

Aprons In The Drawer

by Lynne Belluscio

I hope you have a chance to stop by and see the new apron exhibit. It's not just a collection of aprons, but it tells a story. The apron was for centuries an important functional piece of clothing. For a woman, it was an important part of their domestic life.

When a woman had an apron on, she was prepared for work. When she took her apron off, she was ready to meet friends or to go to church, but many women lived with an apron on most of their lives. The ordinary apron was probably worn until it wore out. Only the fancier, trimmed apron was set aside and saved, so those are the aprons that have survived.

Although aprons could be bought at the store and through the mail order catalogue, many women preferred to sew their own aprons and they spent a lot of time crocheting or tatting fancy apron trims. When inexpensive printed colorful material became available in the early 1900s, women started making colorful aprons. Sometimes the aprons were made from scrap material left over from dresses, but more often, material was bought just for making an apron. During the 1920s and 1930s flour and sugar were sold in cloth sacks. The cloth was printed material and women could take the stitching out of the empty sacks, wash the material and use it for aprons, dresses, or quilts.

After World War II, in the 1950s the picture of the perfect housewife showed her with her apron on, cooking and cleaning in her modern house. It was Ozzie

and Harriet and Mrs. Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*. Aunt Bea in *The Andy Griffith Show* always had her apron on. But then, in the 1960s, women began to aspire to occupations and goals outside the home. The apron strings tied a woman to the home and the apron became a symbol of suppression. While some women were burning their bras, others were throwing out their aprons. For some women it wasn't because of women's liberation, but more a case of why have to wash and iron an apron when you have wrinkle-free clothes that can be tossed into the automatic washer and dryer.

What is the purpose of wearing an apron over a pair of jeans? Only grandma had a drawer full of aprons. But if it wasn't fashionable to wear grandma's apron, it might be OK to wear an apron with a message: "If you don't like my cooking, get out of my kitchen!" "I may be an oldie but I'm a goodie", "I learned this in college" and Henry Truman's noted quip "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!" (I bought one of Truman's aprons at the Truman Library in Independence Missouri.)

I would be hard pressed to find an apron in my house. I took my Thanksgiving apron to LeRoy House for the exhibit. If I need an apron nowadays, I'm apt to tuck a dish towel into the waist of my jeans when I'm canning tomatoes or baking bread. And if I don't have a towel near by, I wipe my hands on my jeans. I bought a Japanese apron on E-bay for the exhibit and I like it and will probably buy one for myself. It's

quite simple and not very big – about the size of a dish towel with strings. It will wash well and won't wrinkle. The other apron that I like a lot and wear when I'm cooking in the open hearth is a double apron that I bought at a museum in Finland. It is really two aprons connected at the top with straps. It has two sets of strings. You wrap the back apron and tie it in front and then wrap the front apron and tie it in back.

You are totally encased in an apron which is helpful working in the fireplace. (I have to admit, that when I'm cooking in the fireplace either at home or at LeRoy House, I must have an apron. I use it as a pot holder and am always wiping my hands on it. I can't imagine not having an apron on.) The BBQ apron which is appropriate for either men or women is the common style today. If you don't like the bib, you can always fold the top down and just tie the lower part around your waist. I was able to

buy a "Buffalo Bills" apron and that's in the exhibit along with two other BBQ aprons. I also have a ketchup bottle apron. The little aprons were also used on detergent bottles. So there's a little bit of everything, including a great collection of nail aprons.



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