

Bloomers in LeRoy



Written on the back of the photo:

"Every student was required to have a gymnasium suit just like this. Notice long sleeves, high neck, belted waist, knee length skirt, high shoes. - 1867 - 1870

(donated by Anna Jones Harkness although the photo is not hers)

While reading through the 1851 LeRoy Gazette a couple of weeks ago, I discovered two very interesting news clippings. "There is no doubt but that the new costume for ladies will soon be universally worn in this country. It is a change which may be slow to be adopted by those who do not care to appear odd, but it will perhaps be no more so, nor the change greater than from mammoth sleeves to tights; or from immense bustles to none at all. Who will start the reform in LeRoy?"

On June 11, another article clarified the first notice: "Short dresses in LeRoy - Some half a dozen beautiful young ladies came out in the new costume on Saturday. They were residents of Warsaw, however, and probably came down

on a pleasure excursion and to "shop" a little at our world-renowned dry-goods stores. They were all becomingly appareled in the Turkish petticoats and short dresses, reaching just below the knee. The dress and trowsers were all of the same material and were so shaped as to give the air of comfort to the wearer as well as to present a comely and even beautiful appearance to the enchanted multitude of spectators. The dress was not as short as the fashion but did very well to start with. All spoke in term of approval of the beautiful Turks, and we shall look for an early adoption of the reform by the lady citizens of LeRoy."

I forwarded both articles on to some friends who are interested in historic clothing, because these articles verify the

interest in what became known as "Bloomers." The departure from long skirts and corsets was a radical change in women's fashion in the 1850s. At that time there was an effort to create a healthier fashion that didn't restrict women's movements by corsets and huge full-length skirts. In February 1851, Elizabeth Smith Miller, wore the "Turkish dress" to visit Amelia Bloomer, editor of the temperance journal, "The Lily." Bloomer adopted the short dress and wrote in The Lily: "I stood amazed at the furor I had unwittingly caused. As soon as it became known that I was wearing the new dress, letters came pouring in upon me by the hundreds from women all over the country making inquiries about the dress and asking for patterns - showing how ready and anxious women were to throw off the burden of long, heavy skirts." By June, the new style became known as "Bloomers" although she never claimed recognition for inventing or introducing the short dress and pantaloons. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone and other women involved with the fight for women's rights began to wear Bloomers. Yet in a short time, Stanton and Anthony abandoned the style because people were more interested in attending women's rallies to see the women in the radical clothes, rather than listening to what was being said.



"A group of Ingham University girls of the gymnasium class 1877-1878." One of the girls is Mary L. VanLenup.

During the Civil War, Althea Dix, who was appointed the director of the nurse corps, forbid any women from wearing Bloomers. Never the less, Dr. Mary E. Walker, who earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for her medical work, wore the short dress and pantaloons while working at a military hospital in Washington, D.C. She noted that wealthy women from New Orleans, wore the short dress while traveling in Haiti and Cuba.



Woman wearing bloomers.

Bloomers elicited ridicule and were pictured in newspaper cartoons and eventually went out of fashion. Yet members of the utopian Oneida Community were still wearing the tunics and pantaloons in 1867. There was a revival of Bloomers in the late 1800s, but primarily for women who were involved with various sports and were riding bicycles. In our files are two photographs of Ingham University students wearing Bloomers, dressed for exercise.

This is a poem published in "The Sibil" in April 15, 1859: "And now I'm dressed like a little girl, in a dress both loose and short, oh with what freedom I can sing, and walk all 'round about! And when I get a little strength, some work I think I can do, 'twill give me health and comfort, and make me useful too."