

# The Quest for the Perfect Bra

Bertha was a Babyboomer born in the spring of 1948. She spent her childhood summers digging her way to China in the sand at Bradley Beach, New Jersey. She and her father had matching Hawaiian print bathing suits. Sometimes she wore both her top and bottom, and sometimes she skipped the top. She was just a child. It was the late 1950s and the very beginning of the still-innocent 1960s.

Her undershirt days could not last forever. Pre-pubescent girls in the gym locker room were starting to wear "training bras." Some sported them proudly; others chose to change privately in a bathroom stall, hiding their new "unmentionables."

The training bra was a peculiar phenomenon. Essentially, it was an abbreviated undershirt in the shape of a bra. The important thing was to have that bra shape show through a white Ship 'N Shore blouse with a circle pin on its front Peter Pan collar.

Although she was always a maverick, Bertha was also susceptible to peer pressure. She had to have a training bra; she begged her mother to take her to Bamberger's Young Juniors Department to buy her one. Even though she still had nothing to train, it was imperative to have those bra straps showing through. The girls were purposely wearing white polyester blouses, or pastel beaded sweaters, just to show their little world that bra outline underwear.

Then the day came when the front of the outline began to matter. Those pre-teens whose breasts were not yet budding resorted to desperate measures. Girls who had good rapport with their understanding mothers requested padded bras. Others, shy like Bertha, had to be more creative.

For a year, Bertha locked herself in the bathroom every morning to perform a personalized origami ritual, preparing two folded

toilet-paper squares. On the way to school, as soon as she turned the corner, she would strategically insert these into her training bra (and roll up her skirt a good three inches). She felt these bra supplements gave her silhouette the required contours. Throughout the school day, she would duck into the Girls' room to adjust the squares, which had an alarming tendency to drift off-center inside the training bra. By the end of the day, the



toilet-paper inserts were rather ragged from all this maneuvering.

Finally, she began to "fill out," as the female relatives called it. "You're A Young

Lady Now," proclaimed the menstrual education booklet which arrived, in its plain brown wrapper, compliments of the Modess Company. The inevitable onset of adolescence had hit.

She graduated from a 28AAA to a 32A. It was the Sputnik 1960s, the era of the Rocket Bra. A newspaper ad from March 1959 declared, "Playtex Contour Bras Flatten the Easter Figure." (There is a resurrection motif imbedded deep in that phrase). This Macy's Notions Department ad offered three choices:

(1) "The Magic Circle Lining Bra, with circle-stitched cups [the Rocket Bra] that clear their contours washing after washing, never shrink or twist out of shape" (\$3.95).

(2) "The Magic-Midriff Long-Line, custom-contoured to give you a young uplift [the resurrection promise], with action-ease panels, white cotton marquette" (\$7.95).

(3) "The Beauty-Shape Bra, pre-shaped with a water-thin cup lining to shape your bosom [evolved from the toilet-paper prototype] as it supports it, criss-cross plunge form" (\$4.95).

If Bertha and her mother found a Rocket Bra that seemed to fit okay, they bought a half-dozen. Those were the days before pre-shrunk and pre-washed clothing, so several of the white bras turned pink when accidentally washed with a red garment. (Those were also the days before tie-dye, or those splotted bras would have been quite fashionable).

Over the years, Bertha experienced the entire broad spectrum of varieties of discomfort afforded by the not-quite-right bra. One that, in the fitting room, seemed to fit fine fastened with the middle of its three back-hooks, shrank after one washing and was then painfully tight across the back, each hook jabbing the sufferer in the spine. Or, the straps would then be too short, causing the classic dilemma of riding-up around the ribs, leading in turn to the dis-

mayng case of its contents threatening to spill out the bottom. Or, those contents could try to spill out the sides, yet another way a bra could be too small. Or, after laundering, the Rocket Bra could become dangerously pointy.

Then there was the problem of the too-big bra. Most annoying were bra straps relentlessly slipping off the shoulders until one resorted to safety-pinning them to one's blouse. Or, falling somewhere between a B and a C cup, the frazzled bra-shopper would settle for the C (the B flattening her out too much). She would then find that, even after washing the bra in hot water, the cups were a bit too roomy for her anatomy. Not filling out the cups completely resulted in a silhouette that was all wrong. Modern technology has utilized the full spectrum of experimental synthetics to construct brassieres. The result has been a whole spectrum of difficulties for the wearer, from the heartbreak of unscratchably itchy nipples caused by lace or chiffon bras, to the problems of perspiration and skin suffocation within rubberized bras, to troubling dermatological rashes from intimate contact with questionable materials.

The bra-burning 1970s provided a welcome respite from all this discomfort. In 1969, Bertha was a 21-year-old college senior in the suburbs of New York City, attending anti-war sit-ins and Sensitivity Sessions led by bearded professors. She felt quite counterculture. The women (previously referred to as girls) stopped shaving their legs and armpits, stopped wearing deodorant, let their hair grow out as wildly as Janis Joplin's, and disposed of their bras. Many just let their breasts flop around freely under their shirts. Some wore undershirts to contain them.

Bertha developed certain modesty techniques of her own. Without that visually protective layer of the bra, she felt her chest was too vulnerable to most eyes, so she began adding layers. A T-shirt under a flannel shirt would do fine. Vests became a staple of her wardrobe for quite a while. The vest worked as a sort of external bra, providing some support. Expanding her thrift-store expertise, she developed a sub-specialty of locating shirts with two chest pockets, another external bra solution. If she wore a T-shirt, it had to be patterned or dark to minimize the nipple-revolution dilemma. This went on for years.

In the late 1980s, the advent of the Athletic Bra was very welcome. The training bra had made a reappearance, but this time it was functional, designed for serious support and for comfort. It had no underwire (a supreme torture device of the brassiere) and often no hardware whatsoever. Manufacturers like Speedo, Champion, and Jockey For Her joined Maidenform, Olga and

Lily of France in the lingerie departments. The athletic bra was so complete a garment, it could be worn without a shirt, even while dancing or jogging.

The only problem with the athletic bra was its tendency to flatten one out. A woman with this concern could now turn to the Wonder Bra, with its patented "cookies," crescent-moon inserts which lift and expand/compress, creating cleavage where heretofore there was none. On a whim, at a clearance sale, Bertha bought a spandex, black-with-bright-orange-trim, two-piece Speedo swimsuit complete with Wonder Bra. It performed a miracle for her now-voluptuous bust. Sometimes she wore it around the house. It was a novelty item. (For serious swimming she buys, annually, a few Speedo Conservative-Fit suits, with built-in bras and full derriere coverage).

In the late 1990s, as the twentieth century rapidly approached its end, Bertha was shopping in Macy's Intimate Apparel Department, still in pursuit of the perfect bra. She examined an Olga Secret Shaper Maidenform Sweet Nothing Classic Warner's Friday Bra ("seamless cotton no-show-thru under T-shirts, no adjustments, no hardware"), even a Warner's Velvet Beware! She looked at Joe Boxer, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein. She considered bras priced from \$15.99 to \$57.99. She fingered materials ranging from cotton to rayon to satin to lycra/spandex to elastane.

Suddenly there appeared before her a candidate for the Perfect Bra: a black, stretchy, hardware-less number with a soft, wide band under the cups, a halter-type item by a Swiss company named Hanro. She carried a size L into the fitting room, tried it on and put it through the range-of-motion tests. Sure enough, the undergarment did not bind or ride up or slip off or scratch or jab or pucker or flatten. Indeed, it created a flattering, natural silhouette. Eureka! Even at the steep price of \$46.99 each, she bought two.

Soon after, she realized with horror that she must have left one of them behind in the washing machine (a small black shadow stuck deep in the machine at the base of the agitator). It must have been promptly snatched up by a fellow launderer, either a cross dresser or another woman perpetually seeking a perfect bra, because, alas, it was never seen again by Bertha.

Much to her chagrin, Macy's and I. Magnin were both sorry to inform her that Hanro had discontinued that particular style. She had the department manager, the top corsetier, contact the Hanro representative. The next time the Hanro rep was in town, the Macy's top bra lady called Bertha to arrange a private consultation.

Bertha rushed down to Macy's, to explain

her plight to the empathetic rep. Bertha felt she was spokeswoman for countless shoppers, who had finally unearthed the Perfect Bra, only to learn that the model had been discontinued. The rep assured her that, should the company ever reissue that particular bra, she would personally inform Bertha of the miracle.

Two years later, Bertha received The Call: Hanro had reissued its halter bra, and it was for sale, now, at Macy's. Bertha rushed down there on her lunch hour, found the bra department, found the Hanro display, located the halter-type item and, even though she could call immediately by looking at it that it was an inadequate reissue of the original, she tried it on. Sure enough, it was not quite right: too binding, a bit flattening, and it did not pass the range-of-motion test. She did not purchase it.

Bertha wears the remaining Hanro bra day in and day out. She washes it frequently and carefully. After two years of daily wear, however, it is a ~~looking like a rag~~ around the edges, and it even has a few small holes. Its wondrous stretchiness is giving out. "It is starting to ride up a bit. She notices her skirt tugging at it, pulling it down around her ribs every seventeen minutes in the course of the day."

According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the word "bra" comes from the Indo-European root "mreku," making "bra" a relative of the English words "brave," "embraco" and "pretzel." It does take a contortionist, a human stretched to wriggle into or out of a bra, especially if the body is sweaty and the garment rubberized. The brassiere must be a relative of the straight jacket. After decades of daily bra-wearing, one learns secret ways to don and disencumber oneself from the garment while remaining fully clothed. An expert can pull the item out of her shirt sleeve like Houdini, while driving 60 miles per hour down the freeway. Bertha has gotten good at this.

A friend of Bertha's spoke of her brief career as a salesgirl in a lingerie shop.

"My challenge was to glance at a woman as she walked into the shop and be able to estimate her size requirements," using the system of alphabetized cup-sizes (from AAA to DDDD) and numeric torso-girth (from 28 to 46). "It was said that I had potential talent as a corsetier."

In all fairness, a corsetier credential should be awarded to every female Baby Boomer for having survived the Training Bra, the Rocket Bra, the Wonder Bra, and the ongoing shopping challenge to discover the elusive Perfect Bra. ☺