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# ***unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* Features Wedding Attire Spanning 170 Years of St. Louis History**

**New Exhibition at the Missouri History Museum Opens June 17, 2007**

**ST. LOUIS, May 25, 2007**— Beyond the workmanship of silk and lace, a wedding gown tells the story of the woman who wore it and the time in which she lived. Featuring garments, photographs and other treasures from the **Missouri Historical Society's** extensive collections, *unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides*, a new exhibition at the **Missouri History Museum in Forest Park**, explores 19<sup>th</sup>-and 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion and matrimonial customs.

The exhibition features outstanding examples of wedding attire—ranging from homespun to haute couture—that bring to vivid life the deeply personal stories of the Missouri women who wore the cherished clothing on their march down the aisle. The

brides whose gowns and stories are highlighted in *unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* are from across the social strata—from the city’s most prominent families to our working class neighbors. Photographs, paintings, invitations, gifts, trousseau treasures and other items offer intimate portraits of local women.

*unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* opens to the public on **June 17, 2007** and runs through **September 9, 2007**.

While the **Missouri History Museum**’s overall collections consist of more than 125,000 artifacts documenting the everyday life of the diverse inhabitants of the St. Louis region, the approximately 15,000 clothing and textiles items in the collection are among the most popular. *unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* is a rare opportunity for the public to see some of the most outstanding examples of wedding attire—whether simple or elaborate, traditional or trendy—in the collection.

In addition to presenting the personal stories that bring history to life, the exhibition will explore the development of the **bridal industry in the St. Louis region** beginning with the early dressmakers and designers who brought the latest in wedding fashion to the Midwest.

Celebrating one of our society’s most enduring rituals, *unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* is guaranteed to get people talking about the meaning of weddings—past, present and future.

### **The Artifacts:**

The centerpiece of the exhibition will be bridal attire from the 1820s to the 1990s, introduces visitors to brides like **Abigail Prather Churchill**, who married Meriwether Lewis Clark, oldest son of the explorer William Clark in the 1830s, and **Johanna Friedewald Sturm**, who, in the 1940s, wore a gown made from parachute silk that her brother brought back from World War II.

The brides' stories, of course, exist against a backdrop that includes the fashion and bridal industries, social and family rituals, traditions such as the trousseau and the wedding gift, and fads and styles that define particular decades. The **6,000-square-foot exhibition** will examine the customs that differentiate brides from various eras and cultures and discover the common threads that link all brides.

*unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* involves **five** sections that tell the stories of Missouri brides and their weddings:

- **Here Comes the Bride:** This first section presents the gowns and the stories connected with particular brides like **Mary Urquhart**, who was only 14 years old when she married Samuel McCree in 1823. While few St. Louis residents have seen **Mary Urquhart's** handmade dress in the French Restoration style, most are familiar with her married name, for she left a lasting legacy through her donation of land to the city of St. Louis. The neighborhood adjacent to the Missouri Botanical Garden and Tower Grove Park is still known as "McCree Town."

Other artifacts will complement the wedding gown in telling the story of **Martha Hannah Ramsey Moore**, who married in 1856. Meredith Moore proposed to **Hannah**, as she was called, in a letter and received her response through the mail as well. Although the marriage took place, the modern reader is hard pressed to see how, given the indirect nature of their prose. Also a part of the **Missouri History**

**Museum**'s collections are **Hannah**'s notebooks with her recipes and accounts that allow us to reconstruct the life of a woman who was an integral part of the family's business.

The stories of the brides involve various traditions and cultures. **Emma Johnson**, like many brides, wore her mother's gown when she married Alexander Elias Forbes in 1888. Emma's alterations to the dress, originally worn in 1850, allow us to see both the original antebellum style and the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century influences.

**Johanna Friedewald Sturm**'s parachute silk dress reflects a convenience cloaked in the "myth" of the white wedding that became popular after World War II. Her husband, Ernst, exemplifies the German immigrant story that is rather typical of St. Louis in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Local folk musician **Kathleen Trost Ross** captured the essence of the 1970s in her pants ensemble with a linen tunic and crocheted bell-bottom pants. **Zella Voncile Smith Williams** and her husband Charles were married October 8, 1994, in a ceremony featuring eight bridesmaids and groomsmen, four flower girls and one ring bearer, all dressed in Nigerian clothing and accompanied down the aisle by African drumbeats.

- **Fashioning St. Louis:** Women have long pursued fashionable dress for everyday and for special occasions. While one might think that fashion choices were limited in the Midwest, St. Louis history is replete with accomplished dressmakers, designers and retailers who offered every option when it came to outfitting a bride. In its second section, *unCommon Threads: Stories of Missouri Brides* presents gowns that show the stylish dresses that St. Louis dressmakers offered to early fashionistas.

**The Slater sisters** demonstrated that women did not simply wear dresses; they made them as well. This pair worked out of their home before opening a dressmaker's business on Washington Avenue in the 1890s. An elaborate two-piece satin gown, worn by **Florence Eiseman** when she married Solomon Swarts in 1898, exemplifies their handiwork.

A designer for Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney, **Samuel Harbison** dominated the fashion scene for forty-five years as the official Veiled Prophet gown designer for the queen and her court. An article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* from 1946 quotes Harbison as saying "I have said that my gowns were the most beautiful in the world. I meant it then. I mean it now." One of his gowns, worn by **Ruth Turley Hetzler** for her 1946 wedding, will allow visitors to the exhibition to see if his boast holds true.

- **Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue:** Heirloom accessories that evoke family traditions through the years will be on display in this section, including a white cotton and lace handkerchief carried by **Mary Loire** in 1963, which had been passed through several generations of women in her family since the first bride made it a part of her ensemble in 1925. Visitors will recall the tradition of the bridal bouquet as they view white fabric flowers and wax orange blossoms from 1874. The orange blossoms, they will learn, reflect the influence of Queen Victoria, who carried these flowers as she wed Prince Albert in 1840.
- **What Exactly is a Trousseau?** This section examines the way traditions change over time using the trousseau as a touchstone. With people living together and marrying multiple times, few brides today have hope chests with collections of lovely linens, and few prepare a trousseau. The word trousseau in fact, is unfamiliar to today's bride, who—often with the assistance of her fiancé—registers online or at retail stores to furnish her home.

To evoke the reality of the past, the exhibition will present a “hope chest,” replete with the bath towels, table linens and lingerie—much of it handmade—that young women used to collect, even sometimes with no groom on the immediate horizon. Visitors will be interested in considering the traditions that have replaced these early preparatory rituals.

- **The Art of Giving:** Museum visitors will see the kinds of gifts that brides received in earlier days. They can compare gifts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like the flatware from Mermod, Jaccard, & Company, given as a wedding gift by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Cupples, with the kinds of objects couples receive today. Avocado green salt and pepper shakers, from an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russel Wright American Modern dinnerware set, will remind visitors that avocado green was not, in fact, first mixed on the color palate in the 1970s. Although much has changed with respect to gifts, visitors may discover that the toaster has always been a popular gift choice!

The following are among the treasures also on view in *unCommon Threads: The Stories of Missouri Brides*:

- Accessories including stockings, veils, bouquets, corsets and bustles.
- Jewelry, including a seed pearl and gold set dating back to 1859.
- Quilts and bed linens.
- A man's silk floral damask wedding waistcoat, 1839.
- A paper doll set representing a wedding party.

- A four-piece tuxedo suit, 1957.
- Cake ornaments.
- A “Going-Away” dress, 1963.
- Several wedding planner books.
- Marriage certificates and licenses.

**Online:**

Visitors to the **Missouri History Museum**’s Web site ([www.mohistory.org](http://www.mohistory.org)) will have an opportunity to view an online version of the exhibition and **share a memory** related to their own wedding experience—as bride, family member or guest. Some stories will be selected for the online exhibition, edited for topic and length, and featured along with other stories to expand the stories of Missouri brides. All stories will become a part of the historical record preserved in the museum’s archives.

*unCommon Threads: The Stories of Missouri Brides* will be on display at the **Missouri History Museum in Forest Park** at Lindell and DeBaliviere, daily from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. and Tuesdays until 8:00 p.m. From Memorial Day until Labor Day, museum visitors can take advantage of the **Missouri History Museum**’s summer hours: daily from 10:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. and Tuesdays until 8:00 p.m.

*For more information, visit [www.mohistory.org](http://www.mohistory.org) or call 314/746-4599.*

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