

I Almost Gave Up

While we waited for the next train on our journey, the Southwest Chief, we thought that we would stroll the small downtown in Galesburg, Illinois. My sister, Betty Edwards, and I set out to walk in the slightly drizzling June afternoon. We had several hours and found an antique shop



not far from the train station. That's where this story begins... sort of.

I have spent most of my adult life buying, selling, repairing and restoring vintage and antique linens. Sometimes, garments also catch my eye. This time, I found an antique christening dress at a good price and although I had no idea why, I spent the \$9 and tucked it into my suitcase.

Once back at home, I took a closer look at what I had purchased and found it to be in much worse shape than I remembered. Grrr, I have much work to do to make it pretty again. I'm up for a challenge and this was a big one. I was determined to restore

it to usable condition so that a new generation could wear it. Yep, I would probably sell it. It would give me an opportunity to see what I could do with this little garment, could it be saved?

A Little About The Dress

Baby dresses from the 1800's and early 1900's are difficult to date. Because the fabrics and techniques are used throughout. Unless I have provenance, I can only make an educated guess. This gown was most likely used for a Christening or dedication, somewhere in the late 1800's. Made of fine, lightweight white cotton. There is hand and machine work so, it places it somewhere between 1870's and 1890's. The machine stitches are very small, I used 1.6mm setting on my sewing machine for a close match. The seams are about 1/8", unfinished. It measures 35" long and 66" at the hemline. The front of the gown has a "princess" insert with 9 sets of 1/4" tucks on either side of the front center embroidered cotton lace insert. This center front feature is also bordered on both sides with the same beautiful cotton embroidered lace. The short sleeves and hemline are finished with coordinating embroidered cotton lace.



Will It Survive The Process?

The fabric is very brittle. It tears easily, it has stains, age discoloration and somewhere in the past, iron-on patches were applied over the torn fabric. Well, I'm only out \$9 if I ruin it so, into the soaking bucket it goes. A 24 hour soak in OxiClean made it white again and bonus, the iron-on patches were easy to remove. The fabric tore a little more but, I got the patches off. Hang it to dry and several weeks have passed before I am able to start the repair process.

At this point, I sit and stare at this little dress and devise a plan for how I will proceed. I have decided to remove the side panel and replace it with newer fabric. I have a stash of vintage and antique fabrics. This time though, I think the fabric is too old to match with anything I have on hand. I chose to match the color as best as I can but the cotton fabric I am using is much newer. I will also try to duplicate the construction techniques used in the original assembly. Time to cut...



Next Steps

I remove the side panel by cutting about 1/8" away from the seams and under the front lace panel. After pressing this cut piece, I used it to make a pattern for it's replacement. Using machine and hand stitching, I replace the panel. Note here that unless I am to nearly dis-assemble the entire dress, I must do some unorthodox repair techniques. I opt to make it look good on the right side, not so good on the inside. Because of the shape, replacing this panel was very difficult. Even though I cut it the exact size (plus a small seam allowance), it didn't fit exactly like the old one. At this point, I am asking myself why I even started the project! I have about 3 hours into the job. I am frankly ready to give it up- too much work.

Not Giving Up Yet



I have almost made it through the panel refit and I want to tell you about the gathering technique used on the back of the dress. Stitching this part was tricky. This gathering technique is seen often in French hand sewing in the past century and beyond. Commonly known as “French gathering” or “gaging”, this technique is quite pretty. The top of the skirt is folded to the wrong side about a half an inch and then hand gathered using 2 rows of basting stitches close together. Once gathered into small pleats, it is then hand stitched to the bodice with stitches placed between the folds. Not sure I did the process justice but, for a first attempt I am happy with the way it looks, at least on the right side of the dress!

When I cut the side panel out, I had to cut up to the neck edge. This finish was something that I had never seen before so, of course, I must research! (Thank you Martha Pullen) It turns out that this was a common way to allow the garment to “grow” with the child. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both boys and girls wore garments like this as babies. The neckline is a double row of casings about ¼” wide. It has cotton thread strings as the drawstrings. They are comparable to today’s perle cotton thread. Stitching the top of the side panel to this is another challenge. I must roll the edge of the new piece and stitch to the drawstring channel by catching the lower row of machine stitching. If I accidentally stitch even one stitch into a drawstring, I will not be able to draw the neckline into shape. A real test of my ability!

And Then...

At this point, I find that the back opening has torn an additional 6 inches. Darn, darn, more work. I press the wrinkles and fold the edge down past the end of the tear, lots of pins, stitch closed. Looks pretty good. There are also a few pinholes in the fabric on the skirt. I am only going to address the larger ones. To repair these, I first fuse a small piece of woven fusible interfacing to the inside of the skirt covering the hole. Next, I use the darning stitch on my sewing machine and a size 10 needle in the machine. I stitch over the holes. They won't open up again.

Finally

Now that all of the repairs are made, it's time to test the drawstring neckline. Yippee! I am able to pull the threads and shape the neckline quite nicely. I originally thought it was strange that there was no indication of buttons or hooks to close the back. According to my research, the back is left open except the drawstrings at the neckline which, I tie in a bow.



Six hours (or more) later, on to the ironing board. I knew that I must be very careful with the brittle fabric. Too much heat will further damage the fabric that is already at the edge of it's performance. I use my little Dritz craft iron with care. I never use starch or fabric finish on vintage textiles. It is finished. Now, what shall I do with it?



Baby Christening Gown ca 1870-1899
Repaired by Patty McCoy
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www.LinenCottage.com