

"She sits down and puts her hand to her chest and rocks. Thinks of all she has lost and will lose. All she has had and will have. It seems to her that life is like gathering berries into an apron with a hole. Why do we keep on? Because the berries are beautiful, and we must eat to survive. We catch what we can. We walk past what we lose for the promise of more, just ahead." ~ Elizabeth Berg

Welcome to Vintage Americana. Exploring and restoring rural American culture. If you're ready to leave the digital distraction behind, and instead find satisfaction in making and doing things with your own hands, building your own home and community, and doing it all with a sense of good stewardship, pull up a chair and listen for a spell. This is episode 37 - Apronology.

Stick with me through this, because I'm going to talk about aprons and their place in our lives, then and now. And then I'm going to advocate for a re-discovery of the joy of the apron, plus give you an idea to get you started.

It's an interesting thing in this modern world that technology brings a landslide of information to our fingertips - and so little of it is useful. Or we don't know enough to even know what questions to ask. For grins, I did a quick internet search on the history of aprons. And most of what came up on the topic was extremely superficial, pretty questionable, or just plain wrong. I say this from the position of someone who did spend quite a bit of time studying historical dress, and for whom it is still an interest.

The short version, therefore, is that aprons have been with us for a long, long time. They're just practical. Especially before fast fashion, when most people didn't have a closet full of clothes to go change into.

They've varied enormously from a simple rectangle of fabric attached to the waist, to full, sleeved versions, to highly decorative versions that would never have gotten near a boiling pot.

What is it about aprons? Even now they speak to us of home, tradition, and the values of thrift, care-taking, and hard work. So they take on a bit of a nostalgic glow, even in a world where fewer and fewer of us wear them.

I'll be honest, my mother wasn't much of an apron-girl. I have come to realize that some of this is that she is just plain a cleaner cook than I am. I don't remember her ever

managing to dust herself entirely with cocoa powder or smear gravy across her shirt as I've been known to do.

I have pictures of my maternal grandmother in a full apron, smiling in her kitchen, although she dies when I was quite young. While my paternal grandmother was also not much found in one.

And yet. But still. The image of the apron sticks, even if lots of us don't associate them with our daily lives.

Great Aunt Jenny, on the other hand, did have a selection of aprons. She and her sister Gracie were both usually to be found in a cross-stitched gingham half apron, whether in the kitchen, doing the ironing, doing other work around the house. I've also seen a picture of Jenny in her uniform as the housekeeper for a wealthy family in Detroit. Definitely an apron.

Jenny encapsulates something of the dichotomy of aprons in the 20th century. At home, doing all the little homely tasks, that apron was a practical cover for her good dress. And also an example of her own handiwork, along with a bit of personality. I'm certain she embroidered it herself. And she took it off and hung it up when company arrived, to come sit in the living room and visit.

While the housekeeper's apron was another matter altogether. Starched and impossibly white, it was her badge of office. Rather than speak to her personality, it made her more part of the furniture - window-dressing, until needed. It was certainly always in place when visitors came to the house, marking her as part of the staff, not the family. It was not to be laid aside until her day was done.

Aprons are one of those items that we still use, and yet often regard past usages through the lens of our own assumptions and ideologies.

Whether on dramas like *Downton Abbey* or reality shows like *Time Crashers*, the focus on the apron is how it denotes the lower classes. Both shows concentrate much effort in highlighting the perceived abuses of "the help." And goodness knows, few modern folks would be even the least bit willing to take up the life and lifestyle of household staff for a wealthy family. But, *Time Crashers*, for instance, gets things more than a little bit wrong when one of the members of the team has a meltdown over the Edwardian

practice of calling all of the maids "Jane," whatever their name may have been. She melts down completely over what she views as a "dehumanizing" habit.

But that views it from a modern perspective. Edwardian, who had all sorts of rules about greeting people, modes of address, and other social niceties. Calling a woman by her first name was an intimacy that could be seen as intrusive. And the level of intimacy of a relationship was determined by the woman. Dubbing the maids "Jane," served the purpose of avoiding over familiarity with a woman who was of a lesser social status and might not have felt comfortable being called by her first name - and also not comfortable objecting.

Modern objections often also fixate on uniforms. But again, we lack perspective. For a young girl who had been raised as one of many children on a tenant farm, it's possible that her maid's uniform was the first really good piece of clothing she'd worn. That starched apron and cap could be a point of pride.

Vintage patterns for aprons are actually rather a lot of fun to peruse. My collection includes everything from directions for recreations of 14-century plain linen aprons and fancy 16th-century smocked versions through Victorian concoctions, all the way up to 50's hostess aprons. Across all of that time there has been a differentiation between useful aprons meant to protect clothes and decorative aprons that were part of more formal outfits. And that's without even getting into tradesmens aprons.

We'll skip over the medieval and renaissance styles, just because they're not really something most folks are likely to incorporate into their lives. But starting with the Victorians.. there are certainly gems to be mined.

Keep in mind that aprons are, in general, designed to go over the fashions of the day. So, a lot of Victorian and Edwardian aprons aren't all that useful in a modern kitchen (even if you've got an old-fashioned soul) just because very few of us cook in full length dresses. Although, who knows? With the new season of Yellowstone introducing us to the patriarchs of the clan, it's possible that Faith Hill will inspire a resurgence of Prairie Style. While those of us old enough to remember ht 70's, however dimly, cringe just a bit.

Because Victorian dresses usually had tight bodices and full skirts, aprons typically follow that plan. Usually the top of the apron is either just a square of fabric that can be

pinned in place to the front of the dress. Or might have shoulder straps, frills, and lace trim. If you typically swoop around home in a dress of that sort, look at some of those Victorian aprons. I'll leave some examples in the show notes on the web page for you.

I do think that Victorian half-aprons are a bit more adaptable. Most of them are simply a rectangle that is gathered to a waistband that ties in the back. But that rectangle might be decorated in all sorts of ways. Pin tucks, shark's teeth, embroidery, lace. The sky was the limit.

This style continued on into the Edwardian era, even as silhouettes got slimmer. I have a simple one that belonged to my husband's great-grandmother with a wide hem of knitted lace made of a very fine thread. It always makes me think of Anne Blythe (once of Green Gables) and her housekeeper, Susan:

"Susan had on a new black silk blouse, quite as elaborate as anything Mrs. Marshall Elliott ever wore, and a white starched apron, trimmed with complicated crocheted lace fully five inches wide, not to mention insertion to match. Therefore Susan had all the comfortable consciousness of a well-dressed woman as she opened her copy of the Daily Enterprise and prepared to read the Glen "Notes" which, as Miss Cornelia had just informed her, filled half a column of it and mentioned almost everybody at Ingleside."

Aprons in the 20's followed style of dresses - they got shorter, sleeker, and were often cut on the bias. Half-aprons are less common, because no one wanted to wrinkle the lines of her dress by tying an apron over it. Full aprons have scooped necks, no waist, and hang more loosely. I'll be honest, I find styles from the 20's a bit shapeless. But they do slide on nicely over jeans and a T-shirt, it must be admitted. Plus, they don't take a lot of fabric! Some of them even have a strong Art Deco aesthetic, and can appeal to people with more "modern" style. If you're not into gathers, ruffles, lace, and bows, there might be a 20's style that applies to you.

The 30's brought us the Great Depression. And probably one of the most famous types of aprons - the feed sack apron. If you're not familiar, during the depression, companies that sold feed (and flour, and other bulk products that normally came in fabric bags) started to create printed fabric for their bags. Patterns abound for everything from aprons to dresses to children's clothing and household linens. Appeal of the fabric pattern was a major factor in which brand of flour a woman might choose to buy. And she might splurge on an extra bag for the pantry - if she needed two in order to have

enough fabric! The marketing was very clever. Even Disney licensed their characters to feed sack manufacturers. Cinderella, Alice and friends, Mickey, Donald, and others all made an appearance.

Because fabric was precious, 30's aprons do tend to be simple. But ruffles, gathers and other trimmings make a comeback, as well.

Gingham aprons also surge in popularity. While gingham had been around for a long time, it suddenly became an excellent canvas for simple but effective embroidery patterns. Simple cross-stitch or more complicated "chicken scratch" patterns in multiple colors turned the little gingham squares into something of a "paint by number" that made it possible to make something pretty on a very tight budget.

And, of course, we moved right from the Depression into the War Years. Fabric continued to be precious. But aprons wear out! What was a patriotic gal to do? New apron patterns tended to still conserve fabric, and half-aprons came back into fashion. More feminine styles predominate, and lots of commercial patterns start including iron-on transfer patterns for embroidery or applique. Both were and are inexpensive ways to add decoration to a garment.

The make-do-and-mend philosophy extended to aprons, with pamphlets published on making aprons from an old shirt or other piece of fabric that had reached the end of its lifespan.

And then came the 1950's. Much like the rest of life, aprons reached exuberant new heights. Covered with fluff, frills, and lace or cut into whimsical shapes like flowers, 1950's aprons defy categorization, beyond "over the top." Many of the more fanciful styles were meant as "hostess aprons" - to be worn while entertaining rather than while actually cooking. Lots of these were made of organza, light and airy confections with little practical application.

Practical aprons existed, as well. Because nobody wanted to greet unexpected guests in a dirty house dress! But even these are often more elaborate than the preceding decades. Gingham is still a mainstay for simple daily wear.

Aprons don't disappear in the 1960's, for all that the modern narrative pegs this as the turning point for women entering the workforce. While they did, the change was actually

pretty gradual and stay-at-home Moms still the norm. Once again, as we've seen before, apron styles followed fashion. 60's aprons tend to mimic the sleeker "sheath dress" form. Waisted aprons DO more or less go away, in favor of the "smock" style that fits better over slimmer clothing styles.

What is there to say about the 70's but "oh, dear." Little House of the Prairie, Holly Hobby, and the Bicentennial can all probably share part of the blame for the wildly popular Prairie style, with long dresses and long "pioneer" aprons. I'm not sure anybody actually wore these to work in. But you can still find vintage patterns. Probably uncut.

You'll also find some simple smock styles, as well as some "bohemian" ...ish... examples. Anything that didn't look like it came from the dreaded 50's.

By the 80's and 90's, aprons really were going the way of the dinosaur for the younger generations, at least for home use. And I'm not sure we're far enough removed from "Kiss the Cook" printed versions to want to revisit that era, just yet.

Men's aprons, on the other hand, are much more highly conserved. We tend to find them identifiable more by purpose than era. Most of us can identify, on sight, a carpenter's apron, chef's apron, a leather blacksmith or farrier's apron, or butcher's apron. Even an old painting of George Washington in a ceremonial Mason's apron is immediately identifiable, even nearly 250 years later. Many of these styles have become just as popular with women, because they're so darned useful both in those professions and when doing anything that tends to be hard on the clothing.

Although, again, Washington's apron is different because it IS ceremonial. And we retain some of these, too. The masons, of course, are the obvious example. But formal aprons are also an important part of traditional costume of lots of ethnic groups. You'll find them across the European continent, with the Slavic versions often being especially elaborate. Examples proliferate in museums. And get shaken out of closets or carefully constructed for festivals celebrating histories and cultures specific to individual places.

Which was a long and extended way to come around to the point that - we have deep and longstanding connections to aprons. Whether that's Grandma in the kitchen making the Thanksgiving turkey in a much beloved (or reproduction of) a feedsack smock apron, or an outrageous aunt mixing cocktails in a glitter organza hostess half apron, they serve as a touchpoint for family, friends, home, and gathering.

And you all know by now that I am all about building community. Also, that I think shared meals build community. So I'm going to introduce you to something that incorporates both ideas.

And I'm going to invite you to participate in Tie One On Day. Created by EllynAnn Geisel, Tie One On Day falls on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. To participate, make a fresh loaf of bread or other baked good, wrap it in an apron, tuck a card with a note or prayer inside, and take it to a neighbor. Food. Aprons. Holidays. Connections.

See?

I want you to take some time to think about who you'd like to bring your gift to on Tie One On Day. What are they like? What might they like?

I have a new next-door neighbor. I strongly suspect, from the renovations she's done on her house (to include painting the exterior white, and updating the kitchen) I suspect she's a fan of JoAnna Gaines. So I'm going to try to find an appropriate apron style to make for her. Maybe a simple chef-style in French striped linen. I've just gotten a new Danish wheat sourdough starter. I think I have my bases covered.

There are so many resources available for apron patterns. You can, as always, hit Pinterest for free tutorials and pdfs. There are a variety of styles available. Plus pictures of various styles of aprons from vintage catalogs and patterns.

All of the major pattern companies have apron patterns in their catalog. And they also have lately begun introducing reprints of some of their own vintage apron patterns. These are well worth getting, especially because you won't have to deal with fragile pattern sheets or missing pieces, as you would with genuine vintage.

Etsy is another source with lots of options. You can purchase original patterns - especially for simpler designs that are common in modern use - chef, wrap-around, and Japanese linen styles, just to name a few, as well as pdf reproductions of vintage patterns or the genuine vintage patterns themselves. Or even a vintage apron, if you'd rather not make one. There is no reason you can't purchase an apron - old or new - wash, press, and fold it ready for giving. Etsy does have an excellent selection of aprons of all sorts. And the great thing about aprons is that sizing isn't usually too specific.

If you do opt for a vintage pattern, I recommend getting some of the gridded interfacing for pattern making, available at most fabric shops, and tracing the pattern pieces onto that. It's much easier than trying to pin and cut 70 or 80 year old paper.

Or, if you're heading to a craft sale or bazaar this weekend or next, keep your eyes open for an apron that might suit your intended recipient. This makes the whole exercise a win-win-win. You're supporting a local business, connecting with your neighbor, and building tradition. All at once!

Antique shops are also fertile ground. Locally, it's pretty easy to find vintage aprons, apron patterns, and all kinds of vintage table linens. Helpfully, there are also more than a few tutorials out there on the 'net for making an apron out of vintage tablecloths, napkins, runners, or handkerchiefs. Go nuts!

Certain retailers actually carry worthwhile options. Both Williams-Sonoma and Sur La Table usually have a good selection, with a few matching kids' styles. Anthropologie is a bit more hit-or-miss but usually worth checking.

And, of course, there is always the old standby - a printed novelty apron from services like CafePress. Not my favorite option, but there it is.

You've got your apron picked out. Now, what about the baked good?

When EllynAnn started Tie One On Day, the premise was to present an apron and a fresh loaf of homemade bread. And I think that (or a tray of rolls) is still an excellent idea. Because breaking bread together has a meaning that clings to us, even now. It's also a very simple thing for our neighbor to add to their holiday table the next day. What you have shared with them, they can also share with their loved ones and friends.

Besides, didn't everybody learn to make sourdough bread during the last 18 months? I kid. Some of us knew how before the great sour doughing of the World.

BUT - if you're not comfortable with bread, there is no reason you can't choose another baked good. Pie? I know a number of confident pie bakers who won't get roped into making bread for love or money. But pie? All day long. Do the traditional pumpkin, or put a new spin on things. If you know your neighbor will be entertaining, consider a slab pie. Or biscuits. Muffins. Anything that comes out of your oven says, "I'm thinking of

you."

While you're at it, take a photo of apron, baked good, and maybe your neighbor if they're willing - post it to instagram and tag me.

Then, when you get home, think about adding an apron to your own household routine. I started with one I made myself. Then added a second, when I realized it cut down on wardrobe changes between baking and going out of the house. Like when I realize I don't actually have any more powdered sugar for that glaze! Mom added to my collection with two more.

Once you're in the habit, it starts to become second nature. I've even got plans for some pegs to hang my aprons in the kitchen of the new house we have plans. Maybe someday, other people's memories of me might involve that kitchen, and aprons. I wear my new ones, and I keep Aunt Jenny's somewhere safe. Aprons, like many things, carry memories and emotions.

I hope I've inspired you today to get into the apron spirit. Buy one. Make one. Give one. Visit the webpage at [vintage.americana.podcast.com](http://vintage.americana.podcast.com) for links to resources. I'll give you EllynAnn's page, as well as some of my favorite patterns, styles, and supplies. Put on your apron, post the photo to your instagram and tag me. Stop by [brambleberry meadow.com](http://brambleberry.meadow.com) for my recipe for pumpkin cinnamon rolls, which would be an excellent choice for a gift baked good.

I think it might be time for me to go to the local fabric shop and see what they have for striped linen.

Are you coming?