

Feature



Creating a World War I Era YWCA Uniform *Ann Morton*

A costumer pays tribute to the YWCA with a uniform reminiscent of those worn by women volunteers during World War I.

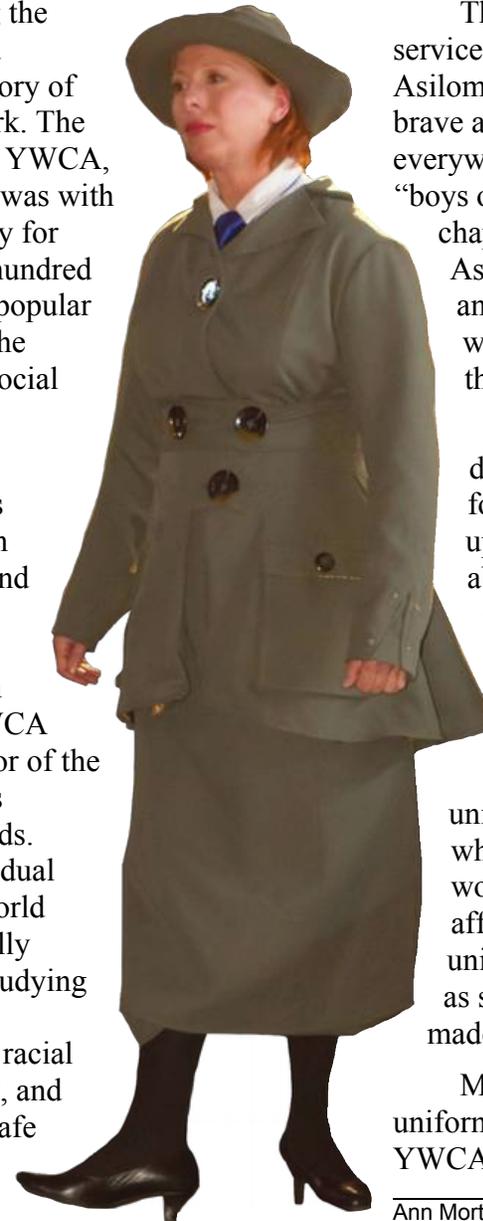
I created a World War I era YWCA costume in 2014 to attend the centenary celebration of the former Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) camp at [Asilomar State Park](#) on the Monterey Peninsula in Northern California. The Park invited local costumers to come in period attire and we held a fashion show that was enjoyed by attendees of the event.



Patriotic YWCA Land Girls Poster c. 1918. Source: [Library of Congress](#).

Before choosing the costume, I researched Asilomar and the history of the YWCA at that park. The more I read about the YWCA, the more impressed I was with their vision of equality for gender and race one hundred years before it was a popular topic. The efforts of the YWCA in behalf of social issues has been breathtaking.

The YWCA was founded in England in 1855 and spread around the world as a social and spiritual support system for women. In each country, the YWCA adopts a cultural flavor of the residents, but remains focused on social needs. After 1898, the individual YWCAs formed a World YWCA and specifically focused on service, studying social and industrial problems, addressing racial and gender inequality, and continuing to create safe environments for women.



The women who volunteered for service during WWI through the YWCA at Asilomar and other places were incredibly brave and forward thinking. Women everywhere volunteered to support our “boys over there” as canteen workers, chaplains, and medical care providers. As women came from all over the world and from every economic class, there was not yet a uniform established for the many YWCA workers.

Women went to their dressmakers to have uniforms made for them, or made their own depending upon their financial situation and ability. All of the uniforms were slightly different, created in a time when financial situation drove the quality of uniform you could afford to make.

The high society women had uniforms made by The House of Worth, while local dressmakers and individual women made what that they could afford. As WWI continued, the uniforms reflected the changing fashion, as skirts grew wider and the “A” line made its appearance in the late teens.

Museums around the world now house uniforms from WWI, including those of the YWCA. The uniforms that have survived

Ann Morton in her recreation of WWI era YWCA uniform.

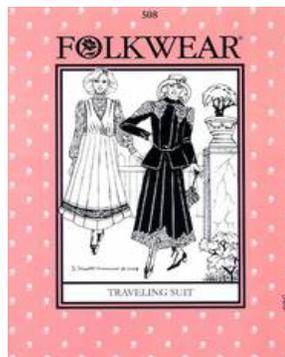


Military Uniform c.1916-1918. Source: [Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).

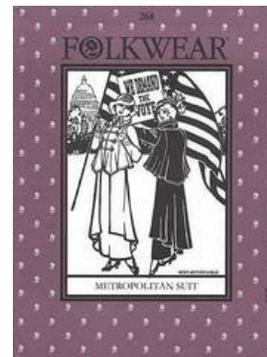
reflect that fabrics and styles of the period, utilizing wool, linen, cotton, and linings that the wearer could afford.

The particular design I chose is more of a historical interpretation. There isn't any one uniform that mine is an exact copy of. I was inspired by a women's military uniform in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. (left) My goal was to present the uniform that I would have made, had I been a YWCA volunteer at the time. It was also attractive me in that it mirrored many of the uniforms now housed in different museums and in photo collections. (right).

My costume includes a high-waisted narrow skirt, lined jacket with cargo pockets, a hat, a white shirt, and a blue tie. The long narrow skirt was so typical of the fashion before the Great War, and the longer cut coat reflected the trends in the early 1910's. The cargo pockets were a racy new addition to women's wear, as they were used only for men's working and hunting fashions prior to that era.



Folkwear #608 Traveling Suit pattern for the jacket.



Folkwear 268 Metropolitan Suit pattern for the skirt.



Frances Gulick, Y.W.C.A. Girl. c. 1919 by Harris & Ewing. Source: [Old Pictures](#)..

The skirt pattern was adapted from Folkwear pattern 268, "Metropolitan Suit," and the jacket was adapted from the Folkwear pattern 508, "Traveling Suit." These Folkwear patterns from the WWI era give the costume a more period styling.

I tried to be historically accurate in my choice of materials and construction techniques. Since the museum pieces were all wool-lined in satin, I made mine of wool-lined in satin too. I also used turn of the 20th century tailoring techniques in constructing the uniform.



Hat with custom made YWCA patch.

A few adaptations to the Folkwear 268 jacket were required to match the uniforms in the museums, including changing the collar to a roll collar and adding a high waist belt. The Folkwear pattern was not fitted in the front, so I added in shaping darts to allow it to hang better with the belt. I also added cargo pockets, and utilized a nifty back construction that was a common tailoring technique of that time.

I drafted the hat pattern myself, after considering the hats that other YWCA uniforms had with them. Most seemed to be a crown with 6 gores and a wide brim, consistent with the Teens era. The hat is soft, and could easily be popped into a bag during travel, probably something valued during the war. I constructed my hat from the same wool and lining as the uniform. I did not use buckram; it is interlined with canvas so that the brim will hold its shape.

The YWCA patch on the hat (left) was custom made by an embroidery shop from the WWI period posters showing the patch on the hats. I had a total of 25 made as gifts to participants in a the fashion show celebrating the YWCA at Asilomar, and gifted the remaining patches to the Asilomar Parks

Above: Ann Morton in her recreation of WWI era YWCA uniform. Right: Patriotic YWCA poster, c. 1918. Source: [Digital Commonwealth](#).

and Rec staff for supporting costuming as an important part of the history of Asilomar.

I enjoyed wearing my WWI era YWCA uniform to the centenary event in the historic Asilomar setting, and feeling a connection with the women who stood there 100 years earlier, dressed like me, and serving their country by supporting our "boys over there."

Ann Morton loves the pairing of creativity and history that costuming provides. She start sewing at 8 years old by making clothespin dolls in period dresses. As a member of Greater Bay Area Costumers' Guild, she attends events for all eras and enjoys sci-fi.

