A new exhibition opening at the History Center in April—What We Wore: Hard Hats to High Heels—offers a playful and sometimes poignant look at the value of clothing as historical artifacts in the lives of Western Pennsylvanians. From the fabulously intricate and expensive gowns of Pittsburgh’s wealthiest women to the splattered overalls of a 1950s industrial painter, the exhibit reflects the breadth of human experience in Pittsburgh while highlighting the Historical Society’s marvelous collection. The oldest clothes in the exhibit date to the 1830s. The show opens April 19, 2000, and runs through January 2001.

Even before her marriage in 1897 to banking scion Richard Beatty Mellon, Jennie Taylor King was a woman of wealth. Her father was Alexander King, a glass manufacturer who rose to prominence during the heady years of the mid-19th century that made Pittsburgh synonymous the world-over with industry.

It’s not surprising that these were also the years that a Scotch immigrant named Thomas Mellon began to build the family’s fortune by loaning money to entrepreneurs like Alexander King. So, it should come as no surprise that children from these families might meet and marry.
Jennie grew up at Baywood in modern-day Highland Park, not far from the Mellon family estate, which covered a vast tract in East Liberty near the modern Mellon Park at Fifth and Penn avenues. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. R.B. Mellon, for a few years after their marriage, continued living at Baywood—until 1909, when they completed a 60-room, $195,000 mansion along Fifth Avenue’s “millionaire row.” During the Depression, Mrs. Mellon set aside one room in the mansion, hired an extra cook, and fed the jobless.

The opulent home was torn down in 1943, but its spirit lives on in two of Mrs. Mellon’s evening gowns which are part of the exhibition. They were donated to the Historical Society by her daughter, Mrs. Richard King Mellon. Both garments document the combination of grandeur and fine craftsmanship preferred by many of the city’s most powerful and richest Presbyterian families. One measure of that ethic is that two Historical Society volunteers, working under the close direction of a textile conservator, spent 80 hours re-stitching the gown’s beading.

Although Jennie King Mellon was reared in a Victorian home, where qualities such as virtue and piety were highly prized, family members also knew her as a spirited woman with an eye for tasteful but elaborate decoration. “Aunt Jennie was rather flamboyant,” says Samuel A. McClung III of Pittsburgh. “She had vivid henna hair and wore fabulous clothes.”

The New York firm that designed the gown also created clothes for the wife of B.F. Jones, a partner in Jones and Laughlin Steel Co. Heavily embroidered with sequins, rhinestones, and costume pearls, the Mellon gown adds unmistakable Gilded Age sparkle to the exhibit.
The spirit sewn into the shirts of Eddie Pasquale's bowling team surely must have helped the team capture the city league championship two years in a row in the 1970s. Angela Pasquale fashioned the snappy tops, which featured the Pasquale Construction company's cement truck and colors of the Italian flag.
MARY LANGE OF ALLEGHENY CITY (ONCE A HEAVILY GERMAN DISTRICT NOW KNOWN AS NORTH SIDE) IS SHOWN IN HER WEDDING PHOTOGRAPH. SHE WORE A BLACK SILK WEDDING GOWN AND BLACK HAT WHEN SHE WED AUGUST WUNDERLY IN 1898. AUGUST OPERATED THE WUNDERLY ART GALLERIES DOWNTOWN. ALTHOUGH CONSIDERED UNUSUAL TODAY, BLACK WEDDING GOWNS WERE A TRADITIONAL SYMBOL OF PURITY TO MANY ETHNIC GERMANS.

DURING THE 1930S, THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH NURSES WERE AFFECTIONATELY CALLED THE "GRAY LADIES" AFTER THE COLOR OF THEIR UNIFORMS, WHICH WERE GRAY WITH WHITE COLLARS AND BLACK TIES. THESE NURSES WOULD GO INTO NEIGHBORHOODS PROVIDING HEALTH CARE TO HELP NEW MOTHERS AND CHILDREN.
1970s

PITTSBURGH JAZZ SINGER/SONGWRITER AND PIANIST DELSEY MCKAY IN HER STRIKING PURPLE SILK VELVET DRESS TRIMMED IN MARIBOU FEATHERS. THE DRESS WAS PURCHASED FOR HER BY DECCA RECORDS TO BE WORN FOR HER PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPH IN THE 1970S.

1900s

MARY L. MOHRHOFF AND HER HUSBAND CHRISTIAN OPENED A MILLINERY SHOP ON EAST CARSON STREET IN 1873. AN ASTUTE BUSINESSWOMAN, MARY RAN THE SHOP AFTER HER HUSBAND’S DEATH IN 1876. HER FASHIONABLE ESTABLISHMENT PROSPERED (SHE EVENTUALLY BOUGHT THE BUILDING SHE WAS RENTING), AND MOHRHOFF SERVED CUSTOMERS FOR NEARLY 40 YEARS UNTIL HER DEATH IN 1912.

THE WHAT WE WORE EXHIBIT INCLUDES A SPACE REPLICATED FROM MOHRHOFF’S SOUTH SIDE SHOP, C. 1905. VISITORS WILL FIND “HANDS-ON” ACTIVITIES THERE FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY—TRY ON HATS FROM DIFFERENT PERIODS OR DESIGN A TIE TO WEAR HOME.
1930s

The Latin dance team of Pittsburghers Rudy Montez and Adele Paige wore rows of ruffles on their wonderful Spanish outfits, handmade by Adele in the 1930s. Montez and Adele danced at venues across America and, in their 60s, married and settled in Pittsburgh.