Swimwear creates hysteria, from panic attacks in dressing rooms to public arrests. Our vintage expert and fashion historian Claudine Villardito takes a look at bathing suits over the years, and shares a tale of her own law-breaking granny.

These one-pieces from the 1950s followed that decade's fashions by accentuating the waist and bust. Photo courtesy of State Archives of Florida/Charles Barron

A recent department store survey reveals that women would rather clean the bathroom or have their car serviced than shop for a swimsuit. And do you blame us? Body image issues aside, we have 150 years of swimwear-induced hysteria to process in the dressing room.

As locomotive transportation brought throngs of vacationers to beaches in the mid-19th century, women were forced to reconcile the preservation of their Victorian modesty with the pleasures of an ocean dip. Unsatisfied by gender-segregated swimming areas, the moral authority introduced “bathing machines”: horse-drawn changing rooms that rolled women out to sea and back again, affording them protective cover for all but a brief moment when they plunged into the ocean.
Horse-drawn "bathing machines" offered women protective cover when they plunged into the ocean. Photo courtesy of Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

They needn’t have worried. Made of taffeta or mohair, the bathing suits of the 1850s were full, long-sleeved dresses worn with stockings, slippers and often corsets, and featured weighted hems to prevent them from rising in the water. Predictably, drownings abounded and women were subsequently tethered to their bathing machines via ropes tied at the waist. Inevitably, women protested this literal and figurative restriction of movement and by the end of the century bathing machines were retired and swimwear was modified to elbow-sleeved, knee-length dresses (often with sailor collars) paired with knee- or ankle-length bloomers. Stockings and bathing slippers were still required, however, and the suits themselves remained fashioned from the same heavy fabrics.
Bathing suits in the 1900s, when woolen swimsuits allowed for a greater range of motion. Photo courtesy of Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

For the following three decades, changes in women’s swimwear were both gradual and hard won. Along with the movement for gender equality, the increased popularity of women’s sports in the 19-teens prompted knitting mills to design woolen swimsuits that stretched, breathed and allowed greater range of motion. Consisting of a sleeveless wool tunic and thigh shorts, the suits - though scandalously small for their time - weighed up to 20 pounds when wet and still required knee-length stockings and slippers to cover the legs and feet. When a west coast visitor to Atlantic City refused to roll her stockings above her knees and was famously arrested for indecency in 1921, city governments hired “beach censors” to patrol shorelines for other recalcitrant lawbreakers, of which my own grandmother was one. Arrested on a Chicago beach in 1926, she had not only eliminated her shoes and stockings but wore a white (gasp!) swimsuit and nearly started a riot.
The author's grandmother Ethel Wolfenberger, circa 1926, immediately before arrest. Photo courtesy of Claudine Villardito

Advances in fabric technology ushered the next phase of swimwear’s evolution in the 1930s, when elastic was introduced for use in women’s undergarments. When woven into swimwear, elastic produced a lighter garment that conformed to the body when wet. Infinitely more practical than their wool counterparts, these “Lastex” suits were also one-piece designs that revealed more leg than any other swimwear garment in history. However, their liberal use by Hollywood starlets, and lawmakers’ desire to distract the public from the potential outbreak of war, ultimately quelled concerns about public decency.
1930s bathing suits modeled by the author's grandmother's friends. Photo courtesy of Claudine Villardito.

Jean Duket, Miss Tampa, modeling a two-piece 1940s bathing suit. Photo courtesy of State Archives of Florida

Ironically, the war itself was responsible for the demise of the one-piece suit in favor of an even smaller garment introduced in the 1940s. Fabric rationing compelled designers to create a suit that simultaneously used less fabric but maintained modesty. The midriff was the only real estate left to expose (or so they thought). Hence, the two-piece was once again adopted, this time consisting of a bra-like top and high-waisted panty or skirt that covered the hips. Christened the “bikini” in honor of the Bikini Atoll, where nuclear tests had been conducted only two weeks prior, the suit caused such a stir that designer Louis Réard was forced to hire an exotic dancer to show it because his models flatly refused.

Little did they know that avant garde designer Rudi Gernreich would push the envelope even further by designing a topless one-piece “monokini” in 1964, a thong in 1974, and in 1985, a “pubikini” with a window that revealed the wearer’s pubic hair.
In the 1960s, the bikini was the favored bathing suit. Photo courtesy of State Archives of Florida

Post-war consumerism saw the brief return of the one-piece bathing suit, which featured new interior padding and boning that accentuated the bust and reduced the waist according to 1950s clothing styles. But by 1956, the “itsy bitsy teenie weenie” bikini, popularized by such sun-goddesses as Brigitte Bardot and Ursula Andress, was the choice of a new generation. And Sports Illustrated has never stopped thanking them.

- Claudine Villardito’s boutique Black Cat Vintage is online at blackcatvintage.com
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