

# The Cornerstone

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 8, NO. 3

## *THE EARLY DAYS OF RICE FASHION*

By Karen Rogers

I began this project with some research about the general condition of women's fashions in the United States during the first twenty years of the twentieth century with the idea of illustrating it with photos from the Rice archives. After completing a modest amount of reading, I began to look through our collection, only to discover that **Rice women have never been slaves to fashion**, at least not in the aforementioned time



**...Rice women have never been slaves to fashion...**

frame. Actually, my research **had** indeed indicated that most middle class American women lacked the monetary resources to dress in what was considered the "latest" styles. Until 1900 the only people with any means to pursue fashion were the wealthy and socially eminent. Fashion was dictated from the top and the prevailing mood was extravagance: huge hats, ribbons, lace, embroidery and beads. Paris was the center for fashion. Between 1900 and 1908, styles changed little. Stylish ladies wore



*Paris fashions, 1907*

many layers: chemise, corset, corset cover, drawers, flannel petticoat, one or more cotton petticoats and a silk petticoat. The corset forced the bosom forward and the hips back, making the famous "S" line. Completing this look were large forward sweeping hats with the hair puffed up and built up over pads inserted along the front of the head.

Fashion passed fairly slowly down

through the social orders and never came close to reaching the community as a whole. At the turn of the century millions of women, including the middle class, had no means to follow fashion without a lot of trouble. There were no retail outlets selling clothes. Ordinary women resorted to the "little dressmaker" who worked on a manual sewing machine for pitiful

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# The Rice Historical Society

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the history of Rice University*

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*The Rice Historical Society welcomes letters  
to The Cornerstone, its official newsletter.  
Rice alumni and friends are encouraged to  
contribute photographs and remembrances  
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future issues of The Cornerstone. Items  
cannot be returned and will be donated to  
our archival collection.*

NEWSLETTER DESIGNED  
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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*Paris fashions, Spring, 1907*

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*Sweatshop, where workers toiled for long hours in miserable conditions for very low pay*

wages. (Merrit Singer had introduced the sewing machine, an invention considered a great revolution in the fashion industry, in 1851.) In the

twentieth century, the “new woman” was emerging, promoting the ideas of rights, education, social freedom, and physical activity. Ironically, technological advances in the production of magazines led to an increased interest in fashion by the general public. A main source of the expanding world of fashion was in the department store; its growth ran parallel to the growth of the middle class. Clothing factories were coming into existence, mainly for men’s clothes since they were more uniform and standardized. Women’s clothes were made in department store workrooms where elaborately fitted bodices, floor length skirts and highly wrought trim were still the norm. It is easy to see why mechanization in the manufacture of women’s clothes lagged behind that of men.

The foundation of future, large-scale manufacture was being laid in the early years of the twentieth century. What had been a long history

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“new  
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...



*Rice girls in bathing costumes at Bay Ridge, 1914*

*Garden Party following Commencement, 1924  
The waist disappeared and belts were round the hips.*



of handcraft was being transformed into an industry not only by the sewing machine but by the huge numbers of immigrants flocking into America and England from Central Europe in the 1880s. They were poor and unorganized and open to exploitation. Sweatshops had begun to spring up with the advent of the factory system in the early 1800s with manufacturers either setting up makeshift, dimly lit and poorly ventilated factories, or

contracting the work out. They hired workers, frequently women and children, for low wages and long hours on a piecework basis. In New York these immigrants crowded into slums and typically worked 84-hour weeks for \$6.00 to \$10.00 per week.

In 1908, a new look appeared for women; the concept of the natural figure gained popularity. Women were to acquire and retain an upright, unshackled stance instead of an

unnatural shape dictated by fashion. The constricted waist was loosened. At the end of the Edwardian era, women were receiving better educations, participating more in the community, and starting careers. The changes in fashion coincided with the rise of the militant suffragette movement. Necklines were no longer high, although this trend was denounced as a source of danger to morals and health. Petticoats disappeared and underwear became simpler.



*Rice Women Tennis Champions, 1916*

was gaining momentum and was responsible for deconstructing the corsets. Women were cycling, skiing, golfing, fishing, yachting, motoring, and playing tennis. Trousers for women were introduced in 1911 and were characterized as audacious or sensational. At the same time, the popularity of dances like the Tango, Turkey Trot, and Bunny Hop increased demand for slinky dresses. Ragtime was the rage. The new woman rebelled against interminable fittings and the tyranny of fashion. She began seeking fashion in retail stores with ready-made clothes at reasonable prices.

By 1917, skirts were fuller but had risen an inch or two above the ankle. The freedom to sit and stand was a modern concept and clothes in

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Hairstyles became flatter and more natural. Hair was coiled and waved round the head. Hats were flatter, too. The new fashions showed bulges more than the older ones and women had started carrying keys, makeup and cigarettes, so the modern handbag made an appearance.



**The new woman rebelled against the ...tyranny of fashion.**

Women were participating in sports more. In 1909, Mrs. Sherry, five-time British tennis champion, wore clinging white skirt, 2 inches off the ground with a blouse. That year a golfing outfit with a knitted sports coat, a loose, rather long cardigan, was introduced. An even greater step toward emancipation was the free-stroke coat with pivot sleeve and adjustable skirt for golf. Thomas Burberry, in a different approach to the needs of women, invented "gabardine," a weatherproof cloth, very useful to the woman motorist when automobiles became popular.

Bathing attire, very elaborate during Edwardian times, with below-knee serge dresses worn over matching bloomers, often with stockings and bathing shoes changed in 1910. The one-piece bathing suit in serge or woven wool was introduced although it was still long and loose.

In the early 1900s, states in the U.S. began passing laws dealing heavy blows to the sweatshop system. They prohibited workers from carrying on work outside the factory in industries where sweatshops were most common. In addition, they passed minimum-wage laws that made it impractical for manufacturers to sublet work as well as laws limiting the number of hours women could work and laws abolishing child labor.

Fashions were becoming more practical. Sportswear



*Rice fashions, 1912*



*Paris fashions, Spring, 1916*

general were shapeless and easy fitting but cumbersome and bulky. After 1918, postwar fashion really showed a change. The number of women working had increased during the war; they were driving vans and laboring in factories and staffing offices (where they were advised



to wear somber colors). In 1919, Suzanne Lenglen wore a one-piece, calf-length tennis dress. Genders were bending; women were borrowing men's fashions. Short hair had started becoming popular before the war. The permanent wave, actually painful when first introduced in 1906, was fashionable by 1920.

**...they were advised to wear somber colors...**

The chemise-style dress, reaching to the knees, requiring little in the way of size or fit, opened up fashion for the masses. The fabric trade was depressed



*Rice fashions, 1916*

at the time so skimpy fashions were a blessing. In the late twenties, movies, now with sound, had a great influence. By the thirties, in the midst of the Great Depression, Hollywood had become the dominant international

force for fashion.

For centuries fashion followed a single line; now it was careening in different directions. Innovations no longer took years to filter through; radical changes occurred seasonally.

# MY FIRST YEAR AT RICE

By William "Bill" J. Hudspeth, '32

*The following account of his first year at Rice was written by William J. (Bill) Hudspeth ('32) and enclosed with a letter to his niece, Helen Hudspeth Flores ('73). Bill entered Rice in 1929 at the onset of the Great Depression, and his account is not unlike that of many other Rice students of his time. Prior to his retirement, Bill was president of Gulf Printing Company. After he graduated, three younger brothers also graduated from Rice. Bill, now 93, lives at Lakeway with his wife of almost 65 years, Billie Byers Hudspeth ('38).*

I graduated from North Texas Agricultural College (NTAC), a junior college under the Texas A & M system, in 1929. This was two years of college that I had completed. At that time Dad was the business manager at the college on a very modest salary. Because of the lack of money, he felt that I should get a teacher's certificate and teach school, but I wanted to go to college and get a degree. Our next-door neighbor was at Rice Institute, and his brother had graduated from Rice in the class of 1920. Rice had no tuition at that time, and that was where I wanted to go.

I wrote a letter to Rice, sending a transcript of my grades along with letters from faculty members. To my surprise, I was admitted for the September registration. I received some forms from Rice about room reservations and was asked for a deposit for four months' rent. Since I had no money at the time, I ignored the request.

I had saved about \$75 from yard work and work at the printing company in Arlington. I got a loan for \$100 at the bank in Arlington and packed up to go to Rice. I had never been to Houston and had never seen Rice, but off I went with a small bag of clothes



*William J. Hudspeth  
in 1931*

arrived there three or four days before registration. I fell in love with Rice – the beautiful buildings and a big campus with many large, green trees.

The first person that I met when I went into the administration building was Mr. J. T. McCants, the bursar for Rice. I told him that I had been accepted for the fall registration. He asked where I was staying, and I said that I was planning to stay in the dorms. He said that the dorms were all filled and that no reservation had been received from me. I told him that I did not have the money at the time but did have money then. He said that he had never done this before, but he would put me in a room with two other boys for about ten days. I could sleep on a cot. After



*J. T. McCants*

– with more to come later in a trunk.

The train ticket from Dallas was \$14, and I had an uncle who lived in Houston. I am not sure who met me at the station or took me to Rice, but I

classes started, ten or fifteen boys would check out, and I would have a room. I paid for four months' rent at the time.

He asked me about sports, and I told him that I played on the tennis team at NTAC. I told him that I was also business manager of the yearbook at NTAC. He asked what I hoped to do at Rice, and I told him that I hoped to find a job as soon as possible and might try out for the tennis team if I had time.

The next day I registered and paid a deposit on all science subjects plus a student activity fee, my board charge for five weeks, and other charges that I cannot recall. I ran out of money and had no way to purchase books or supplies. I went to Mr. McCants and told him that I had run out of money and had no books or supplies and that perhaps Rice was just too expensive for me. He looked at me and paused a long time. Then he said, "I will refund your room rent and you can pay that by the month. This will help you get started, and I will help you find a job." I told him how much I appreciated what he was doing for me.

Mr. McCants lost no time in helping find me a job. It was a job with an advertising agency downtown on Franklin Street. The big problem with a job downtown was getting there. There was no way to town at the time but to stand on Main Street by the campus and catch a ride. All the students did this, and all the residents in Houston recognized our problem and were quick to pick us up. They also picked us up for the return trip if we were standing on the corner of Main and Dallas by the Lamar Hotel. I think the population of Houston at the time was about 192,000.

On Monday of the first week, I went to the advertising agency and asked for a job. The agency was

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conducting a survey for the Ford Motor Company on the 1929 Ford, which was the first car to follow the old Model T. Cards were given to you with the names and addresses of new owners plus about fifteen questions that were to be asked of each car owner. All the cards were for car owners who worked in the downtown area, and you would receive twenty cents for each card that you filled out and had signed by the owner. I did a lot of walking and was lucky to get five completed in an afternoon. I walked back to the agency and was paid \$1.00 for five cards and headed back to Main and Lamar for a ride to Rice.

This was a very interesting job because I met so many different people. Some were very nice and would see me, but others would refuse. One quickly learned that you were best received by those with better positions. I concluded that the worst that could happen to me was to be thrown out, so I often ignored an outside telephone operator. The best thing that I remember was meeting with Mr. Speaker, who was in his office. I had just walked down the hall looking for an office and walked into his. He looked at me and asked how I got in and what I wanted. I told him about the survey, and he asked, "Why are you doing this?" I told him that I was going to Rice and that I got twenty cents per card. He was the president of a company that had twenty cars.

We talked about fifteen minutes, and he said, "Son, I don't know about those cars, but Mr. Johnson in the purchasing department will be glad to help you. Please go to the receptionist at the telephone desk." I thanked him and went to the front desk and told the lady that I wanted to see Mr. Johnson. He asked her what I wanted, and she told him about the survey; he said that he was not interested. I told her that Mr. Speaker told me to talk with him. I started to leave, and she said, "Wait a minute," and she

called Mr. Johnson and told him that Mr. Speaker had told him to see me. He changed his mind in a second and admitted me to his office. He was not very nice to me and turned me over to one of his clerks, who helped with the survey. That was my very best day ever – twenty cards for \$4.00. Shortly after this, there were no more cards in the downtown area, and I had to give up as I had no way around the city.

My next job was at night at the University Club on La Branch Street. I worked behind the desk and signed the members in and out and sold them cigars or other things from behind the counter. One night the club held a big, very formal dance, and the manager told me to wear my tux. I told him that I did not have one, so one of the members gave me the old tux coat that he had. I had a regular white shirt and I got a tie from another student – but I wore no studs in my shirt and my regular pants. It was not a very good formal dress, but I was behind the counter. My pay was \$2.50 that night, but what I disliked the most was the walk across town to catch a ride back to Rice around midnight. I had all kinds of jobs: selling shoes for the Florsheim shop, representing Battlestein's clothing store on campus, clerking in the bookstore, selling tickets to football games, working in the accounting office, and several others.

By the time spring came, I had made several trips back home to Arlington. All of the trips were made by hitchhiking. At that time there was no fear in traveling in this way, and we made the trips sooner or later. At

that time there was no highway route to Dallas via Huntsville so we went via College Station to Waco and then into Fort Worth or Dallas and finally into Arlington. We had only one trip that was overnight. There was a heavy snow, so we spent the night sleeping in the bus station. I caught a ride the next morning.

Everything went well until the final exams for the end of my first year at Rice. Mr. McCants asked me to come to his office and wanted to know if I was aware of the rule that you had to pay in full before you could take the final exams for the year. I was not aware of this rule, and he told me that I owed \$170. He said that he would give me one week to come up with the money.

I had no place to get the money and did nothing. One week later, he sent someone to the class that I was in to bring me to his office. When I arrived, he asked, "Where is my \$170?" I said, "I do not have the money and can't get it, and if I have to have \$170, then there is no way to take my exams." He looked me over very carefully and asked, "What are you going to do this summer?" I said that I would find a job somewhere. He said that he would give me a summer job there in the office, and I could live in the dorms – there would be no hot water, but I would have a place to sleep. I took the exams and finished my first year.

It was a wonderful year, and I had had excellent teachers. I looked forward to next year.

W. J. Hudspeth

17 January 2002

*In response to the publication of excerpts from Ray Peterson's memoir in the spring issue of The Cornerstone, Marian Peterson wrote "What a great tribute...to my late husband." She recalled their attending his 60<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> reunions and welcoming a Rice University representative to her husband's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. The ties were close and enduring. When she gave him a copy of the book commemorating Rice's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Ray Peterson wrote the following inscription: "Rice U changed my life. I learned that you must strive for excellence not just 'getting by'."*

