

## Dress Detectives

Bonnie Smola and Donna Story are twins with unending curiosity and enthusiasm. Both are retired professors of nursing who now volunteer regularly at Montauk and apply their considerable energies to whatever needs to be done.

Story first got involved at the historic home when she created a booklet for children touring the site. Then she decided to photograph and research the artwork. Next she and her sister, working with museum guide Nadine West, turned to the extensive clothing collection. The clothes are too fragile to be displayed very often, and even with the best of conservation care, textiles will not last forever. But the sisters knew that the clothing represented a wealth of historical information, and needed to be described in detail and photographed.

According to Smola, "nothing is as dull as a dress lying on a bed," so soon her husband, John, was making 18 mannequins so the dresses could be photographed to their best advantage. "The dresses looked so different on a model," she said. "We would be thinking, Why would anyone use this combination of patterns and materials? Then we would put it on a model and it was just unbelievable."

Sometimes they had to puzzle out how to even put the outfit on the mannequin. One dress had seven different closures, each overlapping beyond the preceding closure to minimize bulk. The waists of several dresses measured a breathtaking 18 inches.

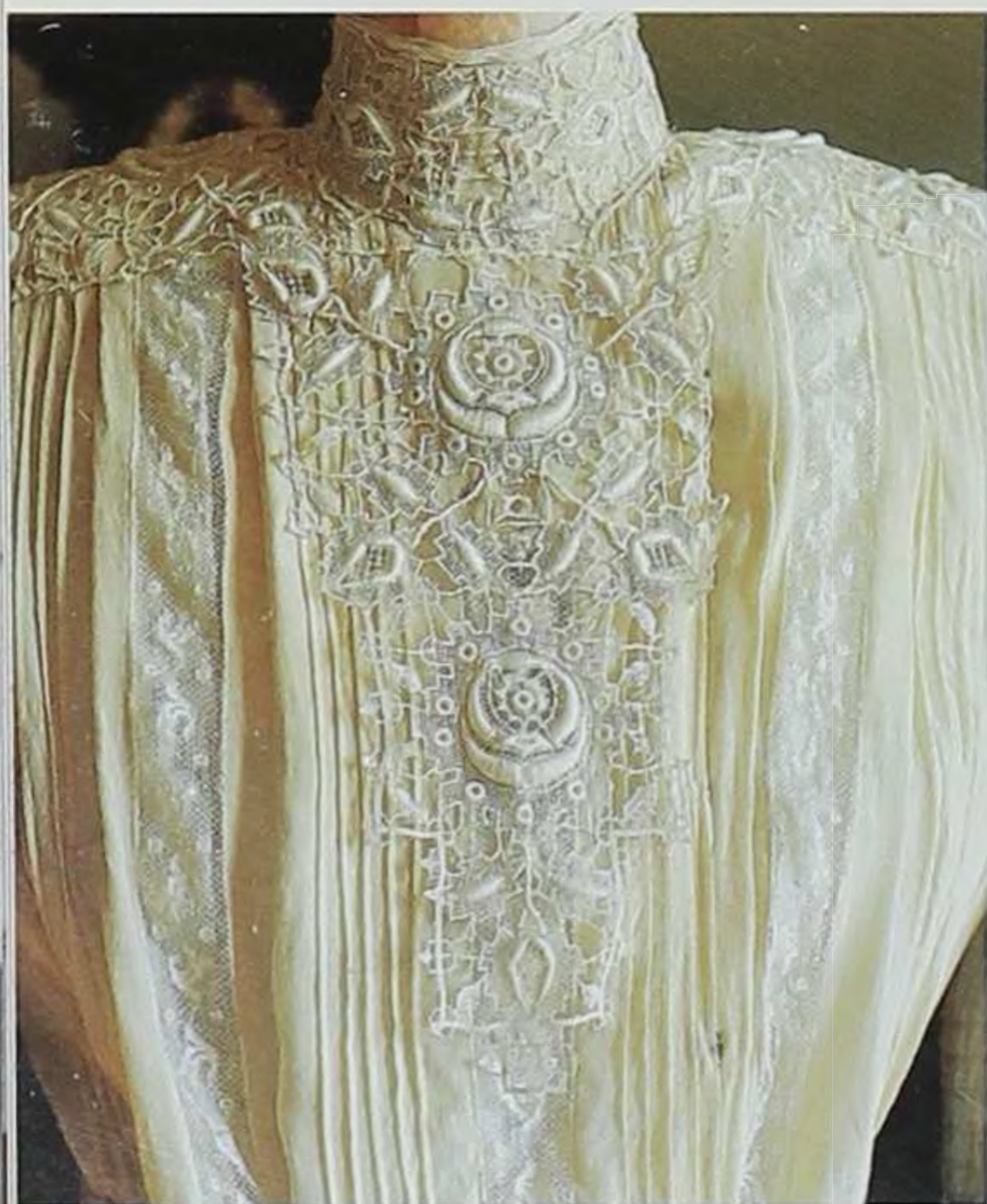
While the Larrabees surely purchased dresses in Chicago and eastern cities, perhaps even Europe, they probably also hired local dressmakers for some items. Many of the dresses are finished beautifully, with tiny, even stitches. Some have lace on the inner seams.

Smola and Story first learned sewing in home economics decades ago and later sewed for themselves and their children. But understanding Victorian and Edwardian clothing styles and construction required new knowledge



**Volunteers Donna Story and Bonnie Smola won a Loren Horton Community History Certificate of Recognition and the Governor's Volunteer Award for their work at Montauk. Here, they gently adjust a Larrabee dress on a mannequin.**

BOTH PHOTOS BY CHUCK GREENER



**This silk crepe de chine blouse closes in the front with hooks. There are six hooks on the neckband and fifteen long stays at the waist.**

and research. They started by checking out every pertinent book in the library and then turned to textile experts for more information and advice.

As they documented the clothing, they improved the storage conditions. They methodically recorded the colors, fabrics, design elements, and construction details of each item, counting the pleats and stays, revealing the hidden plackets and bustle pads. With the extensive records the sisters have created, historians will be able to survey and study the collection without excess handling of the delicate and fragile clothing.

They have photographed and described about 120 different outfits, everything from Mrs. Larrabee's opera cape with tiny turquoise beads to petticoats with ruffles, children's dresses to servants' uniforms, parasols to gloves and fans. "We photographed the hats and thought we were done," Story said. "Then we opened up another cupboard and here were 20 more." Shoes in the collection reflect stylishness and frugality, with an occasional patch added or heels and soles replaced.

Historical research is much like detective work, and Montauk volunteers Bonnie Smola and Donna Story are truly sleuths of style and fashion. —by Ginalie Swaim