



4-H Western Heritage Persona

Resources for creating an Authentic Costume

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This resource guide supports youth, families, volunteers, and leaders as they explore historically accurate clothing connected to the Western Heritage era (1830–1907). It is designed to help youth research everyday dress, understand how clothing was made, and locate reliable resources for patterns, fabrics, dyes, notions, and construction.

Emphasis is placed on research, creativity, and learning through history, using museum collections, historic photographs, and reproduction sewing resources. The goal is not perfection, but thoughtful, informed choices that reflect real people, practical clothing, and respectful representation of the many cultures present in the American West.



Section I: Time Period Terms

These terms can be helpful in researching fashions.

British Terms: (Associated with the reigning monarch.)

- Late Georgian (early 1830s)
- Victorian (1837–1901)
- Edwardian (1901–1910)

U.S. Context:

- Antebellum
- Civil War Era
- Reconstruction
- Gilded Age
- Progressive Era



Section 2: Indigenous Peoples & Clothing (1830–1907)

Indigenous peoples were present throughout the American West during the 1830–1907 period and played vital roles in family life, trade, agriculture, ranching, education, and community leadership. Clothing worn by Indigenous people during this time reflected daily life, available materials, trade goods, and cultural traditions, and varied widely by tribe, region, and purpose.

Youth researching Indigenous clothing are encouraged to focus on everyday wear, not ceremonial or sacred regalia.

Everyday Indigenous Clothing

During the 19th century, many Indigenous people wore clothing made from a combination of traditional materials and trade goods obtained through commerce with settlers, traders, and government agencies.

Common fabrics included:

- Wool trade blankets
- Cotton calico and muslin
- Wool yardage (often red, blue, green, or brown)
- Linen and cotton shirts
- Buckskin or leather (varied by region and use)

Everyday clothing often included: shirts, skirts, leggings, blankets, vests, moccasins, or work garments appropriate for weather, labor, and travel.

When researching Indigenous clothing for Western Heritage projects:

- Focus on your own heritage or sovereign nation
- Use historic photographs, museum collections, and tribal resources
- Choose everyday clothing, not ceremonial dress
- Avoid stereotypes and costume representations
- Indigenous cultures are a living cultures



Section 3: Researching Western Heritage Clothing: Looking Beyond Fashion

Clothing worn by people living in the American West between 1830 and 1907 was shaped by daily life, work, climate, available materials, and access to goods. Unlike high fashion, everyday frontier clothing was practical and often reflected the need to make do with limited resources.

Working families, immigrants, settlers, tradespeople, and frontier communities were not dressing from fashion magazines, their clothing is not always well documented in traditional fashion sources. Instead, the best evidence for Western Heritage clothing comes from a variety of non-fashion historical records.

When researching Western Heritage clothing, look for sources that show real people living real lives.

Think Like a Historian - If you can explain who wore it, why they wore it, and where the information came from.

Where to Look for Everyday Clothing Evidence

Strong research sources for Western Heritage clothing include:

- Historic photographs showing people at work, home, or in communities – Library of Congress Prints & Photographs <https://www.loc.gov/pictures>; National Archives (NARA – Western Expansion & Labor <https://www.archives.gov>; National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum - <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org>; Autry Museum of the American West - <https://theautry.org>; Buffalo Bill Center of the West - <https://centerofthewest.org>; Smithsonian National Museum of American History - <https://americanhistory.si.edu>; Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian - <https://americanindian.si.edu>

Library of Congress search terms (exact phrases help): “frontier family 1880”; “homestead family 1890”; “cowboy camp 1870”; “blacksmith shop 1890”; “railroad workers west”; “mining camp 1860”; “territorial town 1900”; “Indian boarding school 1890”; “women ranch work 1880”.

NARA Collections to search: Homesteading, Railroads, Indian Agencies, Military forts, Western territories

Smithsonian National Museum of American History search collections under: Work clothing, Domestic life, Labor history, Children’s clothing, Rural life

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian key search words: everyday indigenous clothing, trade fabrics, mixed-material garments, working garments, boarding school clothing.

Occupational Search key words: Blacksmith, teamster, ranch hand, cook, laundress, surveyor, telegraph operator, schoolteacher, store clerk, railroad worker, miner, clergy, pioneer families, school, etc.

- Mail-order and dry goods catalogs that show what average families could buy

Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs played a major role in everyday life for rural and working families. The Sears catalog offered a wide range of goods from early watches to complete homes (DeLuca, 2023), and Montgomery Ward issued the first general U.S. mail-order catalog in 1872 to bring affordable merchandise to rural consumers (Chicago History Museum, 2022). Affordable products associated with apparel: ready-made clothing, yard goods (fabric), sewing machines, notions, and tools.

- Museum collections focused on labor, frontier life, and material culture.
- State and local historical societies and territorial archives.
- Occupational images showing how clothing was worn for specific jobs.

Occupational Search key words: Blacksmith, teamster, ranch hand, cook, laundress, surveyor, telegraph operator, schoolteacher, store clerk, railroad worker, miner, clergy, etc.

- Family, school, and community photographs from the time period

These sources often reveal patched garments, layered clothing, reused materials, and simple construction — all common features of everyday dress.

Asking the Right Research Questions

Instead of asking, “*What was fashionable?*” ask:

- Who was this person?
- What kind of work or daily activities did they do?
- Where did they live, and what was the climate like?
- What clothing would be practical and affordable for them?

The answers to these questions help guide appropriate choices in patterns, fabrics, colors, notions, and construction methods.

Western Heritage clothing projects are about research, reasoning, and storytelling, not perfect reproduction. Clothing choices should be:

- Historically reasonable
- Supported by research
- Appropriate for the persona's daily life

Being able to explain *why* a choice was made is more important than having an exact match.

Historic Reference & Context

McClellan, E. (1910). *Historic dress in America 1800–1870*. George W. Jacobs & Company.

<https://www.cuttersguide.com/pdf/References/historic-dress-in-america-800-1870.pdf>

Note: This classic reference provides historical background on American clothing and construction methods. While it focuses on an earlier time period and includes formal dress, it offers valuable insight into materials, garment structure, and everyday clothing foundations



Section 4: Pattern History & How Patterns Worked

Key Timelines and Details

- **Before 1860** – No printed patterns; people drafted by hand or copied garments
- **1860** – Madame Demorest sells tissue patterns (one size)
- **1863** – Ebenezer Butterick introduces **graded sizes** (revolutionary!)
- **1870s** – McCall's patterns appear
- **1890s** – Vogue patterns introduced
- **Early patterns** used holes & notches instead of printed words
- **Early Magazine Patterns:** Included scaled drafts or full-size sheets for tracing, often with basic rectangular skirt pieces.

Helpful Reads:

Wearing History Blog - <https://wearinghistoryblog.com/2013/12/de-coding-vintage-patterns-part-1-mccall-patterns-the-advent-of-the-printed-pattern/>

Patterns & Pattern Resources

The following websites were reviewed and are suggested as resources. Most include information and patterns for clothing, accessories and foundation garments.

Marna Jean Davis – Clothing Historian

- <https://www.marnajeandavis.com/>
- Patterns created from original garments.
- A basic guide to choosing a Historic Late Victoria Dress (1870-1900).
- Living History: Practical day to day wear for women and children.
<https://www.marnajeandavis.com/blog>
- Good examples and explanations of design, color, fabric and construction.
- Excellent for research & inspiration

Maggie May Clothing

- <https://maggiemayfashions.com/>
- Fashion & History
- Workshops
- Ready-made Clothing – men, women, children

Sew Historically

- <https://www.sewhistorically.com/about/>
- Historic Costumes
- Refashion clothing
- Portfolio of Photos
- How to...

The Dreamstress – sewing, history, and style

- <https://thedreamstress.com/about/>
- Scoop Patterns - <https://www.scooppatterns.com/> (18th Century)

Lavender's Green – Historic Clothing

- <https://lavendersgreen.com/>
- Fashion historian, Kay Demlow sharing knowledge and historic reproductions.
- Excellent examples of historic reproductions.
- How to examples.

Past Patterns – <https://pastpatterns.com/>

- Pattern research guides
- Fabric recommendations
- Master list by garment & era

Black Snail Patterns

- <https://blacksnailpatterns.com>
- PDF patterns (instant download)
- Women's patterns **1860–1910**
- Clear instructions, good visuals

Repeated Originals

- <https://repeatedoriginals.com/>
- Exact reproductions of rare historic patterns
- Men's, women's, and children's
- Original instructions included (great history lesson!)

Mrs. Depew Vintage

- <https://mrsdepew.com>
- Antique American magazine patterns
- Excellent for research & inspiration
- More advanced, but fascinating

Folkwear Vintage Patterns

- <https://www.folkwear.com>
- Some styles adaptable for Western Heritage

- Fabric suggestions helpful (dates harder to sort)

Timeless Stitches

- <https://tstitches.com/>
- Men's, women's and children's ready-made clothing.
- Period patterns (civilian and military), accessories, etc. 1860 – 1865

Fig Leaf Patterns

- <https://www.figleafpatterns.com/index.html>
- 17th – 21st Century Patterns
- Men's, women's, and children's clothing

Buckaroo Bobbins

- <https://www.buckarobobbins.com>
- Western-specific vintage-style patterns
- Especially useful for shirts -1910)s & frontier styles



Section 5: Sewing Equipment & Tools of the 19th Century

Clothing was made using a combination of **hand tools and emerging machine technology**. The availability of sewing equipment shaped how garments were constructed, repaired, and reused—especially for working families and frontier households.

Sewing Machines (Timeline Overview)

- **1830s:** Early sewing machines were hand-powered and experimental – chainstitch.
- **1833:** American inventor and mechanic, Walter Hunt developed first hand-cranked lockstitch machine using 2 threads. **Other Inventions:** Safety pin (1849), paper shirt collar (1854), repeating rifle (1849-1849), rope-making machine, flax spinner, etc.
- **1851:** Foot-treadle sewing machines became commercially available, allowing hands-free operation
- **Late 1800s:** Sewing machines became common household tools

- **By 1889:** Early electric sewing machines appeared, though treadle machines remained widespread

Sewing machines increased speed but did not replace hand sewing. Many garments were still **partially or fully hand-stitched**, especially for repairs and finishing.

Common Sewing Tools

Everyday sewing relied on simple, durable tools, often kept in a sewing box or basket:

- **Needles:** Factory-made and widely available after industrialization
- **Pins:** Metal straight pins used for fitting and construction
- **Thread:** Cotton thread mass-produced by the mid-1800s
- **Safety Pins:** Invented in the mid-1800s and used for fastening and repairs
- **Scissors & Shears:** Essential household tools, often shared
- **Measuring tools:** Tape, rulers, or marked cords
- **Sewing Kit:** Needles, thread, thimble, scissors/snips, pins, pincushion, beeswax,

These tools supported both **new garment construction and constant mending**.

Making Do & Repair

Clothing construction in this period emphasized:

- Repair over replacement
- Reuse of thread, buttons, and trim
- Adjusting garments as children grew or bodies changed
- Strengthening seams for hard wear

For many families, sewing equipment was not optional — it was essential.



Section 6: Fabrics, Dyes and Notions of the 19th Century

By the mid-1800s, **cotton dominated everyday clothing** because textile mills were increasingly mechanized and raw cotton was widely available. During the Industrial Revolution, the use of **waterpower and steam engines** allowed fabric mills—especially in **New England**—to produce cloth faster, more consistently, and at lower cost.

As factory-made cotton fabrics such as **calico, muslin, and flannel** became widely available through dry goods stores and mail order, families no longer needed to rely solely on **homespun cloth**. While some home production continued, especially in rural areas, purchased fabric became more affordable and common for everyday clothing between **1830–1907**.

Most Common American Fabrics (1830–1907):

- **Cotton** – calico, muslin, flannel, chintz
- **Wool** – broadcloth, serge, flannel
- **Linen/Flax** – shirts, undergarments, workwear
- **Silk** – limited, more available late 1800s
- **Specialty** – cotton duck, corduroy, madras

Dyes & Color in 19th-Century Clothing (1830–1907)

Before the mid-1800s, most fabric colors came from natural dyes made from plants, insects, and minerals. Common natural dyes included indigo for blues, madder root for reds and rust tones, walnut hulls for browns, and logwood for purples, grays, and blacks. Yellows were often produced from plants such as onion skins, weld, and goldenrod. These dyes created colors that were typically muted, earthy, or dusty, rather than bright.

In 1856, the invention of the first synthetic dye (*mauveine*) marked a turning point. By the 1860s–1870s, chemically dyed fabrics became more widely available through textile mills and dry goods stores. While natural dyes continued to be used—especially in rural areas—synthetic dyes expanded color choices, leading to the popularity of shades such as mauve, burgundy, deep blues, and greens later in the century. Most everyday clothing, however, remained practical in color due to wear, washing, and cost.

Most frontier clothing colors came from plants and insects! Fabrics were dyed with things like indigo (blue), madder root (red), walnut shells (brown), and onion skins (yellow), which is why historic clothing colors look softer than modern ones. ** *Cochineal scale insect* (lives on prickly pear cactus) produces red colorations.

Notions in 19th-Century Clothing (1830–1907)

Notions are the small items used to fasten, finish, or decorate clothing. On the frontier notions were functional, durable, and widely available through dry goods stores and mail-order catalogs.

Common Notions of the Time

- Buttons: shell, bone, horn, wood, glass, metal (brass, pewter, iron)
- Hooks & Eyes: very common for bodices, skirts, and waistbands
- Thread: cotton thread was mass-produced by the mid-1800s
- Tapes & Twill Tape: used for waistbands, ties, and reinforcement
- Lace & Trim: cotton lace and narrow trims for dresses and undergarments
- Pins & Needles: factory-made and widely available after industrialization

In the 1800s, notions were valuable items, not disposable. Buttons, hooks, eyes, lace, and trim were often removed from worn-out clothing and reused on new garments. Many families kept a button tin or sewing box where saved notions were stored for future repairs or projects. Recycling notions saved money and ensured nothing useful was wasted.

Fabric and Color Resources:

- *English Women's Clothing in the 19th Century*, by Cecil Willett Cunnington – decade-by-decade color notes (mostly for silks/wools).
- Fashion-magazine articles (not just fashion plates).
- [Manners Culture and Dress](#) – chapters on dress colors and color harmony.
- Original garments: [The Met](#)
- 19th-century **swatch books** (e.g., from The Met & Reproduction Fabrics).



Section 7: Fabric & Trim Suppliers (Budget-Friendly)

- Renaissance Fabrics – <https://renaissancefabrics.com>

- Cotton, wool, linen
- Buttons, hooks & eyes, trims
- Reasonable prices
- **Reproduction Fabrics** – <https://www.reproductionfabrics.com>
 - Fabric by era and color
 - Good pricing
 - Easy for youth to browse



Section 8: Foundation Garments & Construction

- V&A Museum: Corsets, crinolines, bustles <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/corsets-crinolines-and-bustles-fashionable-victorian-underwear>. Great visuals for understanding *why* clothes looked the way they did.
- See resources in section on Patterns & Pattern Resources



Section 9: Museums & Image Research

- **Smithsonian** – <https://www.si.edu/>
- **Smithsonian Learning Lab** - <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/the-relationship-of-fashion-through-time/uenWaKXeaCUFirTp>
- **Vintage Fashion Guild** - <https://vintagefashionguild.org/resources/fashion-history/>
- **Sprigged & Spotted** - <https://spriggedandspotted.com/mid-19th-century-womens-fabrics/>
- **Claremont Colleges Digital Library** - <https://ccdlib.claremont.edu/digital/collection/fpc>
- **National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum – Traveling Trunks** - <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/learn/school-programs-tours/traveling-trunks/>

- [Cowboy Trunk: The American Cowboy, Teachers Lesson Plans, Grades 3-5](#)
- [Native American Trunk, Teachers Lesson plans, Grades 3-5](#)
- Contact the Museum’s Education Department for more information at (405) 478-2250.



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