



Mary's Velvet Rose

Fashion Column

The Family Albatross

When Prince Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria, died in 1861, Mary Lincoln wore a half-mourning gown of white silk trimmed with deep black lace as a symbol of sympathy. The queen was in deep mourning, and stayed in mourning attire for the remaining 40 years of her life. She set the standard for all women in mourning.

Just four short years later, Mary would join Queen Victoria as a perpetual widow. After all, if Queen Victoria could make such a personal sacrifice, so could the widow of Abraham Lincoln. It was a custom followed by many women during the era, and Mary would have followed it completely if it had not been for one very special invitation.

In 1871, Mary and Tad Lincoln traveled throughout Europe. For a while, they visited London, England. While there, Mary received an invitation to meet Queen Victoria who was holding court at St. James Palace. At Tad's request, Mary did not wear mourning attire that day. Instead, Mary had a gown of white silk fashioned in the latest style from *Godey's* magazine. The skirt was fashioned with a large bustle and was trimmed with coral flounces. The bodice was trimmed with coral ruffles. The outfit's accessories included a simple necklace of coral beads and drop coral earrings. The next day, Mary returned to mourning attire.

When Mary returned to Illinois, she gave many items to her nieces. The coral jewelry was given to one of Elizabeth's daughters. The white and coral dress was given to Louisa Todd, the youngest daughter of Mary's eldest brother, Levi Todd. Louisa wore it on the day she married Edwards Keys in Springfield. By the time of Mary's death, the dress had found its way into Louisa's attic. Having only sons, and no daughter to pass the dress to, Louisa did not know what to do with Aunt Mary's dress. In her golden

years, Louisa could be found on her front porch with Mary's dress by her side. As strangers passed by, Louisa would call out and ask them if they wanted a piece of the dress once worn by Mary Lincoln, the president's widow. If they replied "yes," Louisa would cut a piece off of the dress and present it to them.

After Louisa's death, the dress was stored once again in a box in the attic. When her granddaughter, Mary, wished to wear it for her own wedding, it was taken out of the box for the first time in years. Mary was shocked to find that the bodice was completely gone, and the skirt had hunks cut out of it. She decided that she could not be married in "half a dress." But since she had shown an interest in it, the item eventually landed in a box in Mary's attic. She gave it to a museum several years ago, and when that museum moved its collection, the skirt was returned to Mary. She began referring to it as "the family albatross."

Later the skirt was loaned and displayed at the Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Ind., during a special display of First Lady gowns. This time when it was returned to the family, it belonged to Mary's daughter. When it was given to her, she was told that the "family albatross" was now hers to do with as she wished. She gave it to a museum, and today it still sits in a box marked with Louisa's granddaughter's name and address. The "family albatross" now has a permanent home, but it does not yet have a place of honor.

(Information for this article was taken from an interview with Louisa Todd's great-granddaughter, who was the last family member to own the skirt.)

--Submitted by Donna McCreary, Charlestown, Ind.