

## *A GLIMPSE OF GIRLHOOD IN THE 19TH CENTURY*

### *Ninth In A Series Of Articles On The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell*

*"Remember me when far away  
Though many miles apart  
You may depend this is written by a friend  
That has a faithful heart"*

*From Tova Braun to Viola Pelunek  
Feb 26, 1894, Alma, Wisconsin*

Memory books of the day captured the simple sentiments shared from one child to another. These small books given to boys and girls alike were often gifts for special occasions but were added to from year to year. They were sentimental, they were funny, and they were remembrances of friends and family. It was a time of simplicity in all things.



Although fashion in the city dictated that little girls wore frilly dresses with large collars and lots of lace, the life and clothing of a pioneer girl was controlled by what was available. With little transport of expensive materials, a girl's dresses were made of muslin or calico cotton in the summer and "linsey" wool in the winter. A young girl usually had two dresses for work & play, and one Sunday dress. A pinafore or apron, made from scrap material from her mother's dress, was worn over a girl's dress to keep it from getting dirty or torn. At least one petticoat was worn, more when the weather was cold. A bonnet was an essential to protect her from the hot sun and wind. Warm weather often meant no shoes and as it turned to winter, long black stockings and sturdy leather shoes were the standard.

Sewing was the most skilled craft a young girl could learn. Clothes were mended over and over again because there was little material to be found. All scraps were kept and they often became the foundation for one of the family's quilts. There's many a story where a girl can trace the dresses of her childhood through a quilt made by her mother.

Gesell captures this time of the American pioneer girl through his photography. Using his two daughters as models he often posed them in pictures where his photography documented their clothing and their playtime. It's hard not to step back into that time, just for a moment, when the photography of Gerhard Gesell evokes memories of the *Little House* series of children's books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. We especially relate to *Little House In The Big Woods* because of its nearby location in Pepin, Wisconsin.

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*Photo: Two Girls In Bonnets (WHS Image 25674)*