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The Virginian-Pilot

RESTORATION

Seamstress' gowns are stitches in time

By Lia Russell
 The Virginian-Pilot

Surrounded by beautiful swatches of old lace, silk and satin, Vickie Libbey lives in a world where the present meets the past — and the results are stunning.

Libbey's vocation — passion — is restoring christening gowns from bygone eras, some dating to the early 1800s. A seamstress for nearly 40 years, Libbey, 53, describes her skill as a "gift."

"I started sewing in seventh-grade home ec class," the Colonial Place resident recalled. "Other than that, I taught myself to sew. I sewed clothes for myself in high school."

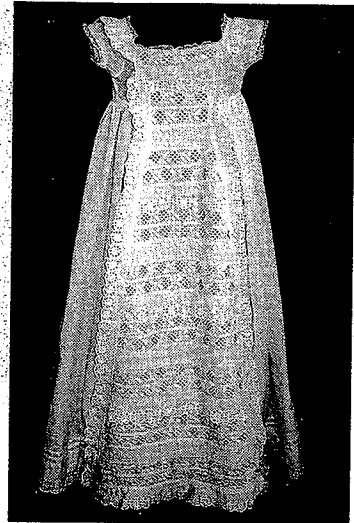
Her talent, she joked, is not hereditary.

"When I was in junior high, my mother made me an A-line skirt out of corduroy. The way she sewed it, the nap of the fabric ran up the front and down the back, which made it look like it was two different colors. I hated that skirt, but I wore it because my mom made it. But that's when I thought, 'I can do better than this!'"

The Ohio native moved to Norfolk 34 years ago with her husband, Thomas, who was then in the Navy. They have three children whom she sewed for, but it was only after the birth of their third, daughter, Ashley, that Libbey taught herself to smock and brought attention to her talent.

"People would see Ashley's clothes and ask if I could make something for them," Libbey said.

She soon found herself in



COURTESY PHOTO

This christening gown, circa mid-1800s, was fully restored by Vickie Libbey. It features a central panel of "broidery anglais" insertion and edging alternating with puffing strips. The sleeves and neckline are edged in lace.

the sewing business, working from home and making garments for friends and their referrals.

Libbey particularly enjoys sewing special-occasion children's clothing.

"I like the fact that most of the things I make end up in church," Libbey said. "I feel that I was blessed with this talent, and it's kind of neat that I can pass it along as a blessing to others."

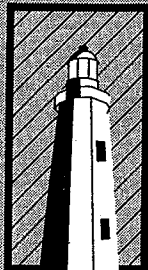
Libbey also likes using existing garments from which to fashion new ones.

"I have cut up a lot of wedding dresses to make christening dresses to make christening

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GOWNS

Continued from previous page

tening gowns," she said. "The first time I did that was really scary, but the results are very special."

Though she has sewn children's clothing for more than two decades, she started restoring antique christening gowns only two years ago.

Libbey learned how to restore fabrics by working with an antiques dealer who specialized in old textiles.

"I decided to try applying what I learned from her to restoring old christening gowns," she said.

Libbey procures her vintage gowns from England, Australia, Scotland, France and the United States, often through Internet auction sites.

"The type of gowns I like to buy are the old, yellowed ones people have found in their attic," Libbey said. "I've bought some nasty looking things that turned out lovely."

To prove her point, Libbey displayed some gowns dating to the 1830s and 1850s, whose delicate-looking fabrics have been restored to a sparkling white.

She uses various restoration processes, including boiling fabrics in a large kettle.

"I just stir and stir. My family jokes that I'm stirring my cauldron," she said, laughing.

Some fabrics may take a week of soaking to restore.

"My husband complains that there's always something in the bathtub!" Libbey said.

Libbey tries to date each gown that she restores. Some items she acquires come with histories, including the names and christening dates of the children who wore them. She provides as much historical information to her customers as she can.

"It seems that the younger people want brand new things," Libbey said. "I love making new gowns, too, but there are also people out there who have the appreciation I do for the history and craftsmanship of these old gowns. When I'm restoring one, I always wonder 'Who wore this?'"

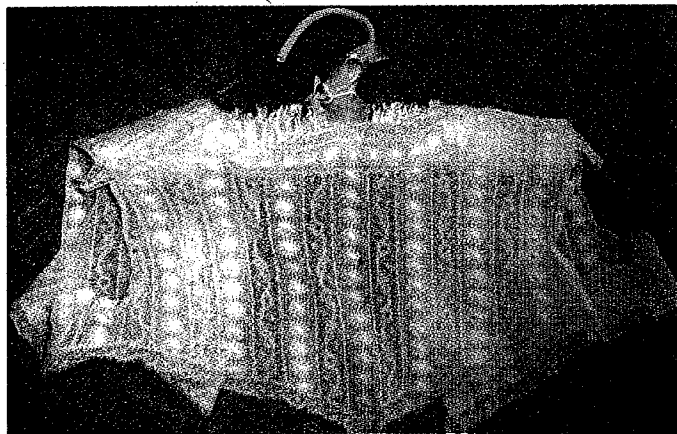
In addition to restoring the gowns, Libbey makes heirloom quality slips worn under the gowns, hand-embroidered with the child's name and date of either birth or christening. The slip can then be passed to other family members, with names and dates added along the way.

Libbey estimates that she



Vickie Libbey displays a christening gown she made for granddaughter Ava, now 2. The gown incorporates new and old fabrics to create a personal heirloom-quality garment.

LIA RUSSELL PHOTOS



Libbey salvages pieces of fabric from antique christening gowns that cannot be fully restored. This lace bodice will be used to make a new gown.

has restored three dozen gowns and several bonnets, and she has at least an equal number waiting for restoration. The process can take more than 30 hours for each garment, and Libbey says she goes over "every little inch" of each gown.

Considering the amount of time that restoration takes, for Libbey, the process alone provides fulfillment.

"The great thing about buying an antique gown is that you get such incredibly fine craftsmanship," she said. "If I was to create a brand new gown with the amount of hand stitching that's found in the old gowns, I would have to charge thousands of dollars, because it is so labor intensive."

Although her customers know Libbey as a talented seamstress, many have no idea that she is also deaf. At 25, pregnant with her second

child, Libbey contracted a virus that damaged nerves in both her ears.

She learned to overcome her handicap by lip-reading, which she taught herself. She copes with everyday events by using e-mail to communicate and selling her items through the White Rabbit, a children's clothing store in Ghent.

Because she doesn't get to meet many of her clients, she keeps an album of photographs sent to her showing children wearing her creations.

"That is what I enjoy the most," she said. "Actually getting to see children wearing my clothes. That is the reason I love my work."

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