Eyes on First Ladies: The Power of the Press

Fine Fashions For The First Lady
By BARBARA BARNECOTT
S. E. California Staff Writer
Thursday, August 31, 1966

With Mamie Eisenhower bearing from a ringside table, any fashion show would become a gala affair. The Republican Fashion Fun Time show was no exception. A beautiful show, a wonderful turnout, in the Garden Court of the Sheraton-Palace yesterday.

The gracious First Lady, who arrived a smiling vision before the show started, looked smart and pretty in a black and white taffeta suit by her favorite designer, Sally Victor. It had a suit and matching jacket and pleated skirt. With it Mrs. Eisenhower wore Sally Victor’s white embossed hobo bag and mocca pearl necklace and earrings.

The show started off with a prologue, “Hands in the Ring for Ike,” with Huddy Hopper

Fashion groupies cluck at First Lady
The Salt Lake Tribune, Sunday, February 6, 1971

WASHINGTON — Most women feel that what they wear is their own business, but what if the woman is also the First Lady?

Mrs. Carter, the one who has probably seen some clothes on other women who have been First Ladies, is said to have a desire to wear very, very few of the First Lady’s wardrobe.

“I’ve wanted to get a glimpse of her clothes,” said one of the many women who have her book, “The First Lady,” and are eager to see every detail of the First Lady’s wardrobe.

When it comes to selecting a dress, Mrs. Carter’s choice is always “I want to see from the top.”

The First Lady’s clothes are as much a part of her as her personality. Mrs. Carter has never been one to dress up for a special occasion. She prefers simple, comfortable clothes. She is often pictured in a white dress, a white suit, or a white blouse.

What she wears is highly influenced by the fashion industry, but she has always chosen to wear what she feels comfortable in. Mrs. Carter is known for her conservative style and her preference for simplicity.

The Loves of First Lady
By Elizabeth Roberts
Washington Post Staff Writer
The Washington Post, Sunday, September 3, 1966

When the First Lady comes to Washington, she is greeted with a warm welcome. She is often seen at political events, and her presence is felt throughout the city. Her fashion choices are often discussed by the press, and her style is often imitated.

The First Lady is known for her love of formal occasions, and her wardrobe is always well-coordinated. She is often seen wearing dresses with fitted bodices and full skirts, and her choice of shoes is often a mix of pumps and heels.

Next Edition: A look at the use of First Ladies’ images in advertising and even by the Federal Government - The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly!
First Ladies as Media Celebrities

A First Lady must use the media and all its elements: newspaper, photographs, radio, television and the internet as a vehicle to promote her causes. In return, she hopes for a favorable review from media skeptics who watch her every word, her gestures, her hairstyles and clothing.

Today’s media thrives on coverage of the controversial, the deviant and the dramatic. It focuses on the unusual, the negative and downplays the ordinary or positive stories setting the stage for extreme criticism of the story’s subject. Yet the public has come to expect some form of public activism from the First Lady and also expects the media to cover it. No matter the cause or event, the media will focus only on what they deem important or newsworthy about the First Lady – if not completely ignoring her. Thus, First Ladies have to “work” the media to get the coverage they – as well as the public – want for their causes.

First Ladies have used their fame and influence in an attempt to make things better for the people of this nation. The contemporary list includes: Barbara Bush and literacy; Rosalynn Carter and mental health; Hillary Clinton and healthcare; and currently, Michelle Obama and childhood obesity. But calling attention to social concerns using media has an impressive history with First Ladies: Florence Harding and war veterans; Grace Coolidge and people with disabilities; Lou Hoover and women’s physical fitness; and the remarkable Eleanor Roosevelt and the racial and ethnic divides. All these women, and more, endured criticism and cynicism over whatever they chose to publicly endorse.

A First Ladies historian wrote, “Unless a First lady stays in the attic, she cannot win.” It is fair to say that for contemporary First Ladies even the attic cannot serve as a haven during their White House tenure. The title of First Lady carries a heavy symbolic burden that transcends the individual woman. From this privileged position, a First Lady can bring media attention to social injustices and causes. But to get the attention she wants, a First Lady has to do all that she can to garner the media’s favor – not an easy task in today’s highly competitive, “do anything for the scoop” media world.

What is in a Name?

We all know that calling people names is hurtful. Public awareness of the devastating effect bullying has on children receives much media attention today. Yet Americans have a long tradition of attaching nicknames to people that can be either affectionate or derogatory.

Presidential nicknames are historically more amicable than those attached to First Ladies. George Washington will always be the “Father of Our Country.” Bravery in military service amicable than those attached to First Ladies. Perfect and dignified support of her husband through the Watergate scandal labeled her as “Plastic Pat.”

First Ladies have not been given many kind tag names through the years. “Sahara” Sara Polk and “Lemonade” Lucy Hayes were dubbed for their stance on refusing to serve alcohol at the White House. Jane Pierce, aka “The Shadow in the White House,” was criticized by the press for her excessive mourning of her only son shortly before her First Lady tenure began. Pat Nixon’s stoic and dignified support of her husband throughout the Watergate scandal labeled her as “Plastic Pat.”

In more recent times, a First Lady who demonstrated power or influence over the president seemed to threaten the media’s unwritten rules regarding how much authority a First Lady should possess in her husband’s administration. Rosalyn Carter was christened the “Steel Magnolia,” Nancy Reagan was marked as the “Iron Dragon,” and Hillary Clinton was portrayed as “Lady Macbeth.” Name calling is a form of bullying, it is not only not found in schools, but also in the workplace and attached to people in media headlines. First Ladies are not immune to the stigma attached to a name, nor to the public pain it can bring.

This exhibit is made possible by the following institutions:

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Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX
Massillon Museum, Massillon, OH
Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA

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www.visitcantonstark.com

TOURS

All tours are guided and include both the changing exhibits at the Education & Research Center and the Saxton McKinley House, the restored Victorian home of First Lady Ida McKinley. Tours begin at the Education & Research Center and last approximately 1 1/2 hours.

Tour Hours: Tuesday - Saturday at 9:30 & 10:30 a.m. and 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m. plus Sundays in June, July & August at 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m.

Reservations are required for groups of six or more, recommended for all others. Admission: $7 adults, $6 seniors, $5 children under 18 - includes both buildings; $3 Education & Research Center only.

Free parking. Buses welcome!