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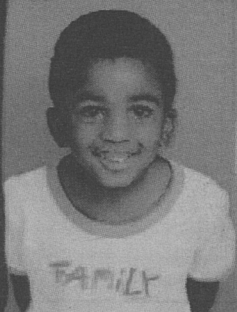


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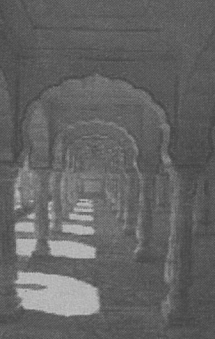


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Amazon Trail: The Dungaree Wars

We don't think of our every day lives as making history, but sometimes they do.

As American kids, my generation was required to dress up for endless occasions, like church and going downtown. It would not have done, in the late forties and early fifties, to shop at a department store in t-shirt and jeans.

I have a black and white photo of myself at seven or eight, standing stiffly, with a reluctant smile, wearing a light-colored dress under a navy blue spring coat with lace on its collar. I am also decked out in black patent leather shoes, white anklets and white gloves. My mother had cajoled my father into snapping a photo of me after church.

Years later, at the Irish bric-a-brac filled home of a Massachusetts friend, I was not surprised when Mary donned finery to go hang out downtown on a Saturday night. No more than mine would her mother have let her out the door without dressing up. I had the feeling that Mary herself was mortified to be seen with me – the dressiest clothing I had was my Girl Scout uniform shorts and white shirt (we were camp counselors on our weekend off). Was Mary's skirt and blouse any less a uniform?

I felt like my dress up clothes were prison uniforms. I was a prisoner – of my time. Yet, other little girls didn't seem to mind the discomfort of crinolines or summer halter tops and pedal pushers (today's capris). They showed off their clothes, chattered about them, kept themselves clean and neat and carefully covered their legs when they sat. They baffled me.

Maybe I was spoiled. I got to wear hand me downs from the family across the courtyard, including the boy's jerseys and pants. I had a taste, in my loose cords, of the liberty of moving through the world that boys had. I could climb trees without little boys chanting about underpants, I could build roads through the muddy back yard for my toy trucks and I could flip around the lawn, doing handstands, somersaults and cartwheels. All of this would have been forbidden in skirts.

Like childhood itself, this



freedom was fated to end. As I approached young-lady age I had one passion: I wanted a pair of what we then called dungarees. Before school started that year, my mother and I went shopping. I expected to get a pair of dungarees. My mother was horrified; she'd been thinking in terms of a trainer bra. Normally I did not argue or fight, but the dungaree wars were an exception. Although this was forty years ago, I can remember details of the store department where we stood, locked in mother-daughter combat. I can remember the rack where the beautiful blue dungarees hung. It was to be a few years, though, before I felt that coarse, stiff denim on my body, could roll up the bottoms in the style of the day. It would be another decade before my mother donned her first pair of slacks (she never worked in a factory during World War II), although eventually she, like other women of her generation, took to pants, especially pantsuits, like they'd never resisted their daughters.

Something was changing. It would be a while before women wore pants to that most patriarchal of institutions, church, but nice women's slacks became acceptable attire for going downtown. Meanwhile, the schools fought for the status quo. I fumed daily as I walked the miles to and from school in snow, ice or rain in a garment open at the knees. By high school I was convinced that the purpose of skirts was to allow boys easy access to girls' bodies.

Never did it occur to me that other girls might be thinking along the same lines and that we were headed toward a second wave of feminism. It was slow coming. In college, we could wear pants, including what we now called

jeans, to classes, although I remember some young women who'd never owned a pair. Skirts were required, however, at dinner in the dining hall. That made no sense to me – rush back to the dorm after classes to change? It took me forty years before I realized that meals were considered a time for socializing with boys. Of course young women had to look available to them.

I didn't understand that compulsory skirts were a feminist (not a gay) issue. I thought it was just my queerness that balked at dresses and skirts. I was not conscious of playing a little part in history, or herstory, but the ground was swelling beneath me.

Entering the work force after college was like going to the dining hall 40 hours a week. There was simply no question of wearing pants to work at the newspaper where I wrote obituaries, or at the college where I typed (badly) registration schedules. But freedom was in the air. Civil rights protests could not be ignored. Women were gathering under the banners of feminism, Stonewall happened. I worked for the state then, and we women would talk at breaks about a mass action to wear pants to work and see what happened. We felt so powerless that we actually feared losing our jobs, but when a few of us defied the rules, nothing happened. We just kept wearing pants and eventually the rules were quietly changed to suit us.

Such a small statement, but we weren't the only ones. The women's movement fed on such tiny victories and burgeoned because so many of us felt empowered and used our newfound strength to wage other campaigns. The dungaree wars, fought by defiant young girls at home, in school, at the workplace, were really, after all, a big deal. ▼

Copyright Lee Lynch 2005. Lynch is the author of eleven books including *The Swashbuckler and the Morton River Valley Trilogy*. She lives on the Oregon Coast. Her web page is at <http://leelynch6.tripod.com>.