

Dressing "Russian" in Friday Harbor, 1920

By Susan Strawn

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Trust a seamstress to tailor and press her son's suit with the expertise seen in this family snapshot.

The boy is Gene B. Larson, father of BIGS member Kay Larson. His birth year of 1915 in Friday Harbor on San Juan Island dates the photo to around 1920, consistent with exposed eaves seen on the craftsman bungalow in the background. Kay is certain that Gene's mother, Ada Mae Larson née Mullis, sewed her son's suit. Ada was a seamstress remembered for her determination to be well dressed in Friday Harbor. She always wore gloves when going out and changed her dress for dinner.

Ada's mother was raised in a solidly middle-class London family that emigrated to the Kansas prairies in the 1870s and later moved to Washington state. Ada married a Norwegian man and worked as a seamstress in Friday Harbor.

Identity, date, and location are known for this photo, but a closer look reveals more family history and insight for Ada Mae Larson.

Why did she sew her son's suit with that trendy "Russian" jacket, a distinctive style that buttons to the side and has a plain collar? For the answer, follow a thread of fashion history back to Paris around World War I (1914-1918). French fashion designers were enthralled with the traditional clothing styles of other nations. The Russian 'peasant' shirt, a plain-collar tunic that buttoned to the side, inspired popular fashions for women, and the style trickled down to everyday clothing for children. The Commercial Pattern Archive at the University of Rhode Island has preserved several Butterick and McCall sewing patterns dated 1916-1921 for little boy's suits with a "Russian closing" style of jacket.

Ada kept up with fashion, but she also understood the distinctly masculine nature of clothes recommended for boys in the 1920s. "Clothes for boys should be as masculine as possible and be suited to the activities which they enjoy," asserted the author of *Clothes for Little Folks*, a 1920s Home Economics Bulletin typical of university extension service publications. Masculine touches included tailored stitching, on-seam side pockets, and sharply pressed trouser creases. Practical, short trousers allowed freedom for play. Practical clothing also planned for the child's



growth—roomy shoulders and cuffs for sleeves and trousers long enough to turn up—but should not be so large as to be uncomfortable or look silly to a boy's friends.

How to Make Children's Clothes the Modern Singer Way, a 1920s Singer Sewing Machine Company publication, called for “manliness” in clothes for boys. Fashion expert Mary Brooks Picken stated that clothes for boys must look “just as smartly masculine as possible, even when boys are tiny.” She added, “Avoid by all means using feminine fabrics in boys' attire.” Ada Mae Larson owned an early electric Singer sewing machine and likely had access to such booklets from the Singer Service Library.

Gene's black stockings are typical for the time. Underneath his suit, he probably wore the recommended one-piece cotton union suit and to hold up his pants had 2- or 3-inch-wide suspenders that crossed over his back and distributed weight evenly across his shoulders.

Ada Mae Larson's suit with a Russian style jacket ticked all the boxes for proper boys' clothes in the 1920s. She selected masculine fabric, tailored the suit from a practical pattern, and sewed a size that allowed for growth. A woman with a fashion sense, she also gave a nod to *au courante* style straight from Paris.