

# Michigan Time Traveler

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center Foundation.

## KIDS' History

### Apron Strings

Aprons sometimes collect food stains, but they also collect history. This month the Time Traveler is trying on aprons at the Michigan Historical Museum's *Apron Strings: Ties to the Past* exhibit.

### What Is an Apron?

The word *apron* comes from a French word, *naperon*, meaning a small tablecloth. An apron is an article of clothing usually worn on the front of the body and tied around the waist with strings. It is used to protect clothing, to cover the body or to adorn a costume.

An apron can be made of cloth, plastic, leather or other material. Half aprons tie around the waist with a skirt that hangs in front of the body. Full aprons have a skirt and a top section called a bib. Aprons are often hand-made, but can also be purchased ready-made.



These men were photographed around the end of the 19th century. Sometimes clothing gives us clues to old photos. We know these men were cooks because they wore aprons. They worked on a wanigan, a floating bunkhouse for men who helped float logs down to sawmills on the Muskegon River. (State Archives)

### Putting Michigan on an Apron



Many people still enjoy wearing and making aprons. This spring women, men and children who sew made aprons for the "Michigan Apron Challenge." These are some aprons with a "Michigan" theme. Other aprons have a "patriotic" or a "vintage-look" theme. They are on display at the museum through August 18.

Rhonda Marvin of Laingsburg made this apron called "Beautiful Michigan." Her apron story shows us that an apron can have a lot of history.

*Aprons have always been an important part of my life. They were one of the first things I learned to sew and iron.*

*In the 1950s my mother sewed aprons for the Jacobson's stores to supplement the family income. I can still remember the many yards of beautiful fabric, buttons and bias tape. This adventure not only created extra income, it brought our family lasting friendships.*

*The pattern I used for the Michigan theme apron was one my mother used for the aprons she made for Jacobson's. I chose the blue to represent our beautiful Great Lakes and many waterfalls. The pastoral scene reminds me of an area south of Mackinaw City on I-75. As you round a slight curve in the highway, you see a farm scene much like the scene in this fabric.*



### Who Wears Aprons?

Many people say they can almost smell good food cooking when they see an apron that reminds them of their mom or grandmother. Some dads like to wear aprons when they barbecue outdoors in summer.

Throughout history aprons have also been a sign of certain occupations. Fishermen wore oilskin aprons. Blacksmiths and carpenters had leather ones. Butlers and maids wore clean white aprons. Lumberyard workers often had short canvas aprons with advertising on the front and pockets for nails.

Many people have an apron as part of their historic national costume. They wear these aprons today for special celebrations. But the apron probably had a useful purpose years ago.

Do you ever wear an apron? Perhaps you wear it when you eat, help in the kitchen, paint or do crafts. At your dentist's office a protective apron is put over you when you have your teeth X-rayed. Have you ever worn one of the garments that have replaced aprons in modern times, such as a smock, jumpsuit or coveralls?



The patchwork apron is from the 1930s. The Victory Garden apron is from the World War II years during the 1940s. The red apron with pioneer scenes is from the 1950s. These historical aprons are in the collection of the Michigan Historical Museum.

### Aprons in History

1900s Many aprons do not have neck straps. The top of the apron's bib is pinned to the women's blouse or dress near the shoulder.

1910s Herbert H. Hoover is in charge of the U.S. Food Administration during and after World War I. An apron style is named for him. The wrap-around full "Hooverette" or "Hoover apron" is popular into the 1920s.

1920s During the Roaring Twenties there is a wider choice of apron styles. Wealthy women wear fancy half aprons. Stores sell kits to make aprons with embroidered designs.

1930s During the Great Depression women can't afford many pretty dresses. Aprons—some made from feed sacks—protect their clothes. In 1939 Dorothy wears a blue and white gingham pinafore-style apron in the hit movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

1940s Women wear aprons or jumpsuits at work in World War II factories and flowery print aprons at home.

1950s During the "baby boom" homemakers wear a variety of aprons from fancy holiday styles to useful cobbler aprons. TV moms on *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* lead the fashion trend.

1960s More women work outside the home and use automatic clothes washers. Terry cloth half aprons are popular.

1970s Permanent press fabrics and improved laundry products mean less need for aprons. Novelty aprons with printed humorous or cute messages become popular.

1980s The barbecue apron is a popular style for both men and women. Aprons become collectibles to look for at antique and flea markets.

1990s Aprons with logos are often part of a worker's uniform in food stores or restaurants. The barbecue-style apron with prints of lighthouses, cats, hot peppers or clever sayings is a popular travel souvenir. But you don't find aprons in many homes anymore.

### At the Museum

- See the aprons on display in *Apron Strings: Ties to the Past*. It's a special exhibit at the Michigan Historical Museum until August 18, 2002. Try on an apron or design your own.
- There are more aprons in the exhibits on the 2nd and 3rd floors of the museum, too. Look for the "Victory Garden" apron in the Arsenal of Democracy exhibit and the patchwork apron in the 1930s bungalow.

The Michigan Historical Museum, 717 W. Allegan St., Lansing is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. The museum telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. The museum is part of the Michigan Historical Center, Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Visit us on the Web: [www.michiganhistory.org](http://www.michiganhistory.org).

*Apron Strings: Ties to the Past* is a program of ExhibitsUSA, a National Division of Mid-America Arts Alliance.



Nigel and Victoria Little take a closer look at patriotic aprons on exhibit at the Michigan Historical Museum. Victoria was in first grade and Nigel in second grade at the Washington School in Bay City this past year.

### Things to Do

- Ask your grandparents or great-grandparents about what they remember about aprons. Write a story about their apron memories.
- Read *My Apron* by Eric Carle or *Ma Dear's Aprons* by Patricia McKissack to someone younger than you. These books are available at your local library or bookstore.
- Visit the *Apron Strings* exhibit on the Web for pictures of interesting aprons and "Kids' Stuff" activities: <http://www.michiganhistory.org/aprons.html>.
- Teachers, school may be out for the summer, but you will find lesson plans for the Michigan Time Traveler at [www.michiganhistory.org/timetraveler](http://www.michiganhistory.org/timetraveler).



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