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All dressed up

Crowd gets lesson in Victorian clothing styles

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Getting help: With the assistance of audience member Nancy Skirkanich, right, of Shelton, Carle tightens her corset.

STRATFORD — Some people would simply call Kandie Carle a delightful entertainer, while others might see her as a comedic social historian.

Whatever the label, Carle offers audiences across the state a peek under the garments worn by Victorian Americans and insight into the manners of a time when people got more than just a four-word e-mail for an invitation to dinner.

Carle, of East Haddam, performed her historic strip tease-in-reverse Sunday for about 80 people attending an old-fashioned Ice Cream Social at First Congregational Church.

Using actual vintage clothing and accurate reproductions, the professional actress — known as the Victorian Lady — talked about fashion, home life and etiquette in the 1860s as she donned the multiple layers of clothing particular to that era.

Carle stood on stage wearing a vintage bathrobe and fixed her hair, telling the audience that 19th-century women did not have mousse, gel or hairspray to hold their dos in place. Instead they used lanolin, she said, asking if anyone knew what the substance was made of.

"Lanolin is a pretty little word for sheep fat," Carle said.

Then she removed her bathrobe to reveal bloomers and a chemise, which, to many, looked like a nightgown. "It's not a nightgown, it's a slip," Carle said.

She explained that bloomers got their name from Amelia Bloomer, a suffragette and newspaper publisher, who daringly wore the balloon-like Turkish trousers on the streets of New York in the mid-1800s, facing much criticism for her fashion error.

"You think purple spikey hair is funny now? You should have been in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848," Carle said.

Then Carle continued dressing, sometimes by herself, sometimes with the help of Nancy Skirkanich of Shelton, who was pulled from the audience to serve as Carle's personal maid.

Halfway through her program, as Skirkanich labored to lace up Carle's corset, the actress singled out 8-year-old Sarah Elizabeth Breault of Milford, telling her to sit up straight, her back against the chair, and remain in that position for the rest of the presentation.

"There were corsets for children as young as 3 months old [in the Victorian era]. Some of us may think they wanted to torture their children. No, they wanted them to sit up straight," she said.

Carle said many people today wonder how Victorians could punish their bodies so — with corsets to cinch their waist. But one day people from future generations may look back and wonder why Americans today undergo plastic surgery to alter their appearance.

After the corset, Carle put on a hoop skirt followed by a corset cover, then a shirtwaist or blouse, as modern fashion goes, an overskirt, a lace collar, gloves and hat to finish off the vintage look.

"Isn't that elegant," said Betty Lou DeTurek, of Northampton, Mass., who attended the ice cream social with her niece, Donna Iodice of Stratford. "It's a wonderful program. It brings back a lot of memories for some people," she said of a time before Velcro and zippers.

Carle said that, contrary to popular belief, Victorians did not wear so many layers covering so much skin for puritanical reasons. Rather, she said, it was to avoid the sun. "You were looked down on if you had a tan," she said.

Sarah Elizabeth made it through the program without slouching but said when it was over it was "really, really, really hard to do ... My back hurt."

"It was very interesting why they wore the things they did," said Pat Bruno of Stratford.

"It's key for us to appreciate history," said Carle, who performs her programs to inform and to make history alive and interesting.

Brian A. Pounds/Connecticut Post

Back in time: Actress Kandie Carle of East Haddam entertains at the Ice Cream Social fund-raiser at First Congregational Church in Stratford on Sunday. Carle, a performance artist, demonstrated the elaborate measures that Victorian-era women went through to dress in their everyday clothes.