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## Article Title: How Fashionable Were Women Settlers in Custer County, Nebraska?: Maternity Wear on the Nebraska Frontier, 1886-1892

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Article Summary: Solomon Butcher's Custer County photographs include views of women settlers, even rare images of pregnant women. All the pioneer women pictured clearly made an effort to maintain a fashionable appearance.

### Cataloging Information:

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## How Fashionable were Women Settlers in Custer County, Nebraska?

# Maternity Wear

## on the Nebraska Frontier, 1886–1892

By Jane A. Funderburk

Sex, hygiene, and pregnancy were considered immodest topics in nineteenth-century Victorian homes. Women did not freely discuss or write about them.<sup>1</sup> On the Nebraska Plains, Dr. Cass Barnes, an early country doctor, agreed with that Victorian attitude when he wrote, "The sacred privacy of maternity in those crowded sod houses must not be opened to the vulgar gaze of the public."<sup>2</sup> Public display of the pregnant figure was considered inappropriate during the nineteenth century, which partially explains the lack of painted portraits, fashion plates, and photographs showing early maternity wear. This Victorian attitude has limited access to information about what women wore while pregnant. In addition, few fully documented extant maternity garments survive for examination.

Rare views of pregnant women settlers appear in a unique Nebraska photograph collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS). These photographs were taken by Solomon D. Butcher as he traveled the countryside in Custer County, Nebraska, between 1886 and 1892. Butcher's photographs are historical documents that captured people as they lived during an important era on the Nebraska Plains. He photographed not only the people, but also sweeping views of their new homes, their surroundings, and some of their most prized possessions.

Butcher's photographs have been the focus of other researchers who have

studied a variety of aspects of the Nebraska settlers and the sod house frontier. This study focuses on the dress of settlers on the Plains and particularly on the dress of women who appear to be in the later months of pregnancy. The photographs were examined to find what types of garments were customarily worn by pregnant women. The second object was to establish whether the pregnant women wore garments that followed the stylish norms of the period. The Butcher photographs offer a unique opportunity to view a large number of women settlers in a limited geographic area and within a limited time period. They pro-

vide costume historians with an image frozen in time that shows what people actually wore, not just what the fashion magazines and newspapers advocated.

Solomon D. Butcher, who settled in Nebraska in 1882, was a man with a vision of history. He had learned photography and soon realized the historic significance of the settlement of the sod house frontier. His photography provided the means to capture the magnificent adventure of settling the vast open plains of Nebraska. With this in mind, he enthusiastically began an ambitious venture to create a pictorial history of Custer County, Nebraska.<sup>3</sup>



Plate 1. Identification: **The Holmes family, east Custer County, Nebraska, 1886.**  
RG2608.PH-1020

Research: **The Holmes name and similar spellings were researched but no information was found about the family photographed.**

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## Maternity Wear on the Nebraska Frontier



Plate 2. Identification: **The Morrison Gandy family, west of Broken Bow, Custer County, Nebraska, 1886.** RG2608.PH-1031

Custer County is located in central Nebraska and contains about 2,500 square miles with several small towns, but the majority of the county is farm and ranch country. The county was organized in 1877 and named for George Armstrong Custer, killed at the Little Bighorn a year earlier. Between 1886 and 1892 Butcher took 1,535 photographs of the county's settlers and wrote sketches of their pioneering experiences for his planned historical book.<sup>4</sup>

Butcher traveled by wagon, carrying his photographic equipment over dirt roads and sandy trails to reach families he wanted to photograph. Along the way he accepted food and lodging for himself and his horses in exchange for taking photographs. Consequently, his photograph collection represents a cross section of the population of Custer County during the late nineteenth century. He had to quit taking photographs

in 1892 due to financial problems caused by local drought and economic depression. It was not until almost ten years later, in 1901, that an interested local rancher funded the printing of his book, *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska*.<sup>5</sup>

Butcher's original ledgers and family histories were lost in an 1899 fire. Fortunately the glass plate negatives were undamaged. Butcher himself added most of the identifying notations to the photographs either before his book was published or after his photograph collection was purchased by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1913. Although there are some discrepancies, making it difficult to identify suspected pregnancies, the location, Custer County, Nebraska, and the time period, 1886–92, are undisputed.

All of the original Butcher photographs, reproduced from the glass plate

Research: No records were found for Morrison Gandy. The 1885 Census listed John S. Gandy, age twenty-six, his wife, C. Caty Gandy, age twenty, and their daughter, Estella, three years old. The next entry in the census listed Cyrus and Jennie Morrison, who are also believed to be in the photograph. The Morrisons are perhaps Caty's parents because family members or neighbors are frequently listed sequentially in the census as the census taker would travel door to door. The 1886 Gazetteer lists Jno. S. Gandy as a farmer in Custer County, so John Gandy lived in Custer County in 1886 when the photograph was purportedly taken. The records of Custer County cemeteries listed the death of Bessie S. Gandy, the daughter of J. S. and K. C. Gandy, as Feb. 12, 1887, age two months and one day. These facts would support the theory that Caty was pregnant with Bessie when the photograph was taken in 1886.

*1885 State Census of Nebraska, Custer County, Broken Bow township, enumeration district 175, sheet 8, National Archives Microfilm Publication 352 (Washington, n.p., 1961), microfilm at NSHS; Nebraska State Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1886–1887 [Lincoln, Nebr.]: J. M. Wolfe and Co., [1887], 2:750; Carl Smith and Phillip K. Gardner, comps., Custer County Cemeteries, 5 vols., mimeographed, n.p., n.d., 3:18.*

negatives, were examined with the use of magnification to select images for this study. It was decided to look for women in the latter months of pregnancy, when their choice of clothing would be most influenced by their changing shape. Other women in the photographs may have been pregnant, but could not be identified as such because they hid their condition by holding hats, pets, or children or by standing behind other people or objects. This behavior could be expected because of the Victorian standards of the era, and may explain why the pregnant woman in Plate 4 is standing in the doorway, not with the family in front of the sod house.

After the initial selection, two clothing and textile professionals examined the photographs independently to help select the examples of pregnant women. To further confirm that the women were pregnant, genealogical information was

Research: The 1885 census lists Henry J. and Wilhemina Reeder with two children, Fannie (Frances), twenty-five years old, and Elmoñ, twenty-two years old, living in Custer County. According to her obituary, Frances Reeder married Marshall S. Eddy on November 10, 1886. A son, Carl Eddy, was born September 9, 1887, and died nine months later on June 25, 1888. The two young men in the photograph with Wilhemina and her daughter, Frances Eddy, appear to be Frances's husband, Marshall Eddy, and her brother, Elmon. To coincide with Frances's pregnancy the photograph would have been taken in the summer of 1887 instead of 1886, as dated by Butcher.

*1885 Census*, Custer County, Kilfoil Township, enumeration district 174, sheet 3; *Custer County (Nebraska) Chief*, Dec. 14, 1939, typescript 322 (Broken Bow, Nebr.: Custer County Genealogical Society, n.d.) n.p.; *ibid.*, Aug. 6, 1936, n.p.



Plate 3. Identification: **The Reeder Family, Merna, Nebraska, 1886.** RG2608.PH-1052



Plate 4. Unidentified family, east Custer County, Nebraska, 1888. RG2608.PH-1352

Research: None could be conducted.

## Maternity Wear on the Nebraska Frontier



Plate 5. Unidentified family, east Custer County, Nebraska, 1888. RG2608.PH-1432  
Research: None could be conducted.



Plate 6. Unidentified family, northwest Custer County, Nebraska, 1890 or 1891.  
RG2608.PH-1598

Research: None could be conducted.

compiled when possible for all family names identified on the selected photographs. The genealogical search included census records, business directories, cemetery records, and local and family histories. This information served to corroborate or refute the suspected pregnancy of the subjects. Following this study several photographs were removed from the selection.

Because Butcher did not have his original records when he identified the photographs, some of the names and dates were not accurate. The census records and other documents were examined to: (1) verify the spelling of the first and last name; (2) provide additional evidence that the family lived in the area at the date on the photograph; (3) provide additional evidence that a child was born following the photograph; (4) provide evidence through the number, sex, and ages of the children shown in the photograph about which child was born next; and (5) verify that the child's birthdate coordinated with the season the photograph was taken.

The final selection resulted in a sample of ten photographs for which five of the perceived pregnancies were confirmed by genealogical research. The other five photographs either had no identifying name or the given name could not be traced. Although the sample is small, it provides costume historians with important information about the garments that were worn during pregnancy on the Nebraska frontier between 1886 and 1892.

Women composed a major portion of the frontier population in Nebraska. Some women settlers felt a deep sense of dislocation after leaving their familiar homes and tasks. Others derived pleasure and a sense of accomplishment from the adventure. Women brought west with them values of domesticity and a will to "civilize" the untamed country. These women made major economic contributions to the frontier society by caring for the houses, the fields, the gardens, the livestock, and the children.<sup>6</sup>

## Nebraska History – Summer 2000

Many of the women settlers faced living for several years in a sod house or dugout. Sod houses were constructed of blocks of readily available native sod and were economical and practical to build in an area with few trees. Dugouts were carved into the side of a hill so only the front needed to be built of sod. Sod houses varied in size and shape according to the builders' skills, needs, financial resources, and determination. The thick walls provided natural insulation, making the houses warm in the winter and cool in the summer.<sup>7</sup>

Housekeeping was difficult for homemakers who now lived in a home with dirt walls, dirt floors, and often a dirt roof. These compact homes had poor interior light, poor ventilation, and the roofs usually leaked. The walls provided a home for the soil's natural inhabitants, fleas, bedbugs, snakes, and mice. Sod houses or dugouts were usually viewed as temporary or transitional dwellings until a wood frame house could be built. Living in a sod house was an adventure for many families, though not one most settlers wanted to prolong.<sup>8</sup>

Frontier living also presented special problems with regard to health. Contagious diseases and epidemics were widespread. The shared drinking cup, the open dug well, the outdoor toilet, or no toilet at all, created health problems that were further fostered by the sod house's lack of ventilation and crowded quarters. Young children were especially vulnerable to the many illnesses and hardships shared with their families. This fact was confirmed when several of the children in this study were found to have died young and were identified by their burial records.<sup>9</sup>

The clothing worn by Custer County residents, and most of the Nebraska settlers, did not have to undergo the wear and tear of a long overland journey like that of earlier emigrants to Oregon and California. The trek to Nebraska was shorter and they could carry more supplies. Part of the journey could be made by rail. Many women planned ahead and brought supplies of clothing to last

the first few years. It is not surprising that their clothing reflected their learned "eastern" values of style and proper dress.<sup>10</sup>

The clothing women wore for the photographs provides important insights into the way people of the past lived and thought. Some historians have concluded that women settlers on the Great Plains had special clothing considerations because of the harsh environment and the women's limited resources.<sup>11</sup> Nebraska historian Everett Dick quoted one pioneer as commenting, "After we had been here a short time we carried our whole wardrobe on our backs and our feet stuck out." The same person noted that poverty was a badge of honor which decorated all.<sup>12</sup>

Some settlers did experience hard times and had limited funds, but the majority of people in the Butcher photographs did not wear torn or tattered clothing. It was obvious that they had dressed in their best for this occasion. Butcher did not carry clothing with him to be used for his photographs because the same garments did not appear repeatedly. Many of the women in the photographs had curled their hair and wore jewelry or decorative trim on their garments. Most of the men appeared clean shaven. According to Butcher historian John Carter, on at least one occasion a person was not allowed by the family to appear in a photograph because of the person's lack of suitable clothing.<sup>13</sup>

By 1882 Custer County had a newspaper, *The Custer County Republican*, which probably included items of fashion news. The area's close proximity to railroads was another important factor in the ability of Custer County settlers to be fashionable. The Union Pacific Railroad was within a few days travel. Of even greater importance, the Burlington and Missouri Railroad traversed Custer County by 1886, the year this study began. Settlers could receive mail, newspapers, fashion magazines, fabric, and clothing supplies in the time required for a train to travel between two loca-

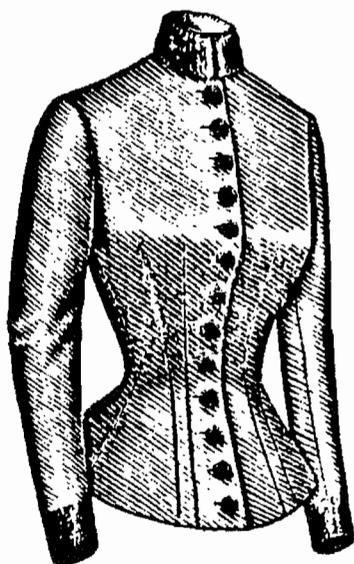
tions. Local towns had stores that carried an assortment of dry goods and household items.

Several historians have concluded that frontier wear was plain, with simplified styles and few embellishments. Joyce Larson noted that frontier wear in Dakota Territory consisted of plain dresses or skirts and bodices in which few details or applied designs were displayed. Barbara Fargo, Larson, and Deanna Love all concluded that pioneer women wore simpler and less stylish clothing because they lacked the time, energy, and funds to buy, make, or care for the more elaborate and fashionable dresses of the period.<sup>14</sup>

When trying to identify a "typical" pioneer dress, the same costume historians could not single out one specific style. According to Elaine Lumbrá, "Midwestern American costume during 1870–1900 could not be determined to be regional."<sup>15</sup> Not only was there no specific pioneer style, but researchers found that there was little time lag in the fashions reaching other frontier areas.<sup>16</sup> Lenae Harless researched Nebraska fashions between 1880 and 1890 to find how long it took for clothing style elements that appeared in a national fashion magazine to appear in Nebraska. Harless tracked twelve different style elements and found that eight had a time lag of one year and the other third, which included collars, colors, fabrics, and length, appeared in Nebraska almost immediately.<sup>17</sup> Nebraskans of the late nineteenth century could be expected to keep up with the latest fashions found in the East.

Indeed, Custer County women appear to have stayed in style as closely as their circumstances and financial resources would allow. Sally Helvenston, who studied Kansas pioneer dress, determined that the desire for physical comfort and functional mobility in clothing was not as important as maintaining "stylish" feminine attire.<sup>18</sup> Women on the frontier, in fact, still felt bound by tradition to the feminine values they had learned before moving

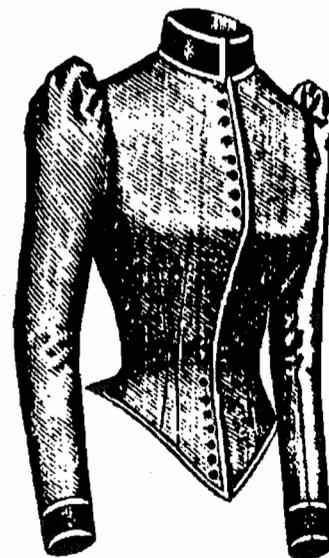
## Maternity Wear on the Nebraska Frontier



**"Ladies Basque,"** *Metropolitan Fashion: Autumn and Winter Catalog, 1890–1891* (New York: Butterick Pub. Co. Ltd., 1890), 18.



**"Ladies Skirt with Polonaise Overskirt,"** *Metropolitan Fashion: Spring and Summer Catalog, 1889* (New York: Butterick Pub. Co. Ltd., 1889), 76.



**"Ladies Basque" (with enlarged sleeve caps),** *Metropolitan Fashion: Autumn and Winter Catalog, 1890–1891* (New York: Butterick Pub. Co. Ltd., 1890), 18.

west.<sup>19</sup> Custer County research supports Helvenston's conclusion that fashion, rather than being of lesser significance on the frontier, actually played an important social role.<sup>20</sup>

Determining what clothing styles the pregnant women in Butcher's photographs would be expected to wear is difficult. The prevailing styles for 1880s women included a narrow-waisted bodice and a multilayered skirt with a bustle. Most dresses had closely fitted, boned basque bodices with a high neckline and snug-fitting sleeves. Skirts had bustles that held them out in back and bulky layers of fabric looped to form a polonaise. These garments usually included a combination of colors and textures, as well as abundant trimming. Some active women began to select simpler tailored suits and skirts to wear for special activities outside of their homes and during their participation in sports.

During the early 1890s the narrow, corseted waist continued to be popular, but women no longer wore bustles. The silhouette began to change to include sleeves with large upper caps, called leg-o-mutton sleeves, and bell-shaped,

flared skirts. Women continued to wear tailored garments for some activities. For day wear and employment as teachers, secretaries, and clerks, some women began wearing shirtwaists (blouses) with sturdy, tailored skirts.

But the question remains, what would the pregnant woman wear? Maternity wear, that is clothing designed specifically for the pregnant figure, is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Earlier there are only a few sketchy references to garments worn during pregnancy. The consensus is that prior to the twentieth century, fashionable clothing in general use was simply modified to accommodate the pregnant woman's increasing girth. These adjustments included extra side lacings, extra fabric that could be let out at strategic seams, and belts that could be released either in the front or back. Women also wore aprons, shawls, mantles, and long scarves to cover their changing shape.<sup>21</sup>

Trousseau's in the late nineteenth century frequently included versatile garments that could be left unbelted or let out easily to accommodate a pregnant figure. This approach made good

sense in the 1890s when narrow, corseted waists were popular and clothing alterations were imperative early in pregnancy. Camouflaging the pregnant figure was common advice for young women "to avoid rather than court observation."<sup>22</sup> Appropriate yet unobtrusive dress was repeatedly suggested.

Two of the pregnant women in the sample, shown in Plates 5 and 9, wore fashionable dresses with fitted bodices and draped overskirts with back fullness. These women are probably wearing one of their best dresses, if not their best. In Plate 9, however, Sarah Shettron wears a white apron that covers any adjustments she may have made to her garments in front. The seated woman in Plate 5 appears very uncomfortable because the fitted bodice does not accommodate her enlarged abdomen. Notice the elaborate trim on the edges of the layers of skirt. Apparently she decided to wear one of her best dresses for the photograph even though it caused her some discomfort. Her hair appears to have been styled in individual curls, which indicates she had taken time to prepare for the photograph and select

her attire. The women who do not appear to be pregnant in Plates 2, 3, 4, 8, and 10 wear similar stylish dresses with tight-waisted, fitted bodices and full skirts. Note the fashionable dress worn by Jennie Morrison in Plate 2 with its tight waist, draped skirt, and stylish jewelry.

The woman standing in the sod house doorway in Plate 4 also wears a dress with a fitted waist and high neck, but with a simple pleated skirt for ease. Unlike the fashionable dresses in Plates 5 and 9 this dress is plain. There is no indication why this woman was relegated to stay in the house and not out front with the family. It is possible that social convention limited her to being in the background, or she may not have been a family member. What a contrast to the well-dressed young girl in the foreground of the same photograph holding a hat and fan. The lack of an identifying name limited research on this family. The dress in Plate 4 could be considered an example of the implied, less elaborate styles that Lambert, Love, Larson, and Fargo suggested were worn on the frontier.<sup>23</sup> The women in Plates 5 and 6 who did not appear pregnant also wear this simplified style of garment, though such garments were not prevalent in the photographs. Women may have had this type of dress in their wardrobes, but did not choose to wear it for the photographs.

The pregnant woman in Plate 1 is dressed in a separate top and skirt. This sack top is a unique, knee-length garment that buttons down the front and is fitted through the shoulders and sleeves. The sack top extends in front in an apron-like lower edge and is trimmed with a bias edging. The woman wears a separate skirt that does not match the top, and petticoats that extend below the skirt. Either she is not in fashion or very ahead of her time because separates became worn as maternity wear only after the turn of the century.<sup>24</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s some well-dressed women started wearing tea jackets and tea gowns when “at home” and while

pregnant. These were loose-fitting but elaborate garments made of rich fabrics and dripping with fussy lace trims that could camouflage spreading hips and a growing abdomen.<sup>25</sup> No tea jackets or tea gowns were observed in the Butcher collection.



**"Ladies Mother Hubbard Wrapper,"**  
*Metropolitan Fashion: Spring and Summer Catalog, 1889* (New York: Butterick Pub. Co. Ltd., 1889), 84.

The fussy tea gowns and tea jackets were worn by wealthier women who had time to enjoy their finery. The more practical solution for women who had many duties and limited funds was a belted wrapper. These were garments loose through the waist and flowing down to a full hem. One popular type

of wrapper was called a “Mother Hubbard.” These are similar to many nightgown and robe styles worn today. The Mother Hubbard dress or wrapper had a shoulder yoke attached by gathers or pleats to a floor-length skirt. Six of the ten women in the sample wore Mother Hubbards (see Plates 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 10). In most of these photographs, the women who appeared pregnant wore their Mother Hubbards without belts. The exceptions were Caty Gandy in Plate 2, who has belted her Mother Hubbard loosely just below the bustline. Another exception is Frances Reeder Eddy in Plate 3, who has an apron tied around her Mother Hubbard above the waistline. It is not surprising to find a large number of women wearing Mother Hubbards during pregnancy. Helvenston’s research of pioneer women’s diaries and letters revealed that several women wrote about wearing Mother Hubbard dresses during the latter months of pregnancy.<sup>26</sup>

From her sources about the Kansas frontier, Helvenston concluded that the loose-fitting Mother Hubbard was the only garment that showed any concession to comfort. For actual work or “at home” loungewear, nineteenth-century Louisiana women were also found to have worn loose gowns that could be belted or unbelted to look like a regular frock and yet would preserve the fashionable bodice, skirt, and sleeve shapes.<sup>27</sup>

The Mother Hubbards worn in Nebraska also followed the popular sleeve styles of the period. Edith Wilcher, who can be seen in Plate 7, was photographed in 1892 and the image illustrates the changing sleeve styles. Her Mother Hubbard has the enlarged sleeve caps that did not become popular until the 1890s. This sleeve style required a substantial amount of fabric in contrast to the earlier fitted sleeve. Use of the enlarged sleeve caps leads to the conclusion that her dress was constructed shortly before the photograph was taken and represented an effort to follow the fashionable styles of the day.

The Mother Hubbard can be seen

## Maternity Wear on the Nebraska Frontier



Plate 7. Identification: The J. M. Wilcher family, southwest Custer County, Nebraska, 1892. RG2608.PH-1662

Research: The 1886 Gazetteer listed J. M. Wilcher as a farmer in Custer County. The 1900 Census revealed James M. and Edith Wilcher had four children. The two sons were born in April 1891 and April 1894, respectively. Their daughter, Laverna, was born August 18, 1892, at Arnold, Nebraska. Edith's oldest son, which she may have her arm around, would have been about fifteen months old when the photograph was taken in 1892. If the woman who appears pregnant is Edith Wilcher, the historical information supports the contention that she was pregnant with Laverna at the time of the photograph. The identification of the woman seated on the ground or the other children, and their relationship to James Wilcher or his wife, is unknown.

*State Gazetteer, 1886-87, 1:757; Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Nebraska Population Schedule, Custer County, Arnold Township, enumeration district 59, Sheet 4, Line 17, microfilm at NSHS; Custer County Chief, Nov. 30, 1944.*



Plate 8. Unidentified family, northwest Custer County, Nebraska, 1889 or 1890. RG2608.PH-2002  
Research: None could be conducted.

being worn by a number of women throughout Butcher's photographs of Custer County families. A few of the dresses were worn loose without belts, although most were belted to create the desired slender waist. This garment was also worn by younger girls because it allowed for growth, and by older women who desired comfort and lacked a narrow waist. Two of the women on the far left in Plate 10 are wearing Mother Hubbard dresses, however, both garments are belted. Consequently, we know that the Mother Hubbard was not worn strictly as maternity wear, but was generally worn belted if the woman's figure would allow it. In contrast to the women who appeared pregnant in the ten photographs, all of the other women

wore tightly fitted waists or belted waistlines. Because the fashion dictates of this period called for women to appear with a slender waist, unbelted dresses were not deemed desirable or fashionable.<sup>28</sup>

The Mother Hubbard is generally called a house dress or work dress in most historic costume sources and it has been considered as less than fashionable. Although it is not a designer garment that would be pictured in fashion plates, magazines, or newspapers, the Mother Hubbard appears to have become a universal garment by the 1880s. Ready-made wrappers and commercial, full-sized paper patterns for Mother Hubbards were available in general stores, dry goods stores, and by mail from companies such as the

Butterick Pattern Company. By the 1890s these garments could be purchased by mail order for a reasonable sum from many popular department stores on the East Coast or in Chicago.<sup>29</sup>

Were the pregnant women in Butcher's photographs wearing fashionable dresses or simply the only garments that would fit? The Mother Hubbard dress was a popular, if not a high fashion, garment. Photographs of women wearing Mother Hubbards taken in nine separate states have been found, attesting to its general acceptance and popularity.<sup>30</sup> "They [Mother Hubbards] were possibly not worn because they were more comfortable and healthy," Gerilyn Tandburg concluded, "but because they were 'the rage.'"<sup>31</sup> Nebraska



Plate 9. Identification: **The Chevron family, West Union, Custer County, Nebraska, 1886.**  
RG2608.PH-2746

Research: **The spelling Sheltron, not Chevron, was found in Custer County records at the Custer County Historical Society. The 1885 Census revealed that William and Sarah Shefren, another spelling for the same family, lived in Custer County with three daughters ages ten, eight, two-year-old Stella, and a four-year-old son. In the 1885 Census William was listed as Milton, but all other references call the father William and the son Milton. The 1900 Census reported that Stella, now twelve, was still at home and two additional daughters had been born, Lucie in January 1888 and Pearl in September 1889. Sarah Sheltron's obituary reported that she had given birth to eight children, but only six survived, which was information also given in the 1900 census. If Sarah Sheltron was pregnant at the time of this photograph, then the child either died soon after birth and was not reported in the 1900 Census, or Butcher incorrectly dated the photograph as 1886 when it was actually taken in the fall of 1887, before Lucie was born.**

Mary Landkamer, curator, Custer County Historical and Genealogical Society, Broken Bow, Nebraska, to author, Dec. 18, 1985; *1885 Census*, Custer County, Lillian Township, enumeration district 178, sheet 8; personal visit, Broken Bow, Nebraska, Dec. 16, 1985; *1900 Census*, Custer County, Lillian Township, enumeration district 70, sheet 5; *Sargent (Nebraska) Leader*, May 9, 1912, typescript, Custer County Historical and Genealogical Society, 3:1.

## Maternity Wear on the Nebraska Frontier



Plate 10. Identification: **The Caywood family, Broken Bow, Custer County, Nebraska, 1889.** RG2608.PH-3232

settlers were keeping up with “the rage” when they made or purchased Mother Hubbards. The pregnant women in the sample were aware of the garment’s popularity. The main concession most of them made was to wear their dresses unbelted. One woman wore the simplified style of dress often linked to many pioneer woman images, but this was not the norm. Another wore a combination of what she had on hand. Two pregnant women continued to wear stylish garments of the period with fitted waists and draped skirts, despite the probable discomfort they caused. Most of the women wore their hair in the period style, parted in the center and pulled back. All of the women, both those who appeared pregnant and those who did not, wore lace scarves at the neck, jewelry, or trim on their dresses. All of these

garments attest to the fashion consciousness of Nebraska women. They may not have achieved the high-fashion-plate styles of wealthy urban women, but the Nebraska women’s effort to be fashionable was important to them.

By examining the women in the Butcher Photograph Collection, it is possible to glimpse what women settlers in Custer County, Nebraska, chose to wear between 1886 and 1892. By looking specifically at pregnant women, the choices become even more apparent. The research strongly supports the theory that women settlers in Custer County, Nebraska, including pregnant women, remained interested in maintaining their fashionable appearance and followed the fashion trends of the era.

Research: **The 1900 Census** reported that **James S. and Annie A. Caywood**, who lived in Custer County, had five children. Sons were born in 1877 and 1886. Daughters were born in 1879, 1880, and 1883. **Records of the Broken Bow Cemetery** reported two additional daughters, **Addie G.**, who died July 12, 1894, when she was five years and ten months old and **Cora Bell**, who died September 17, 1891, when she was six months and twenty-nine days old. This would mean **Addie** was born in September 1888 and **Cora Bell** in February 1891. In the family grouping to the right, the sex and ages of the children correspond with the children of **Annie Caywood**. If the woman who appears to be pregnant in the photograph is **Annie Caywood**, she was probably pregnant at the time with **Addie**, who died before the 1900 Census. There is no information about the women and children seated and standing to the left.

*1900 Census*, Custer County, Broken Bow Township, enumeration district 62, sheet 14; *Smith and Gardner, Custer County Cemeteries*, 2:38.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 39; Linda Baugarten, "Dressing for Pregnancy: A Maternity Gown of 1780–1795," *Dress* 23 (1996): 16; Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Cass Barnes, *The Sod House* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1930), 249.

<sup>3</sup> John E. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Butcher also took photographs in neighboring areas between 1900 and 1910. These photographs were also examined, but the scope of this article is limited to those taken between 1886 and 1892. For further information see Jane A. Uhrig, "Maternity Dress of Nebraska Women, 1886–1910" (M.S. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher*, 5–6; Solomon D. Butcher, *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska*, including *Sod Houses of the Great American Plains* (1901; reprint, with an introduction by Harry E. Chrisman, Broken Bow, Nebr.: Purcells, 1976), vi–viii.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 53; Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 47, 150; Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 39, 56–57; Gene Patterson-Black and Sheryll Patterson-Black, *Western Women in History and Literature* (Crawford, Nebr.: Cottonwood Press, 1978), 22, 26.

<sup>7</sup> For a good description of the construction techniques used for sod houses and dugouts see Roger L. Welsch, *Sod Walls: The Story of the Nebraska Sod House* (Broken Bow, Nebr.: Purcells, 1968), 28–29; Everett Dick, *The Sod House Frontier, 1854–1890* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Johnsen Pub. Co., 1954), 110; and Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Angel Kwolek-Follard, "Discoveries in the Meaning of Domesticity: Middle-class Women and Cultural Changes in the United States, 1870–1900" (M.S. thesis, Kansas State University, 1982); James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 205; Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 31–33; Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairies and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 87–88.

<sup>9</sup> Barnes, *The Sod House*, 245; Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 52; Deanna Alice Love, "Dresses of the American Woman Pioneer in the Westward Movement from 1836 to 1889" (M.S. thesis, University of Maryland, 1969), 154; Barbara Fargo, "Clothing of the Kansas Women 1854–1870" (M.S. thesis, Kansas State University, 1969), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Kaiser, *Social Psychology of Clothing* (New York: MacMillan, 1997), 7–8; Dick, *The Sod House Frontier*, 270; Love, "Dresses of the American Woman," 155; Fargo, "Clothing of Kansas Women," 22; Joyce Marie Larson, "Clothing of Pioneer Women of Dakota Territory, 1861–1889" (M.S. thesis, South Dakota State University, 1978), 70.

<sup>12</sup> Dick, *The Sod House Frontier*, 267.

<sup>13</sup> John Carter, personal interviews by author, Lincoln, Nebraska, Nov. 5, 1984; Mar. 12, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Love, "Dresses of the American Woman," 150; Margaret Ann Lambert, "Women's Costume in Northwest America During the 1890s with a Time-Lag Study of Diffusion" (M.S. thesis, University of Washington, 1971), 228; Fargo, "Clothing of Kansas Women," 22, 40; Larson, "Clothing of Pioneer Women," 70, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Elaine L. Lumbra, "Every-day Women's Dresses Worn in the United States during the Period 1870–1900" (M.S. thesis, Indiana University, 1966), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Lambert, "Women's Costume," 231; Larson, "Clothing of Pioneer Women," 106; Love, "Dresses of the American Woman," 157; Lumbra, "Every-day Dresses," 54.

<sup>17</sup> Lanae Harless, "A Comparison of Style Elements in a National Fashion Magazine with Dress of Nebraska Women from 1880 to 1890" (M.S. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1983), 77.

<sup>18</sup> Sally I. Helvenston, "Feminine Response to a Frontier Environment as Reflected in the Clothing of Kansas Women, 1854–1895" (Ph.D. diss., Kansas State University, 1985), 183–84.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Uhrig, "Maternity Dress," 18; Baugarten, "Dressing for Pregnancy," 16; Margaret Conning, "Maternity Dress- c. 1845–55" *Costume* 14 (London: Journal of the Costume Society, 1980): 190; Naomi Tarrant, "A Maternity Dress of about 1845–1850" *Costume* 14 (1980): 117–20; Zuzanna Shoefield, "The Expectant Victorian" (Late nineteenth century maternity clothes) *Costume* 6 (1972): 36–44; Marion Phillips, *More Than Pregnant* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1955), 85–91.

<sup>22</sup> Schoefield, "Expectant Victorian," 36–42.

<sup>23</sup> Fargo, "Clothing of Kansas Women," 22; Lambert, "Women's Costume," 228; Larson, "Clothing of Pioneer Women," 70; Love, "Dresses of the American Woman," 155.

<sup>24</sup> Uhrig, "Maternity Dress," 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Helvenston, "Feminine Response," 131.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 184; Gerilyn G. Tandburg, "Toward Freedom in Dress for Nineteenth Century Women," *Dress* 11 (1985): 12.

<sup>28</sup> Helvenston, "Feminine Response," 129.

<sup>29</sup> Sally Helvenston, "The Much-Maligned Mother Hubbard: A Study in Unfashionable Dress," unpublished manuscript presented at American College Professors of Textiles and Clothing annual conference in 1989, revised July 2, 1999, 2–6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Tandburg, "Toward Freedom," 25.