that were made to promote healthy dress that still looked stylish. For example, the Lane Bryant Maternity Corset sold in 1917 was advertised stating “Retains Stylish Figure; Preserves Health; Relieves Fatigue.”<sup>44</sup> Also following in the popular ideas, one of the largest manufactures of corsets, Warner Brothers Corsets, would go on to be one of the first manufactures to trademark and sell ‘health’ corsets.<sup>45</sup> Warner Brothers Corsets would not be the only corset manufacturer to join in on the ‘health’ corsets craze others like Madame Foy’s Corsets and Ball’s Health Preserving Corset were also marketed and sold to the public.<sup>46</sup> Then with the popularity of certain fabrics being stated ‘healthy’, advertisements would make sure to add the fabric every garment was made from. Some would go as far as to only make their items out of one fabric.<sup>47</sup> There was a clear understanding of the need to dress healthier but there was a fear of women becoming ungraceful or even manly looking without corsets, so they persisted.<sup>48</sup> Entire exhibits centered around healthy dress took the public by storm. For example, the International Health Exhibition of 1884 had an attendance of 4,167,683 between May 8 and October 30. It would feature many

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<sup>43</sup> State Journal, *The Rational Dress Club*, May 9, 1894.

<sup>44</sup> New York Tribune, *Lane Bryant Maternity Corset*, March 18, 1917.

<sup>45</sup> *Warner Brothers Health Corset Trademark*, April 25, 1878, Library of Congress.

<sup>46</sup> Evening Critic, *Douglass*, May 3, 1882; The Journal, *Ober & Hageman*, May 5, 1889.

<sup>47</sup> Evening World, *Koch&Co.*, April 30, 1913.

<sup>48</sup> Review of Reviews, *Does Athleticism make Women Ungraceful?*, 1892.

corsets, their patterns, and new fabrics like crepe, silk longcloth, and pine-wool.<sup>49</sup> It was too radical to do away with the corset, so instead it was constantly altered and improved to become healthier and more comfortable to wear.

Corset manufactures did not just make ‘healthy’ corsets they also made and marketed ‘comfort’ corsets that were supposed to be more comfortable for the wearer. Some would allow for more range of motion while others did not compress the stomach and chest as much. Corset companies, like Foy, Harmon and Co. made corsets that allowed for the waist to pivot. They would advertise this “Pivot Corset” with captions reading “Breathing while singing,” “Easily picking up baby,” and “Easily buttoning up shoes.” The Charles Foster and Company would join this by creating a corset that did not have any bones in the hips and was called the “Universal Fitting Corset.”<sup>50</sup> It was clear that as popular as health corsets were comfort corsets were just as popular. Whether they were actually comfortable is up for debate just like whether health corsets actually were healthier to wear. The two types of corsets would also be advertised together because they were popular at the same time and did relatively the same thing.<sup>51</sup> Warner Brothers would also join in the topic of comfort with a small add promoting how they had “The most skill corset fitters” that could find women the perfect corset that made corsets a pleasure to wear.<sup>52</sup> Once comfort and health became a popular topic for clothing it would have an impact on the ideas of corset entrepreneurs.

Once the conversation surrounding lady’s corsets started to concern health while staying fashionable, it opened a whole new avenue for corset entrepreneurship for both men and women.

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<sup>49</sup> Ewing, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Evening Critic, *Douglass*, May 3, 1882.

<sup>52</sup> Evening Star, *Do You Feel Comfortable in Corsets?*, May 9, 1898.

While they could never quite compete with the large corset manufacturers, they still a great example of how easy it was to adapt the corset. The improvements of corsets patented by at home seamstresses were not strange to see before the 1880s and 1890s. The smaller improvements varied from just improved shoulder straps, new ways to lace corsets without the use of metal eyelets, how to cap whalebone boning without the use of metal, and new busks that clasped differently from the standard busk.<sup>53</sup> These different improvements made it easier for the regular seamstress to make and alter her own corset without the need of heavy machinery or tedious work arounds. For example, to put metal eyelets into the back of the corset for lacing requires they use of a device that curved and pushed two metal washers together to keep the hole punched in the fabric from closing and to cover the frayed edges of a fabric so that it did not unravel. Without the proper tools it would be difficult to make a proper corset but with public ingenuity that was glossed over. The patents that focus on overall larger improvements created completely new corset patterns for things such as pregnancy, teaching toddlers to walk, post-surgical spinal correction, and corsets with improved flexibility with boning that allowed for side-to-side movement.<sup>54</sup> Flexibility and movement would be the next to catch public eye with entrepreneurs making corsets that encouraged movement. Larger patents such as these would

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<sup>53</sup> Clarissa Preston, Improvement in Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 47856, Dated May 23, 1865; Thomas A. Nelson, Improvement in Clasps for Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 39,322, Dated July 21, 1863; Edward K. Warren, Textile Eyelet for Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 371,394, Dated October 11, 1887; J.W. Brooks, Improvements in Fastenings for Stays of Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 89,018, Dated April 20, 1869; William R. Mestler, Stay and Lacing for Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 601,446, Dated March 29, 1898

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Adams, Method of Manufacturing Corsets to be Worn by Females During Pregnancy or Suffering Under Umbilical Hernia of Abdominal Weakness, United States Patent Office, No. 1,940, Dated January 21, 1841; Catherine Tardy, Improvement in Baby-Exercising Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 149,692, Dated April 14, 1874; Joseph W. Battershall, Manufacture of Surgical Corsets, United States Patent Office, No. 328,638, Dated October 20, 1885; Henry W. Gilbert and Eva Maynard Martin, Corset., United States Patent Office, No. 956,957, Dated May 3, 1910

most likely be sold to larger companies so that they could be manufactured and sold in large retail stores.

The largest impact, that would forever change the corset and how they were made and manufactured, was the popularity of sports and outdoor activities. The start of this was the invention of the bicycle. It exploded in popularity in the 1880s and suddenly walking paths were inundated with cyclist, and newspapers were crawling with adds selling bicycles.<sup>55</sup> The bicycles popularity surged because it made travel much easier, was a good source of exercise and was relatively cheap to purchase. With the popularity of the bicycle, women's fashion would change to accommodate their new source of transportation. Entire outfits were made just for riding bicycles gloves, hats, split skirts, short jackets with plenty of room in the shoulders for movement or the arms, leather riding tights, bloomers and especially corsets.<sup>56</sup> Ribbon and Riding/Bicycle corsets started to be used when riding a bike, if the corset was even used at all. These corsets were made to sit under the bust to not encumber the shoulders and arms while riding. One article dedicated to the new bicycle dress would go to say, "The bicycle corset proper is supposed to give greater freedom and suppleness of motion to the wearer's body than do other stays."<sup>57</sup> The bicycle influences a need for freedom of motion by the rider, which meant possible freedom from their corsets. This would start a new debate on if world was ready be free of corsets.

With some bicycle riders unlacing from their corsets to be comfortable while riding, a new debate would appear. Was it time to retire the corset? In a column written in The Wichita Daily Eagle in 1899 it was asked "Can women go without their corsets and still be a delight to

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<sup>55</sup> Wichita Daily Eagle, *Bicycles! Bicycles! And Bicycles, Bicycles*, July 26, 1896.

<sup>56</sup> American Woman's Home Journal, *The Millionaire Girl's \$249 Spring Cycling Suit*, March 21, 1897.

<sup>57</sup> Journal, *Bicycle Costumes for Women*, May 10, 1896.

the eye?”<sup>58</sup> This column would go on to explain how women were in the beginning stages of tossing out the corset while also explaining that they were on the eve of a new corset improvement because of the popularity of the ribbon corset. The column explained that women were more favorable to the ribbon corset because it sat under the bust quoting Mrs. Leslie Carter as saying “The corset impeded the actions of my arms and restricted the freedom and ease of my breath. Now I wear simply a ribbon corset band just to button my skirts upon.” They would also go on to quote the New York champion cyclist Mrs. Irene Burn, as saying “Oh, I could not ride in stays. I like the freedom of all my muscles, and find no fatigue in holding myself erect in the saddle.” To further drive home the point that the corset was going to soon change the column pointed to the new fashion of Paris explaining that a designer named Mme. Peters was making a low sitting corset that would allow for freedom of the chest and arms but still synch the waist if needed. This would come to be ‘S’ bend corset of 1900 to 1920. It sat under the bust, synched the waist and went over the hips. A covering for the chest would be made once corsets started sitting up the bust, this would be the brassiere, that would later become the bra, and it would allow for movement like women wanted. While the ‘S’ bend corset was not as freeing as the Ribbon corsets it was clear to corset makers that their consumers wanted to move their arms freely. To accommodate the chest and shoulders became free of the corset.

The bicycle was not only the start of women becoming active in athletics. Women joined in playing tennis, soccer, golf, baseball, swimming, enjoyed horse back riding and even rode motorcycles across America. There would even be a professional women’s soccer team in Edinburg and professional female tennis players like Miss May Sutton.<sup>59</sup> Sports and other

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<sup>58</sup> Wichita Daily Eagle, *War on Corsets*, July 13, 1899.

<sup>59</sup> New York Tribune, *The Great Outdoors*, Ed. Edward Cave, March 18, 1917.

outdoor activities became so popular that some advertisements would claim their clothing was made just for sports. Mallinson's Silk de Luxe created an entire line of sporting silk and satin wear and advertised it as "The Spirit of outdoors is in these Mallinson's Sport Silks- something of the dash and daring and youthful "aliveness." <sup>60</sup> The popularity of women joining sports had the same effects on clothing as colored undergarments, or realizing the need for strong, hardy, and cheap corsets, and healthy clothing. Sports and movement was the next big trend, and corset manufacturers saw the rise in both movement and sports and adapted to that change.

Manufacturers at this point had learned it was better to stay with the popular public demand to keep selling. They had to adapt to survive and if that meant changing the corset to allow for more movement for women who wanted to play sports or ride a bike or just have a wider range of movement that what they were going to do.

Once the question of whether a corset should continue to be worn, corsets would not exist much longer. Consumers were looking towards comfort, health, and a range of motion. All qualities that the corset did not have. There would continue to be undergarments that still shaped the waist, chest, and hips like girdles and corselettes. However, those would be made from elastic and stretchable materials. No longer were undergarments filled with bone and metal, pulled tight to give the illusion of a large chest and small waist. Instead, the fashionable form would reduce curves entirely with the boyish box look of the 1920s. With freedom to move and the idea of being mans equal women would like their curves and embrace a more androgenous look. Women were free to finally move, and they took to it by storm.

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<sup>60</sup> New York Tribune, March 18, 1917.

Between 1860 and 1920 the corset would go on to rapidly change and develop in this short amount of time. This would be the first and last time the corsets would change so much, so quickly. Starting with the crinoline and the sewing machine the mass production of women's undergarments began. Once the corset itself was beginning to be mass produced, corset companies would go on to market to the working and middle classes to sell as many corsets as possible. They started appealing to the public by making corsets more exciting to look at and wear by making corsets in fun colors, adding lace trim, silk ribbons, and using brightly colored and embroidered satin and silk fabrics. Realizing the money they could make by making corsets for many sizes women, with patterns that could be sized up and down to fit many bodies. This created ready-to-wear corset fashion. To further appeal to as many women as they could they stressed price, quality, and design.

Manufacturers would do anything to continue to make and sell as many corsets as possible and if that meant making their own materials, they were going to do that too. That also meant they were going to follow in popular topics like healthy and comfortable styles of dress spurred on by the education of women after the Civil War. Change was just around the corner from the popularity of these topics about corsets and to help encourage that change there was the invention of the bicycle. Completely new outfits were made for the fervent bicycle riders. Public discussions and debates on women's dress driven by the new riding gear, bloomers, would somehow connect to the Radical Dress Reformers who were more concerned with quality dress that did not impede health or movement not the conversation on whether bloomers should be worn. To reformers, reform meant the removal of the corset and heavy articles of clothing, like petticoats. Discussions about dress reform merged and finally the quest of 'is the corset really still needed' was asked. To hold on a bit longer corset manufacturers would make corsets that sat

under the bust to allow freedom of the chest and arms. The 'S' bend would be a longer corset started under the bust and going over the hips while the Ribbon corset would be shorter just covering the waist and was very minimally boned to allow for more movement. To compensate for the uncovered chest the brassiere was made. Finally, the corset was out of popular use. It would be replaced with undergarments that stretched and moved. After the corset women were dancing, moving, and working completely unencumbered by previous restraints. They were finally free to move.

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