

Girls Didn't Wear Pants

We didn't exactly set a fashion trend, but at least we stayed warm.

By Lois Bruce

As you read your *Good Old Days* magazines, have you noticed that in the illustrated stories set in the 1920s and 1930s, women and girls are almost always wearing dresses? Even if they were working outside or standing in a snowdrift, they wore dresses—but rarely pants. Girls just didn't wear pants back then. Do you remember how cold your legs got if you lived in a freezing environment?

I grew up in the small town of Mullen (population 500) in the sandhills of western Nebraska. I remember the winter of 1936 as an especially snowy, cold one, with winds howling down from Canada and piling snow in knee-high drifts.

Our high school, where I was a freshman, sat on top of a hill above town. By the time we girls struggled through the drifts to reach it, our dress hems were soaked, as were our long stockings above our overshoes, and our legs were very cold.

On one such stormy afternoon after school, four of us gathered around the warm woodstove at Shirley's house. We were griping about how cold our legs were when Bud, Shirley's older brother, walked through the room.

"You should wear overalls to school to keep your legs warm," he said jokingly.

As he went into the kitchen, we girls stared at each other

in amazement. Overalls! Girls didn't wear boys' clothes—not in the remote sandhills of Nebraska anyway! But Shirley finally had the courage to say, "Why not? We'd keep warm and dry—and there are no rules against it."

We tossed the idea around for a while until Shirley jumped up and went into Bud's room.

"I dare you girls to wear overalls to school!"

She snatched a pair of his bib overalls, pulled them on over her dress, tucked the dress down inside, put on her overshoes and came back into the room and modeled for us. It was the perfect cover for her legs!

Bud came back from the kitchen and stopped with a surprised start. After staring for a moment, he mumbled through a mouthful of sandwich, "I dare you girls to wear overalls to school! By golly, I'll even get each of you a free movie ticket if you really do! I'll loan you that pair of mine you have on, Sis, and get another pair of mine for you, Harriet." He gestured toward Rosalie and me and continued, "Frank and Dean are about the right size for you two, and I know I can get them to loan you each a pair."

We girls looked at each other with glee. A free movie! Movies

were few and far between deep in the Depression of 1936. We realized Bud could deliver on the tickets because he worked at the theater, and the manager could take the ticket price—10 cents each—out of his pay. And besides, we couldn't let a boy win a dare! We took him up on it.

It took another day for him to borrow overalls from his friends, who thought the idea was a real kick! We girls didn't tell our folks, of course. The boys wanted to see if we really would go through with it, so they didn't tattle either.

So a day later, Rosalie, Harriet and I stopped at Shirley's house on our way to school. (Her house offered the advantage of no parent at home before school, as Shirley's widowed mom had to report early for her job at the post office.) When we got there, Shirley was already in her brother's bibs. Rosalie, Harriet and I climbed into the ones Bud had borrowed for us. Then we all headed for school, lagging behind the other kids walking up the hill.

When we entered the hallway, everyone stopped talking. The girls, I am sure, were envious of our dry stockings and skirt hems; a few of the boys whistled softly. We just walked quickly to the girls' room—but not quickly enough to avoid Mr. Bragg, our principal, who was coming down the hallway.

We knew we were breaking no rules—dress codes had never been heard of in those days—but we still started mumbling about removing the overalls and leaving them on our hangers. He nodded—and opened the door for us! We scuttled in, hung up our bibs and hurried to class. Some of our teachers questioned our coming-to-school attire until they learned Mr. Bragg had made no objection to our just wearing them up the hill. Almost everyone thought our idea was great—after all, we looked so warm and dry!

After school, we stopped in the girls' restroom again and pulled on our overalls before we went home. We didn't try to hide them anymore. We knew our parents would find out—there are no secrets in a small town.

Surprisingly, only Harriet's folks objected. Rosalie's, Shirley's and my parents were fine with them, as long as we only wore them when the snow was really deep. From then on, with parental permission, they became normal wear for the girls when a blizzard hit.

We four felt like ground-breakers, even if no one else in the world had ever heard of the little town of Mullen, nor of the girls who were the first women brave enough to wear pants there, back in the blizzardy Good Old Days! ❖



Shown in this photo from 1936–1937 are (left to right) Joe, Jeffie, Bud, Shirley and Barney Gibson.



In this photo of the author's eighth-grade class, her friend Shirley is shown at the left end of center row; Harriet is third from the left in the center row. Frank and Dean, wearing overalls that the girls borrowed, are in the center of second row; and Rosalie can be seen at the right end of center row. The author is in the back row, second from left, standing next to their teacher.