Up Front

Curator’s Corner
By Emily Ruby, Curator

Western Pennsylvania Prom Dresses

The promenade is the formal entrance of guests into a room that announces the start of an event. A common practice in high society balls of the 19th century, this is also the origin of that awkward rite of high school passage, “the prom.” The prom as we know it today is a middle class evolution of upper class formal balls and debutant events. In the late 1800s, formal co-ed dinners, or proms, were a regular part of college life and eventually filtered down to the high school level. Although evidence of proms can be found in the early part of the 20th century, they were generally simple events, often a dinner in your Sunday best. The prosperity of the post-World War II era is credited with elevating prom to a more ceremonial and formal event. Today the average cost for prom is $1,078, as the casual dinner has evolved into an event that requires tanning, hair and make-up, a rented limo, an expensive dress or rented tux, and an after-prom destination. In a society that, for the vast majority, lacks any formal entrance from adolescence into adulthood, prom fills this void.

To celebrate spring and showcase some of our wonderful donations of prom dresses, we have highlighted a few gems from our collection. These dresses, spanning four decades, demonstrate the evolution in prom style and practice.

The South Hills High School prom of 1944 was an especially poignant event as 36 of the young men in attendance would soon be heading off to war. As prom chairman, Virginia DeGasperi had to create an extra special occasion. The prom’s location at the William Penn Hotel fit the bill and she enlisted her brother, a member of several local bands, to be the entertainment. Since cars were scarce due to war rationing, Virginia and her date, Oresh Tammasino, took a taxi, while many other students rode the streetcar. Virginia’s dress was the first she tried on while shopping, and she knew it was the one. The beautiful lime green gown was purchased at Joseph Horne’s department store for $30. A slim silhouette, high neck, padded shoulders, and long sleeves were all typical of the mid-1940s, as well as the vibrant lime color made popular in the age of chemical dyes. In a few short years, the New Look would dominate fashion, identified by an extremely cinched waist and full skirt.

Ten years later, Marcia Getting, a junior at Bellevue High School, wore a special Kaufmann’s purchased gown to her prom. Today she is not sure if she bought the dress new or repurposed one of her sister’s old...
gowns, but the short beige chiffon piece, covered in pink and green flowers with a blue cummerbund waist accent and very full skirt, is the epitome of a 1950s silhouette. She took family friend Bob Boucek on her triple date, accompanied by her two brothers and their dates. They all piled into the family’s 1947 Chevy and made their way to Shanopin Country Club; the after-prom was held at Henry’s in Finleyville because it had the best dance floor.

After spending much more than anticipated on her Kaufmann’s net and taffeta prom gown, Mary Anne Novak’s father remarked, “Every girl should have one dress like that other than her wedding dress.” She wore the gown to her 1960 St. Thomas High School junior prom and then to the after party at the Holiday House in Monroeville, a famous nightclub and popular post-prom destination in the 1960s.

Moving into the next decade, Tina Vital wore a pink and rhinestone beaded gown to her 1971 Johnstown Senior High School prom. The color pink was popular in the ’70s, and the full skirt was no longer in vogue. Tina traveled all the way to Pittsburgh to buy her dress at Miller’s. The store was founded in 1920 in Charleroi and, by 1974, had several locations throughout the region specializing in ladies and children’s clothing with the tagline, “Famous for Fashion.”