

# Easter Sunday

By Arlene Shovald

A chill rippled through me in the cold spring air as I walked to the outdoor Easter sunrise service in 2005. Seeing the crowd of worshipers gathered outside, most of them wearing jeans, jackets and knit caps pulled down over their ears, I was reminded sharply of how different Easter is today from when I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Easter was always special to me. One reason was that I came close to being an Easter baby. In fact, a couple of times my birthday actually fell on Easter Sunday. Easter came on March 24 in 1940. I was born on April 14, three weeks later. My dad had hoped that his firstborn would arrive on Easter. My mother probably wished I had too, because my arrival on April 14 caused her to miss the premiere of *Gone With the Wind* at the local Delft Theater. The movie was the talk of the town. Clark Gable had actually said “damn” on screen!

Easter in the Upper Peninsula was seldom the spring holiday we saw in magazines and movies. Usually there was still plenty of snow and ice, and even if it came near the end of April, there were no spring flowers blooming or green grass growing. It was still muddy and cold, and the green, if any, was just beginning to peek out from under last year’s dead grass. The most new life one could expect at that time of year was the first fuzzy pussy willows popping out of their thin brown casings.

Still, no matter what the date, Easter called for a new spring outfit, even if you had to cover it with a storm coat. And a new Easter hat was a must.

For little girls, new black patent leather shoes

were almost required, and new anklets, sometimes with lacy trim, replaced those awful, ugly, long brown stockings, held up by a garter belt, that I wore all winter. However, there were exceptions. If the weather was still cold, the style was long

white stockings held up by that same awful garter belt. I can’t believe that today those ugly garter belts are actually advertised by Frederick’s of Hollywood and Victoria’s Secret and some people think they’re *sexy*!

All females wore hats to church, so every clothing store in town had a supply. I usually picked out my hat at Krom’s Department Store or J.C. Penney’s, both of which had mezzanines—fascinating places where you could look over the railing and watch the people shopping on the first floor.

The first hat I remember was a wide-brimmed straw hat decorated with ribbons and artificial flowers. It was just like the one Minnie Pearl wore—only I removed the price tag.

The first year I got a hat with a veil, I felt very grown-up. I was in seventh grade. The hat was a red pillbox with a red veil.

In high school, I wore a navy blue hat that looked like an English riding hat with a veil. I thought it was very stylish. Then there was

the pink straw hat, with the navy blue ribbon trim to go with a navy blue gabardine shorty coat. Shorty coats were the height of fashion in the early 1950s.

Cotton or rayon gloves were a necessity. Usually they were white, and you could buy them in every store because every woman and girl wore them, not just for Easter, but for any dress-up occasion. I remember reading an old magazine article about what to wear for a job interview, and gloves were



*This wasn't Easter Sunday but it was my first communion Sunday in 1947, and I was all dressed up and ready for church.*

a required accessory for proper dress. You might as well be naked if you didn't have your gloves!

The first year I wore nylons, I felt very proud and grown-up. But I had a heck of a time trying to keep that seam on the back straight on my skinny little legs, and I was really pleased a few years later when seamless nylons came out. Pantyhose, many years later, were a great improvement over the two separate stockings—held up, once again, by that awful garter belt that was part of every female's intimate wardrobe.

A corsage was the finishing touch for the Easter outfit. Unfortunately, it usually froze in the cold weather. Corsages were purchased at a flower shop in those days, which made them very special. I still remember the wonderful smell and color of all those flowers when I went to the greenhouse with my dad to get my mother a corsage. The warm, moist feeling inside the greenhouse was like an oasis behind the glass walls that sheltered us from the cold.

My first Easter corsage was an orchid from my Uncle John. He gave me a box of special English chocolates, too, but the corsage was special because it said I was a woman. I was probably about 12 at the time. As ridiculous as it seems, given the usual freezing weather, everyone broke out their Easter finery and wore it to church on Easter Sunday. Women staggered through the snow and slush in their spike heels and new hats, risking a broken limb to be in style.

Men wore suits and topcoats in brown, black and gray. Stiffly starched white shirts with ties were the only appropriate male attire for Easter. It would be quite a few years before colored shirts were in style. A banker, the first businessman to wear a colored dress shirt in our town, was reprimanded for wearing one to work!

As excited as I was about growing up and wearing such things as hats with veils, nylon hose and corsages, there was always part of me that loved being a kid. I was probably in high school before I gave up the tradition of placing my Easter basket out for the bunny to fill with hard-cooked eggs.

And how exciting it was to awake on Easter morning and find a store-bought basket covered with cellophane and tied with a ribbon at the top!

And oh, the surprises and treats that were hidden within! Jelly beans, chocolate eggs, sugar-coated marshmallow bunnies and chicks that got better (and chewier) the older they got, and sometimes even an Easter toy like a wind-up rabbit.

One year I saved my money to buy my little brother a chocolate egg with his name on it. They sold big chocolate eggs at the J.J. Newberry store. I selected one and watched as the lady piped my brother's name on the egg in frosting and placed it back in the box. When he dropped it on the floor and it broke, I was devastated to discover that it was hollow! I just assumed it was solid, and that he'd have at least a year's supply of chocolate—which he might want to share with his sister!

As it turned out, there was no sharing anyway. My little brother didn't like sweets, so the chocolate egg sat in his bedroom for years until it finally turned all mottled and white and my mother threw it out.

On Easter morning, my dad would tease us, mimicking the song *Here Comes Peter Cottontail* as he sang:

"Here comes Peter Cotton Ball,  
Hoppin' like he's gonna fall. ...

He just had a beer or two—

I think he had quite a few. ..."

As kids, we always got a big kick out of that because beer drinking in our house was practically nonexistent.

The tradition of decorating eggs and the accompanying lovely, tangy scent of vinegar continue to be a treat, even today. Other Easter traditions, like ham with pineapple, and chocolate bunnies, linger as well. But the old tradition of emerging in new spring clothes, like a butterfly from a cocoon, is long gone.

As I looked around me last Easter Sunday, it occurred to me that dressing in warm winter coats and knit caps was much more sensible than the way we dressed when I was a kid. But I'll never forget that special feeling of getting all dressed up—high heels, nylons, gloves, hat and corsage—and going to church to check out what everyone else was wearing for Easter. It was a sure sign that spring was on the way, no matter how cold the weather was that day. ❖

