

# Dressed for the Photographer

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September 2020

Two small children, brother and sister, were dressed and groomed with care for their visit to the photographer. This 4 x 5½-inch studio photograph mounted on 6 x 9-inch blank commercial cardstock provides no clues for the date; photographers could order blank cardstock via mail-order catalogs throughout the lifespan of cabinet cards. Estimating the date falls to the children's clothing.

The little girl's "lingerie" dress dates this photo to about 1913. The lingerie dress referenced soft fabric (not underwear!) and was worn from Edwardian times (1901-1910) until 1920. Girls of all ages wore lingerie dresses, often for graduations. Usually white or cream, the classic lingerie dress had a low or natural waistline, bloused bodice, gathered sleeves, high collar, and frilly folds, tucks, lace, and embroidery. However, the flanges, wide vertical folds over the tops of the armholes, appears most often in photos and sewing patterns in 1913.



The girl's dress was a relatively short-lived fashion, but the boy's sailor suit holds decades of history stretching back to Great Britain's Queen Victoria (1819-1901). The Queen commissioned a miniature sailor's uniform for her oldest son Albert Edward (1841-1910), memorialized in his 1846 portrait. Albert's sailor suit had long trousers with wide cuffs, blousy overshirt with a flat square collar and V-shaped front neckline, neck scarf, and wide-brimmed hat. The square collar on the sailor's uniform protected the shirt from long, greasy hair, and wide cuffs were easily rolled up for swabbing decks.

The boy in this photo wears a blousy overshirt and knickers, consistent with age-appropriate short pants. Most likely, the stripes and collar were red or navy blue, considered correct boyish colors. Sailor suits and dresses caught on with American parents. Many photographs show children wearing sailor outfits, and Godey's Lady's Book, that tome of fashion advice, praised sailor outfits for boys and girls. The children's clothing was either purchased from a shop or mail-order catalog, or it could have been home sewn. The sewing pattern collection at the University of Rhode Island's Commercial Pattern Archive includes sailor suit and dress patterns dating as far back as 1876. The sailor blouse turned up in the 1880s for girls active in school sports and yachting, and by 1910 the "middy" (derived from the naval term midshipman) had been adopted for activities like calisthenics and rowing.

Interestingly, this boy and girl lived on the cusp of a major change in attitudes toward dressing children. Home economics—the radical turn-of-the-century notion that topics of concern to women and the home were worthy of research and study—included child development. Home economists deemed proper clothing essential for developing a child's healthy body, mind, and character. Instead of dressing children in miniature adult fashions, as before, loose and comfortable clothing would allow children the freedom to play and develop healthy bodies. Clothing that let children dress themselves would encourage mental self-reliance, believed to link with their future responsibility as participants in a democratic society.

Looking past the clothing, the boy appears calm and compliant, but his sister looks ready to bolt from her little chair. Would these personality traits continue into adulthood?