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## How To Dress Like a Pioneer Girl

First, let's define *girl*: if you are younger than 18, and unmarried, you are a girl in the mid-19th century. Congratulations! The styles of clothing appropriate for your social group are comfortable, and have some options not open to adult women. There are distinct advantages to dressing your age.

### Undergarments

Many girls, regardless of their financial circumstances, would expect to own two or three dresses. The majority of a girl's wardrobe is actually undergarments: she'll usually have two or three changes of stockings, chemise & drawers, and one set of petticoats, even if she owns only one dress. With baggage limitations on the trail west, two or three dresses is about the maximum for anyone. Pioneer girls wore undergarments very similar to adult women:

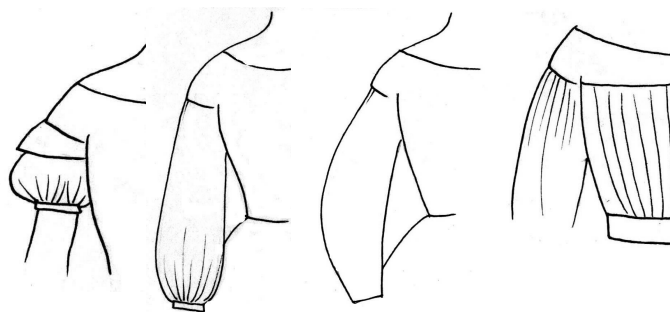
- A chemise or shift, white cotton or linen, like a short-sleeved slip. Hemmed about the knee.
- Supportive stays are the "sports bra" of the mid-century. These use soft cotton cording for support, rather than steel or whalebones. For one-time pioneer experiences, you won't need this garment. If you'll be doing similar things on a regular basis, you might consider adding stays.
- Petticoats are used for skirt support, and to create the common silhouette of the era: low shoulders, tidy waist, and a belled expanse of skirts. Plain white cotton fabric, pleated or gathered to a waistband, works well for petticoats. Plan to wear at least one—many girls from the pioneer era wore between three and five petticoats, plus their dress!
- Drawers in white cotton, with a cut-to-measure waistband, and hemmed between lower knee and mid-calf. Not all adult women wore drawers mid-century, but they are more common for girls. Drawers often have an open center seam, making it easier to use an outhouse or chamber pot without removing clothing. If you will be walking, drawers can help prevent your thighs chafing.
- White cotton, or natural, white, or black wool stockings are common. For a one-time trek, plan to take several pair of white cotton knee-high socks. A bit of lycra content is normal these days, and won't affect the performance.
- Black or brown leather boots, about ankle high, with a flat sole and small, "stacked" (fat) heel, will approximate mid-century styles. While some did make the trek west with bare feet, it's safest to wear shoes today (as they did, if they had them). You'll stay the most comfortable in leather.

### Dress Lengths

Young girls should hem their dresses and petticoats to about mid-calf. Older girls should hem their dresses and petticoats to between the lower calf, and about a hand-span above the ankle bones. This length is one benefit of dressing your age. You'll be cooler, and move more easily, than adult women. Skirts and petticoats are full, from 90" to 140" around.

### Dress Styles

Another advantage to your clothing is the variety of styles appropriate for your dress bodices. Your bodices will generally close in the back with buttons or hooks, though older girls may be switching to front-fastening bodices worn with youthful, shorter skirts. Your bodice might be darted-to-fit, or gathered-to-fit at the waistline, with smoothly fitting sides. You may wear either a jewel neckline, or a more open neckline. You can also choose among a wide variety of sleeves: short puffed, short straight, short loose; long straight, long shaped, or long full sleeves gathered to a band at the wrist. Printed fabrics, checks, and plaids are all good choices for your dress.



### Accessories

Neckerchiefs keep the neckline of your dress cleaner, and absorb sweat and body oils easily. They're easy to clean without a lot of water, too—far easier to launder than your whole dress! Aprons (bibbed or plain) keep the front of your dress cleaner, too. A shawl is also very common as a girl's warm wrap.

### Headwear

For the trek, a sunbonnet is the most common headwear. Before your journey westward, and after your arrival in Zion, you might well wear a pretty fashion bonnet, though many girls stuck with the sun protection of a sunbonnet with cording or slats to stiffen the brim.

### Hairstyles

Girls also have more hairstyle options than women. A center part (without bangs) is very common. Short, "cropped" hair (chin to shoulder length bobs), or long hair worn in three-strand braids starting just behind each ear are both typical girls' styles that you can easily recreate today. Longer braids can be pinned up at the back of the head to keep them out of the way. You'll want to wear your hair in a contained style (braids, or held back with a ribbon if you have short hair), to keep it as clean as possible, and keep the dust and other trail "nasties" out of it.

### About the Author

*Elizabeth Stewart Clark is a 19th century dressmaking instructor and historic pattern designer. A member of the LDS Church, she is always interested in helping others more fully appreciate our pioneer heritage. Find more patterns, articles, and books related to living history and the 19th century at*

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