

Idyllic Afternoon in Brooklyn

By Susan Strawn

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Three women in dressy outfits posed in their Brooklyn back yard for the photographer, all prim and proper. Or were they?

The curvy silhouettes and high necklines are consistent with Edwardian style dating to 1901-1910. The S-bend Edwardian corsets shaped women's bodies, sending hips backward and chests forward into a fashionable pouter-pigeon contour.

Each woman in this photo has a corseted waistline, probably cinched to gasping tightness. The tapered, bell-shaped skirt and pouty, mono-bosom blouse accentuate the tiny waist. Most likely, their skirts and blouses are popular separates.

Details of blouses, sleeves, and hairstyles reinforce an Edwardian date. All three women wear stylish shirtwaists, which were separate blouses sewn from soft fabric shaped with pleats, ruffles, tucks, gathers, ribbons, and lace. Shirtwaists were among the earliest mass-produced garments and came in many elaborate yet affordable varieties sold in department stores and mail-order catalogs. The woman on the left wears three-quarter-length bishop sleeves, gathered and puffed from armholes into cuffs with ruffles. The other two women wear long, close-fitted sleeves with sleeve-caps, the one in back with very fancy ruffles. The seated woman on the right, the oldest of the three, wears a jabot that dresses up her otherwise plain shirtwaist and has a small nosegay of flowers at her wrist. Was this a special occasion for her?

Hairstyles teased and gathered up and out, often shaped over pads with false hair, supported the enormous, broad-brimmed hats popular among Edwardian ladies. (Excessive demand for elaborately decorated big hats and the craze for feathers alone nearly wiped out the ostrich species before the style fell out of favor.) The



woman standing in back (grandmother-in-law of member Susan Palmer) has a boater –a flat, straw hat–perched atop her pompadour hairstyle. Does her mischievous grin suggest high spirits when she balanced that smallish boater on her big hair to break from prim and proper in the photo? Or she was simply delighted with a photo op that showed her sporty sense of style?

Photo analysis by BIGS member Susan Strawn, an author and former academic who studies historical dress and textiles. She moved to Bainbridge Island and joined BIGS three years ago after stepping down from teaching in Chicago. Her genealogical interests are in her Danish and German immigrant family.