

Mystery Photo with Handkerchiefs

By Susan Strawn

This studio portrait of three women languished among hundreds of cabinet cards (paper photographs adhered to cardboard) for sale at a suburban Chicago antiques mall. Sadly, no handwritten notes identified the women, so their names remain a mystery. Each woman clutched a white handkerchief trimmed with lace, another mystery.

Location and decade are identified easily. The front imprint on the cards reads, "Matousek" and "1575 22nd ST. near KEDZIE AVE. Chicago." The Chicago Historical Society's compilation of photographers from Chicago city directories, 1847-1900, verifies that Mathias Matousek located his studio at this address from 1895 to 1900. Matousek is a common Czechoslovakian surname in Chicago, and immigrants were known to select photographers of their own nationality. Were these women of Czech or Slovak heritage, perhaps among the immigrants who had made Chicago the world's fastest-growing city?



The impressive "S-curve" silhouette of the stylish young woman on the right dates the photo to Edwardian times, the first decade of the twentieth century. Edwardians—named for exuberant English King Edward VII (1902-1910)—favored opulent fashions, quite a change from the more somber reign of his mother, Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Corsetry, serious and clever, exaggerated the woman's spinal lordosis (anterior curvature of the spine) into the ideal Edwardian shape. A straight-front corset flattened her abdomen, threw her shoulders forward, and pushed her hips back. The rounded hipline, flared skirt, and pouchy mono-bosom made her waist look desirably tiny. The other two women dressed in less extravagant Edwardian style, each in black or dark colors.

Handkerchiefs had been popular accessories dating back to the 1600s at least, but why did these women hold white handkerchiefs so prominently in a formal portrait? One possible answer could be a nod to the "Chautauqua salute." Chautauqua, an adult education organization, was popular in Chicago during the early twentieth century. Audience members waved white handkerchiefs above their heads to salute a speaker, originally to acknowledge a deaf speaker.

Or the handkerchiefs could be symbols of mourning. Mourning rituals began with royalty, slid down the social ladder to people in general, and had reached even the poorest level of society by the early twentieth century. Mourning was serious business for Victorians—Queen

Victoria made mourning ultrafashionable—and formalized mourning customs carried over, somewhat lessened, to Edwardians.

A woman who gave up her everyday clothing while mourning was still expected to wear the latest fashions, albeit in black or subdued dark colors. Etiquette books and fashion magazines dictated acceptable colors and fabrics, especially the critical amount and placement of crape (crimped and crisp fabric) to be worn during different stages of mourning. Requisite stages of mourning—deep mourning, first mourning, second mourning, half mourning—specified duration and correctness of mourning customs and clothing based on the person being mourned. Black jet ornaments were the only jewelry allowed during a widow's first year of mourning, for example, with the exception of memorial brooches or locket. Note the only jewelry, a small brooch, appears on the high collar of the fashionable woman.

Handkerchiefs, often white silk with black lace borders, were suitable mourning accessories. Dress historian Lou Taylor chronicled an extensive history of mourning, including handkerchiefs, from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century in *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983). In her book, a remarkable number of women who sat for paintings and photographs during mourning held handkerchiefs. Many museum collections include mourning handkerchiefs, and the tradition continues to present times.

Had the names of the women not been lost to history, research might identify the death of a relative—or a prominent public figure—and strengthen the argument for handkerchiefs as mourning accessories. Look for possible symbols of mourning in family photos and compare with dates of ancestor's deaths. The first year of full mourning for a widow, especially wearing a veil, will be most obvious. More subtle symbols of mourning may be overlooked. Typically a man wore only a black armband with an ordinary suit and tie when mourning.

Of course, there could be other explanations for the handkerchief mystery. One wry suggestion: allergy season?