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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Short Pants Note Brought Reaction

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THAT "SHORT PANTS" reference last week brought some interesting reaction. The consensus among people to whom I talked in the Mt. Stewart area was that the short ones went out somewhere in the 1920's, perhaps in the middle of that decade.

That idea is subject to amendment – none of us was sure of the time – but that was the nearest time period we could suggest.

Dick Rosser, Architect writes me about his experiences in England which is somewhat different, but none the less interesting.

"At 14 years old in 1938", he writes "I had my first pair of long trousers." Here he explains that "pants" are undergarments and the proper term is "trousers". But in my days at school the term we used was "short pants".

But the long trousers he wore at 14 were only for "best" wear. He "wore shorts for at least the best part of the following year".

Both fashion and economics contributed to this state of affairs, Mr. Rosser explains.

Rules Dictated Fashion

"FASHION WAS synonymous with school rules, Council as well as public school, and rules strictly demanded short trousers as lower school uniform.

"More than just that, the rules required grey flannel, and this was expensive. Trousers had to be 'handed down' as long as they survived the rigor of schoolboy activity. Short trousers, being cheaper than long ones, were economically popular with mothers.

"The distinct advantage was that they also catered to a wider age range by the simple expedient of being turned up at the leg and being progressively turned out again; the traditional school 'color belt' was used to camouflage the variations in waist sizes.

"Incidentally so popular were short trousers that 'double seats' were offered so that a prudent mother had a reasonable guarantee of clothing, respectably, the younger boys of her family no matter how hard the older boys punished, or had punished their backsides.

Down From The Dads

IN THE '30's, of course, many boys wore short trousers remodeled from Dad's outworn pair; the original legs having moved up in the world in the process."

Mr. Rosser suggests "Undoubtedly the war saw the demise of the short trousers. Many a number one son took over his absent father's wardrobe; clothes rationing prompted this otherwise unforgivable act as it also forced school authority to ease the rule. Added to which, of course, the long trousers kept one warm at night 'down in the shelter'. For the generation that has grown up since 'The War' the reference was to air raid shelters during World War Two – 1939-1945."

He suggests that denim, so loathed by the servicemen as an ill-fitting fatigue dress, was enthusiastically adopted by his sons as one of the fruits of victory.

“The uniformity of grey flannel short trousers has given way, with a few exceptions, to variations of dull theme-faded blue denims.”

Some veteran scout leaders may disagree but I personally agree with those who cheered the move of which Mr. Rosser speaks in this paragraph:

Long Drill For Scouts

“EVEN THAT last stronghold of conservative uniformity, the Boy Scouts, officially acknowledged that Baden Powell’s corduroys could be discarded in favor of long drill.” This came, he believes in 1961.

The above letter brought other interesting comments on the same school dress theme from fellow staff member Stan Bowles.

Stan went to school in London and recalls that in Junior College they wore grey striped trousers, not unlike morning pants. The blue jackets were vest length, or ‘bum freezers’ as they were termed without affection. The brass buttons added to the required uniformity appearance.

The boys had to wear top hats going to school and on the way home in the evening. Oh yes, there were celluloid collars also.

“We used to crumple the top hats up and carry them under our arms when we got out of sight of schools”, he recalls, and that is an easily understandable reaction.