TUCSON’S SQUAW DRESS INDUSTRY

by
Angelina R. Jones and Nancy J. Parezo

Flora Kornmuller lived in Tucson, Arizona, in the late 1950s while her husband was stationed at Davis Monthan Air Force base. As a city employee, she admired how her co-workers dressed up for the annual Fiesta de los Vaqueros rodeo. Along with Copper Days and the Tucson Festival, it was one of post-WWII Tucson’s biggest events. Held each February, the three celebrations brought thousands of tourists to town, much as the Gem and Mineral Show does today. Every year, people dressed up in special attire that demonstrated their loyalty to the community and its traditions. Newspaper photographs captured resplendently dressed citizens enjoying various social events. Men donned jeans, cowboy or guayabera shirts, cowboy hats, and bolo ties, while women wore flowing, full, brightly colored, and richly decorated cotton dresses that swirled when they moved. Called squaw dresses, or Fiesta wear, they were a special symbol of life in the Old Pueblo throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s.¹

Because she expected that her husband would soon be transferred elsewhere, Flora Kornmuller purchased a Tucson-made blue georgette squaw dress from Indian Village for forty dollars. To her, the dress symbolized Tucson and its border culture. It would revive fond memories when she wore it, and enable her to show new acquaintances Tucson’s special dress style.

As it turned out, Flora and her husband stayed in Tucson—but she still got plenty of use out of her squaw dress. She wore it at work.

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during many rodeo celebrations to showcase her Americanness and the Southwest. The dress became a symbol of place. One year, for example, a photograph of Flora dressed in her special attire and standing in front of the San Xavier Mission graced the front of the Kornmullers' Christmas cards. The dress was a symbol of self and of Flora's place in the Tucson community, available for the entire world to see.

Flora Kornmuller was not unique. Many women in the late 1940s and the 1950s wore versions of the ubiquitous southwestern fashion. The trend began in Arizona and New Mexico, spread to Southern California, and became a national style with mass-produced versions of the squaw dress sold by JCPenney and other department stores. Fashion was big business in post-WWII Arizona. In 1953, the *Tucson Daily Citizen* touted the local fashion scene (which included designing, producing, and selling clothing) as “[a] new industry which promises to add much stability to the economy of Tucson and the state.” One reporter estimated that fashion brought about eight million dollars into Arizona's economy each year. Although this figure is probably high (a 1955 article claimed that the Arizona fashion industry generated four million dollars a year for the state), fashion was undeniably a lucrative business, especially for women entrepreneurs and laborers. As an enterprise and a symbol, the squaw dress defined the late 1940s and the 1950s for Arizona women.

The iconic squaw dress was the catalyst for Arizona's fashion industry. The style, with its ethnically diverse influences and emphasis on a special region, was a successful visual representation of the state. Despite the dress's commercial success, most people today do not recognize its importance in Tucson history, thinking of it only as the precursor to square dance attire. This little-known story of post-WWII Tucson economic success illustrates how creative businesswomen helped establish a viable industry in southern Arizona.

The Squaw Dress as Arizona and Southwest Attire

Europeans and Euro-Americans have famously borrowed and adapted (some would say appropriated) many items produced by
Two-piece georgette squaw dress with navy, white, and gold trim bought by Flora Kornmuller for $40.00 at Tucson's Indian Village shop in 1958. AHS Cat. #02.37.1A, B.
various American Indian cultures, including food, tobacco, place names, motifs, and imagery. Since the contact period, they have also copied American Indian ornamental styles in clothing (snow shoes, moccasins, and fur parkas come readily to mind). The squaw dress is no exception to the historic fascination with American Indian clothing and its reinterpretation by non-Native designers for the Euro-American market. Reinterpreted garments have utilized Indian materials and production techniques to embellish Euro-American silhouettes with Indian-inspired patterns or decorations.

American designers gained prominence in ready-to-wear and casual clothing realms in the 1930s, as resort wear became a critical component of the tourist industry in Arizona, California, and New Mexico. During WWII, when American rather than European designers determined what American women wore, Arizonans and New Mexicans began envisioning attire that employed a combination of Spanish and Southwest American Indian designs and styles. Scoop-necked blouses with full sleeves created a pseudo-peasant look that was associated with Mexican, Spanish, and Hispanic clothing. This style was combined with Navajo and Western Apache-inspired long, tiered skirts, which like the blouses, were often embroidered. Turquoise and silver jewelry completed the ensemble. The geometric designs and earth tones found in Navajo weavings were adapted to fabrics.

The Tucson squaw dress emerged from this base. Wartime shortages in the West encouraged designers to look toward Mexico. *Huapaches* (Mexican sandals) became popular from California to Texas, and were frequently advertised in *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Hand-painted Mexican skirts and embroidered cotton blouses, imported because they did not require ration coupons, were frequently seen in Santa Fe. Mixing Mexican and Native American clothing with Euro-American fashion became common in the Southwest. As the postwar American fashion industry decentralized, Los Angeles evolved as the center for casuals, sportswear, and beach attire; Dallas for sportswear and daily wear; and New York for evening wear, business attire, and high fashion. Arizona became noted for resort clothes, casual wear, and special occasion attire—all of which were combined in the ubiquitous squaw dress.

The Tucson squaw dress is a shirtwaist garment with a full skirt or a blouse-and-skirt ensemble. The designation actually
Evidence of the squaw dress becoming national, or mainstream, attire can be seen in newspaper advertisements like this one from JC Penny Co., ca. 1957. Folder 24, Marcie Sutland Collections, AHS Technical Library.

refers to three styles: 1) a garment with a straight, or slightly gathered, skirt based on contemporary Navajo dress; 2) a dress with a “broomstick,” or pleated, skirt based on Navajo, Western Apache, and Mexican attire; and 3) a fully gathered, three-tiered skirt based on contemporary Western Apache and Tohono O’odham cotton camp dresses and Navajo attire. The latter were also called “fiesta” dresses, while the former were referred to as “Navajo” dresses. Bodices were generally made of the same material as the skirt. They
usually followed the Navajo pattern with a v-shaped neckline and standard pointed collar. If designed as a two-piece ensemble, the shirt was worn tucked into the waist. Sleeve length varied—from sleeveless to full length, cuffed or cuff-less (although three-quarter sleeves were most common). Sleeve styles included fitted, puffed, belled, and flared. The skirt with “broomstick pleats” was less full than the Navajo prototype or the tiered skirts; some versions even had a slightly A-line appearance. All styles were decorated with rickrack, appliqué, painted designs, or other trims on the skirts, while the trim on the bodice and sleeves was more variable. The most common squaw dress, a style prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, was the square dance prototype, often in a bright color, such as turquoise, and decorated with zigzag trim. Dresses were frequently accessorized with silver and turquoise jewelry.8

The Tucson Squaw Dress Industry

It is difficult to pin down exactly when the Tucson-produced squaw dress entered the U.S. fashion market. Reporter Bernice Cosulich mentions that the broomstick skirts, copied from Apache Indians, appeared in Tucson in 1947.9 The timing is revealing. The squaw dress was fundamentally influenced by both the aesthetics and sartorial message of Christian Dior’s “New Look” that dominated the subsequent decade. The fact that the two fashions rose and fell between 1947 and 1957 suggests their close connection.

We know for certain that Cele Peterson was an early Tucson designer of squaw dresses. Born in Bisbee in 1909, she attended the University of Arizona before moving to Washington, D.C. Peterson returned to Tucson and opened her first store in 1931. Thereafter, she played an important role in promoting fashion in Tucson and throughout southern Arizona. Peterson recalled that she began selling broomstick and three-tiered skirts in the 1930s, as did retailers in Santa Fe. “I didn’t design them,” she explained. “I lifted them. The Indian women were already wearing them, both kinds. You saw them everywhere.”10 Peterson began designing squaw dresses shortly after the end of World War II.11 One example, a black dress constructed in her boutique shop circa 1947 and preserved in the Arizona Historical Society (AHS) collections, consists of a separate blouse and skirt.12 The blouse features a v-neck with a turndown collar. A machine-embroidered pattern of white thread decorates
Two-piece black squaw dress made in Cele Peterson’s shop in Tucson, early 1950s. AHS Cat. #95.29.45A,B.
the yoke, making a “v” shape that mimics the neckline; a line of the same pattern is embroidered along the length of the three-quarter raglan sleeves, from the shoulder to the cuff. The calf-length skirt consists of three tiers. The first two tiers are embroidered with white thread bands similar to those on the blouse. The bottom tier displays six appliqué thunderbirds, with rhinestone eyes, around the skirt’s circumference. The thunderbird is a common motif found in Navajo and Zuni jewelry and a stereotypic symbol of generic Indianness. It actually derives from American Indian Church symbolism that traders asked Native jewelers to incorporate in their work. Squaw dress designers often fashioned their own versions of supposed Indian symbols.

Intended for an upper-middle and upper class clientele, the squaw dresses Peterson sold in her stores were restrained in comparison to their counterparts made during the squaw dress’s heyday and intended for a more popular audience. Dresses made for wealthier patrons had little or no embellishment. A prime example from Peterson’s studio is a crisp white cotton dress with an accordion pleated skirt has three tiers and falls to calf length.

Another sign of the exclusivity of dresses sold by shops such as Cele Peterson’s is that she stopped selling the style shortly after squaw dresses became widely produced. “I only stayed with it a short time . . . ,” she recalled. “I did not manufacture them [squaw dresses] you know, like turning them out so the public could buy them right and left. There were other companies that came into Tucson, that were already here that really went into it and it was great that they did; I had other fish to fry.” Peterson likened squaw dresses to pearls, originally worn by the upper classes and now a timeless symbol of elegance. She credited Dolores Barceló Gonzales for expanding the style, and its market, by repeatedly reinvigorating the squaw dress in the 1950s.

Dolores Barceló Gonzales was born in Sonora, Mexico, in 1907. Her family fled that country’s civil unrest in 1911, and lived in Douglas before moving to Los Angeles in 1920. The Gonzales family moved to Tucson in 1938, and Dolores followed in 1940. One of the many entrepreneurs and businesswomen who successfully developed the squaw dress industry in Tucson, Gonzales and her brother Richard Barceló bought their sister Maria Barceló’s dress
shop at 144 N. Stone Avenue after WWII and began experimenting with the broomstick skirt. The result was a heavily trimmed tiered skirt that is the hallmark of the 1950s’ squaw dress. All of Gonzales’s dresses were made in a converted house on West Council Street. According to Dolores’s son, Lee Gonzales, the store, called the Dolores Shop, received orders from “all over the world.” Dolores also had market outlets in Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Louis, and New York. In 1956, a Los Angeles Times reporter dubbed her “The Dior of the Desert.” 15 Major department stores sent buyers to the Dolores Shop to purchase dresses that sold for $100 to $300 ($800 to $2,400 in 2009 dollars). 16 JCPenney offered to carry Dolores’s line of dresses for $19, but the price was too low for her to agree to the venture. 17

The popular Dolores brand squaw dresses attracted women of all ages and ethnic groups, and from all parts of the country. Women who could afford to buy designer dresses included several of Gonzales’s styles. Women who could only afford one dress, as a souvenir or for special events, also purchased from the Dolores Shop. Gonzales’s creations were particularly popular as square dancing attire in Indianapolis during the 1950s and 1960s. “They take square dancing very seriously there,” Dolores explained. 18 Her squaw dresses had just the right flare when worn with multiple crinolines.

A number of high profile women bought Gonzales’s dresses. Lucile Hanna Pyle, the wife of Arizona governor Howard Pyle, wore a Gonzales squaw dress to a governor’s ball in Seattle, Washington. Lynn Toski, the wife of golf champion Bob Toski, posed in a Dolores dress for a Dolores Shop advertisement that she made with her husband. 19 The Dolores Shop also made dresses for the 1956 Miss National Photographers’ Queen, the singer Anna Maria Alberghetti, and Patricia Nixon. 20 First Lady Mamie Eisenhower described her Dolores dress in a letter to Gonzales as being “a lovely shade of blue . . . the brightly colored trimming around the hem serves as a striking contrast to the simplicity of the dress.” 21 Gonzales’s creations came to represent a main fashion style of the American Southwest to the nation at large.

Because all Gonzales dresses were manufactured in Tucson, the Dolores Shop provided jobs for seamstresses in the 1950s, as did Faye Creations, Inc. and Georgie of Arizona. In the fall of
1953, the Dolores resort wear factory employed “20 workers and new machines [were] added as rapidly as new workers [could] be trained.” By the mid 1950s, at least thirty workers produced the Pima cotton dresses designed and cut by Gonzales. At this time, the Dolores Shop moved into a larger store to accommodate its growing clientele.

While the Dolores Shop’s dress fabrication was a boon to the Tucson economy, Gonzales purchased cloth and notions, particularly trim, locally in Arizona and elsewhere. Pima cotton was a homegrown staple, but Dolores also imported velveteen cloth from Italy and trims from Mexico and Guatemala. These imported materials provided sophistication to her dresses. They also underscore the point that the 1950s’ squaw dress was a cultural amalgamation, rather than an exact replica of American Indian attire.22

According to her family, Dolores ran the creative side of the business, designing, cutting, and supervising the manufacture of the dresses. Dolores’s brother, Richard Barceló, was her business partner. According to Barceló’s son, also named Richard, his father “had been working for a distributorship, and had some business acumen,” when Richard and Dolores bought the store from their sister.23

It was common for family members, usually a husband and wife, to run their squaw-dress manufacturing and retailing businesses together. At least five of the ten apparel businesses listed as dress sellers at the 1953 first annual “Made in Tucson Exhibition” were run by husband and wife teams. The Dolores Shop, of course, was a brother-and-sister operation.24 The division of labor varied, depending on the business and the family partnership. Marcie Sutland, a Tucson-based fashion illustrator, took notes on the labor division of several companies participating in the 1953 exhibition. In the case of Alpha of Tucson, Martin Coleman was in charge of silk screening fabrics, while his wife designed the fashions. At Kosta Western Dandees, a company that specialized in trim for squaw dresses, I. H. Kosta was the designer while Mrs. Kosta was the business manager. Both Dolores Barceló Gonzales and Richard Barceló designed and manufactured squaw dresses for Dolores Sportswear, which suggests a balanced partnership, both in terms of creativity and business management. The fact that the business continued to thrive after Richard left in 1955 to work in
Commercial photograph of squaw dresses made by Dolores Barceló Gonzales, taken on the Catalina Foothills property of artist Ted DeGrazia, ca. 1960. Western Ways Collection, MS 1255, AHS-SAD.
Two-piece white cotton squaw dress with embroidered black musical designs made by Mickey Hood Huber for her daughter in 1953. AHS Cat. #01.36.1A,B.

New York City is a testament to Gonzales’s abilities as a businesswoman and a designer.25

Many Tucson stores sold squaw dresses during the height of their popularity. In 1958, Mickey Hood Huber saw a squaw dress, with three musical notes on the skirt, for sale at the Switzer Store at 45 E. Pennington. Inspired to make a similar dress for her daughter Dianne to wear at Future Farmers of America (FFA) events in Tucson, Huber took the theme a step further by embroidering a music staff around the skirt’s circumference using the FFA theme song. Dianne Huber wore her music note squaw dress, with full crinolines and a concho belt borrowed from Mickey Huber’s niece, when she was crowned “State Sweetheart.”26 This story not only demonstrates that squaw dresses were sartorial expressions of individuality and of belonging in Arizona but also illustrates that they were produced domestically as well as commercially throughout the 1940s, 1950s,
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and early 1960s. Patterns were readily available; even today, they can be bought under the rubric of square-dance attire.

Competition among designers was intense in the early 1950s. By 1953, a number of designers advertised that their version of the squaw dress was unique and the most beautiful. Designer Betty Johnson of Wickenberg, who also owned Johnson’s Dress Shop in Scottsdale, advertised that her dresses were both original and authentic, because they were based on “ideas derived directly from authentic Indian garments” seen in the Indian Fashion Show. They were more than replicas, she assured her customers: “They’re truly different!”

The Indian Fashion Show, an innovative outreach program of the Denver Art Museum, designed and emceed by Frederic H. Douglas, a noted anthropological specialist of Native American attire, provided authenticity, as well as stylistic ideas, for Tucson designers like Johnson. Developed in 1941 and presented at eight venues throughout the United States before Douglas enlisted in the army in 1942, and more than 150 times between 1947 and Douglas’s death in 1956, the program consisted of fifty-three “colorful, imaginative, and ingenious” ensembles from thirty-five different North American Indian societies made between 1830 and 1950. The Indian Fashion Show was designed to be educational—to help promote inter-racial understanding by dramatically pointing out resemblances among peoples of different races; to widen people’s horizons; and to show that other cultures have aesthetic merits that can be admired in Euro-Americans terms. Douglas wanted to teach Americans to overlook the “slight superficial differences between the races,” and dismantle the barriers among people by borrowing and adapting fashions.

The Indian Fashion Show was held three times in Tucson: at the University of Arizona, under the sponsorship of the Arizona State Museum in 1948 and 1951, and as part of the Tucson Festival in 1952. Festival coordinator and University of Arizona anthropology professor Clara Lee Tanner discussed how Indian women had an eye for style and demonstrated “how Indian costumes have been copied by modern designers.” Douglas noted the nationwide acceptance of the squaw dress.

The “Fashions of the Southwest” style show that accompanied the Indian Fashion Show supported Douglas’s observation. Pro-
duced under the direction of Peter Marroney, the gala event began with Western Apache dances. Next, a series of historic sketches, written by Dr. Fairfax Proudfit Walkup, treated the audience to “high fashion, with a wonderfully smooth blending of old and new.” The first skit, designed to represent the sixteenth century, included Apache dancers, Navajo artist Harrison Begay, and women modeling a play suit with a crimson lined cape designed by Bertha Wright. For the seventeenth century skit, Gonzales modeled a white cotton dress stamped with vivid Indian symbols around the hem, topped with a snug-fitting bolero jacket. The eighteenth and nineteenth century sections introduced more variety: a Catalonian duchess, pioneer women, a Mormon Battalion lady, and a young woman circa 1865. The old and the new were paired as contemporary designers commented on how historic styles had affected their work. Next, Geòrgie of Arizona showed squaw dresses of 1852, 1952, and 2052. Arizona Originals featured a Fiesta squaw dress that combined “Mexican colors” with “Navajo style.” Novel Tucson-produced fashions based on Apache pants, Pueblo styles, Pima cotton dresses with Tohono O’odham basketry symbols, and western wear substantiated Douglas’s call to eliminate cultural barriers.

The presentations demonstrated that the squaw dress was distinctive, Native American- and Mexican-inspired. It was associated with Tucson and the border region’s “blended culture.” However, it was not so place specific as to constitute folk dress. Two factors contributed to its regional and national success. First, the dress’s silhouette, which fell within the sartorial framework of international fashion; and second, the rise in popularity of resort wear, which coincided with a national emphasis on leisure, suburbanization, isolationism, and nostalgic patriotism. The latter was “reflected in a rejection of international modes in favor of national styles, often those of the past.” And what could be more national than adapting native attire? The squaw dress was also popular because it played so well on the dominant styles of the day, especially the “New Look.” Although the silhouette was the same, the use of Indian design gave the squaw dress new expression. It allowed regional designers to experiment in ways that were impossible in Paris or New York. It was a fashion statement rooted in Arizona.

Nationally, Arizona-designed attire—especially from Tucson—was the hottest look in 1953, as the Arizona Fashion Council, created
in 1952 to promote Arizona’s fashion business nationwide, took samples on a cross-country promotional tour. Lenore Brundige, fashion editor for the *Pittsburgh Press*, pronounced the show “thoroughly American in concept,” while noting that the “basic designs for clothing stem from Indian costumes of the Apache, Hopi, Navajo, and other tribes.” Arizona Originals featured Apache shirts (with beaded button yoke), Apache warrior pants (knee-length peddle pushers), and squaw dresses with multicolored horizontal stripes on a broomstick skirt. Designer Jerome displayed Navajo dresses with Indian motifs (geometric Anasazi pottery designs) on raw silk and desert cocktail dresses reminiscent of the Great Lakes dresses, while Georgie of Arizona contributed red velveteen (Navajo-style) princess jackets worn with frontier pants, and the increasingly popular squaw dress in shades of turquoise, purple, cream, rose, rust, and gold.
Brundige declared the designs “refreshingly individual” and the clothing perfect for “comfortable, easy going living.” The Indian-inspired motifs were “as genuinely American as the hot-dog.”

The popularity of squaw dresses created jobs in Tucson, not only for manufacturers and retailers, but for women who modeled the dresses. The Arizona Fashion Council hired models to work for many manufacturers around Arizona. Marian Lusk (Stevenson), for example, was a University of Arizona student and member of Alpha Epsilon sorority who modeled for Georgie of Arizona and Arizona Shirt Company, Inc. It is worth noting that although Lusk modeled for commercial manufacturers, she seems to have highly valued the squaw dresses her mother, Ethel, made for her. She kept two of them for more than three decades before donating them to AHS, where they are preserved for posterity.

An article in the Woman’s View section of the Tucson Daily Citizen from 1957 shows the pride Tucsonans took in their local fashion and models. Entitled “Local Designers Capture Fiesta Mood!” and accompanied by five photographs, it mentions each designer, as well as each model pictured. The article suggests that, even though the Arizona Fashion Council managed models for hire, many manufacturers selected family members to don their fashions for publicity shots. The Vos Twins, modeling for Mae Vos in the September 1952 University of Arizona Kitty Kat, are a case in point.

Squaw Dresses Transformed

Every dress style eventually loses momentum as fashion constantly changes to maintain consumer interest. Usually styles fade away and are replaced by other styles, only to be marketed years later as retro-fashions. For example, the 1950s’ squaw dress was rediscovered as part of the 1990s’ and 2000s’ vogue for vintage fashion. A notice in the July 20, 1994 San Francisco Chronicle noted that the 1950s’ and 1960s’ squaw dresses were popular items at Morning State Vintage Clothing, a store that specialized in resale clothing. Teenage girls were especially attracted to turquoise dresses to wear at graduation parties.

Modern equivalents of the squaw dress—minus the politically incorrect name—are seen in the “Santa Fe Style,” or “Southwest Style.” This style utilizes cloth and full broomstick and tiered skirts.
In the 1990s a new “Indian Look” was combined with a romanticized image of the West. This is seen most clearly in the attire produced by Ralph Lauren and labeled “Cowgirl chic” by Cathy Smith, who designed the attire for the 1990 motion picture *Dances With Wolves*. A host of other California, New York, Santa Fe, and Phoenix western wear designers note that the source of their inspiration is 1880s Plains Indian attire, not Navajo, Tohono O’odham, and Western Apache attire. Plains Indian style, characterized by leather, fringe, beaded bodices, and beaded accessories, is combined with cowboy, military, or prairie sartorial symbols inspired by both menswear and womenswear. Vests, jeans, long leather skirts, and beaded jackets, accessorized with concha belts and turquoise jewelry, predominate. Denim work shirts are combined with silk- or cotton-tiered or broomstick skirts descending from the squaw dress. These skirts remain a staple of western style, as well as the basis for numerous hybrid styles that anthropologist Andrea Gillespie calls “Cowboy Couture.” They are still available in a number of mail order catalogues.

The squaw dress was adopted as specialty wear, and as such became a costume that refuses to go out of style. Tucson squaw dresses were transformed into square dance attire as the modern western square dance movement blossomed in the 1930s and 1940s, and expanded from Ohio to California following WWII. Designed to preserve American folk dance and to standardize calls, dance steps, and attire, the vogue for square dancing, particularly in the Midwest, contributed to the success of the 1950s’ squaw dress, which became the underlying standard for women’s attire as the square dance look. The style included single- or two-piece cotton dresses with wide broomstick or tiered skirts and a puff-sleeve blouse worn over multiple layers of crinolines. This costume was eventually standardized in an official dress code for square dance clubs and competitions, which meant that every female dancer had to have one. Cele Peterson attested to the popularity of square dancing in the 1950s and 1960s. “That’s when the dresses really and truly came into their own,” Peterson recalled. They were now associated, not just with Tucson and the Southwest, but with ranching and community get-togethers throughout the rural West.

In 1948, *Vogue* ran an advertisement for McMullens Country Style square dancing dresses designed by Dorothy Cox. The advertisement shows two women standing among crates in the
This calico pioneer-style dress with rickrack braid, by Arizona Originals, became a favorite for square dance teams, and has been widely copied. Western Ways Collection, MS 1255, AHS-SAD.
outdoors. They each wear black blouses with cap sleeves and scoop necks. One model twirls so that her four-tiered skirt billows. The other model, whose skirt displays a light flower print on a dark background, is bending down to adjust her shoe. This national magazine advertisement underscores how early the tiered skirts of the squaw dress were associated with square dancing.

Several Arizona designers and retailers capitalized on the association. A 1951 advertisement for the Arizona Shirt Company depicts a man and a woman square dancing. The man wears a cowboy hat, button-down shirt, denim pants, and cowboy boots; the woman wears a “popular Arizona Squaw Dress of wrinkled Navaho-Red Patio Cloth.” The color reference is meant to associate the dress closely with the Southwest and the Navajo people. Similarly, Maurice’s Tucson dress shop advertised squaw dresses and square dancing dresses “in original styles, at low prices” in the September 1952 University of Arizona Kitty Kat. Square dancing was popular with the college-aged demographic, and Tucson squaw dresses were common apparel. The association also occurred on a state level. By 1954, the Arizona Fashion Council was prominently marketing squaw dresses as square dancing attire at its showings for store buyers from across the United States.

From Regional Attire to Treasured Heirlooms

Unlike other fashion cycles in which a style is introduced, grows in acceptance, reaches a plateau, and then declines as consumer demand tapers off, the squaw dress never became obsolete. It dropped out of mainstream fashion, only to regain preeminence as a modified regional dress most notably equated with the Santa Fe style. Nevertheless, production of squaw dresses declined in Tucson and Phoenix with the change of silhouette in 1957, so that by the 1960s the squaw dress was considered a specialty costume. Today, they are valuable heirlooms.

Although Tucson never had a defining regional fashion after the 1950s, during its heyday the squaw dress industry was nationally recognized and completely self-sustained. The popular and uniquely southwestern dresses were designed, manufactured, sold, modeled, and worn in the Old Pueblo. They still evoke nostalgic memories of Tucson and the Southwest among collectors across the country and around the world.
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NOTES

1. The authors use the word “squaw” in this article to refer to a named dress style popular in the late 1940s through the 1950s. It is not used in any derogatory sense. For our analysis of the term “squaw dress” see, Nancy J. Parezo and Angelina Jones, “What’s In a Name?: The 1940s-1950s Squaw Dress,” American Indian Quarterly, vol. 33 (Summer, 2009), pp. 373-404. We would like to thank the staff of the Arizona Historical Society (AHS) for their extensive assistance with this article. Thanks to Curator Laraine Daly Jones for supporting our project and particularly for her help in choosing illustrations and writing photo captions. We also thank Publications Director Bruce Dinges and collections and library and archives staff at the AHS Southern Division, Tucson; Kelley Hays-Gilpin, Dan Strehl, and Cele Peterson; and all of the squaw dress owners who spoke with us. Unless otherwise stated, all archival materials are from the AHS/Tucson collections.

2. Flora Kornmuller interview, November 2006, authors’ files.

3. AHS/Tucson Object Catalogue # 02.37.1 A, B.

4. “Cash Registers Jingle Sweetly,” Tucson Daily Citizen, October 2, 1953, p. 8, in Marcie Sutland biographical file, AHS/Tucson Technical Library. Note that the source does not say whether this amount was made through wholesale or retail sales, or both. Nor does it explain how the estimate was calculated. Regardless, it shows that fashion was an important part of the southern Arizona economy.


6. Ready-to-wear clothing is mass manufactured and sold by retailers. Resort wear, in the sense it was used during the era of the squaw dress’s popularity, refers to clothing worn at a specific vacation spot or resort; it is, therefore, region specific. The term is now used to refer generally to clothing lines that are worn during the summer months.

7. Navajo women bunched their waistbands around a broomstick and then tied the skirt tightly with string. The resulting accordion-style pleats created a controlled wrinkle that gave the skirt a unique style. The broomstick skirt was often referred to as an Apache skirt. The style derived from the Western Apache outfit—a full, gathered, and tiered skirt with a loose overblouse.

8. See Parezo and Jones, “What’s In a Name?” for the history of the word “squaw” and how the dress acquired its unique moniker.


11. Barbara C. G. Green, “A Lifetime of Style: Honoring Local Fashion Icon Cele Peterson,” Tucson Guide (Winter 2006-2007), p. 128; Cele Peterson oral history, AV 0389-03, p. 9, AHS/Tucson, Library and Archives. During an interview with Jones, Peterson claimed that she did not, in fact, design squaw dresses, but instead “lifted them” from American Indian women. This is an example of direct cultural borrowing. However, Peterson’s dresses are not exact replications of Navajo and Western Apache attire on which they were modeled. By modifying attire that she observed American Indian women wearing, Peterson was effectively designing a new garment that was influenced by an existing garment. We, therefore, refer to Cele Peterson as a designer of squaw dresses.

12. AHS/Tucson Object Catalogue # 95.29.45 A, B.

13. See photograph in Fashion Folder 373c, Box 24, Western Ways Collection, MS 1255, AHS/Tucson, Library and Archives.


15. Henry, “Dior of the Desert,” pp. D-1 and 4. The shop was originally called Irene Page. The pleated-skirt designs were based on the daily wear of Sonoran women.

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19. "Dolores Shop Now Occupies New Location." It is interesting to note that both of the former instances of public figures wearing squaw dresses come from sources contemporaneous to the popularity of the squaw dress and neither use the names of the women in question, only the names of their husbands.
20. The authors were unable to determine the name of the 1956 Miss National Photographers' Queen.
22. "Dolores Shop Now Occupies New Location."
24. This description is based on notes taken by Tucson-based fashion illustrator Marce Sutland at the 1953 exhibition. Sutland worked for Cele Peterson and donated her source files to AHS. Her notes, along with a program for the 1953 "Made in Tucson Exhibition," are in "Tucson 1950s," Sutland biographical file. The businesses Sutland specifically mentions as owned by husband-and-wife teams are: Arizona Originals (a division of Arizona Shirt Company), owners Mr. and Mrs. William Macey; Alpha Sportswear, Mr. and Mrs. Martin Coleman; Faye Creations, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Cohen; Kosta Western Dandees, Mr. and Mrs. I. H. Kosta; Georgie of Arizona, Mr. and Mrs. George Fine. Sutland also notes that Dolores Gonzales and Richard Barceló ran Dolores Resortwear.
26. The dress is in the AHS/Tucson collections. Object Catalogue # 01.36.1 A, B. AHS also has photographs of Dianne Huber wearing the dress.

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36. AHS/Tucson, Object Catalogue numbers 97.35.1 A, B; and 01.23.1 A, B.
38. This is inferred from the observation that models for three of the five featured designers had the same last name as the owner of the business—Alpha Sportswear model Victoria Coleman, Arizona Originals model Frances Smith Cohen, and Dolores Resortwear models Betty and Mary Barceló.