



Connecting with the past through fashion

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DECLAN OUTHIT

Rachel Behling hears a story in every piece of vintage clothing. Wedding dresses speak loudly to her – for example, the 1920s beauty that she dyed a subtle shade of purple. Or the 1940s gown that has found a new home.

Behling is a fan of beautiful things, clothing and accessories worn and loved by others. She deals in quality vintage apparel, attending to each piece before it is carefully displayed at Auburn Vintage Clothiers in Conestogo.

“It stems from my love of theatre,” she says. “I had a costume closet. That’s how it started. It becomes like an obsession almost.”

Behling, who has been involved in theatre



Lynn Haddrall

in Waterloo Region and Vancouver Island, started by collecting items for future theatrical projects. As her closet overflowed, someone suggested she might be good at running a vintage clothing store.

“I took it a big step further and bought an entire collection from another vintage dealer and that’s how I started.” She opened her shop more than three years ago in a historic building in the heart of Conestogo. She created the business name, Auburn, by conflating the first and last name of style

icon Audrey Hepburn.

Some of Behling’s most treasured acquisitions are worn by brides who opt to be married in a repurposed wedding dress.

“A lot of my things were made for a specific individual. They’re not mass-produced; they’re made to fit,” explains Behling. Quality of this kind often requires tailoring, but sometimes the stars align and it’s a perfect fit.

Sandra Annett, a regular at the shop, wanted a unique wedding gown to complement her vintage art deco engagement ring. The ring belonged to her fiancé’s grandmother and dates to the 1920s.

Annett’s search started and ended with a 1940s wedding gown with intricate ruffling, lace details and a long row of delicate buttons on the back. It fit like a glove. Her parents came to visit from Nova Scotia and her mother was at the fitting to fasten the long line of buttons on the back of the gown.

Annett said yes to the dress, but there was more shopping to follow. Her entire wedding party will wear vintage items. It was a lively day in the store when they sampled a variety of eras. Those who couldn’t attend in person participated virtually, provided with a steady stream of pictures.

“As we tried them on, the style developed,” recalls Annett, who is an associate professor of film studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. “They will all be floor-length dresses with narrow profiles. My dress is 1940s, so we’re going 1930s and 1940s for the bridal party. And all in different pastel colours.”

One stepdaughter will wear a powdered gold gown and the other a pale-blue crepe gown with a little half-cape. Annett’s sister will be in silver and her best friend was mulling over pink or purple.

The groom is David Barth, executive director at World Accord International Development Agency. He sat watching his daughters try on dresses and spotted a



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Delicate lace, pleating, and ruffle accents adorn a 1940s wedding gown that will be worn June 9 by a modern bride.

morning jacket from the 1940s.

“He tried that on and it was a good fit, right off the rack. It was meant to be. He could not believe it; he was amazed. His best man has found an outfit in a very similar style,” says Annett.

Behling beams as Annett describes how she found her vintage wedding dress and how her wedding party has embraced the all-vintage concept, including the reception. Annett and Barth met at a local swing-dancing club. You can bet there will be some fun dances after the wedding ceremony. Charleston, anyone?

The store owner often sees first-time visitors venture into the shop and find something that connects with them.

“It’s very hard nowadays to see what a woman’s figure actually looks like. We cover ourselves up,” Behling says. “But as soon as they start trying things on, I can choose a silhouette that would be perfect. It evolves quite naturally. Nine times out of 10, they

will find something that makes them feel really good about their body and themselves, which for me is really important.”

On this day, the self-described “vintage girl on a mission” channels Audrey Hepburn. She’s wearing modern black hose with a vintage feel to complement her black 1960s dress and shoes. It’s a chic Parisian look. Although she identifies most with the 1940s, this style chameleon draws inspiration from all eras. She could just as easily be in a Janis Joplin mood.

“I feel really great in 1970s because it’s long and lean and I like the colours, but I didn’t know that until I opened the store. One of the things I do on purpose is I dress in the most outrageous pieces. It makes me more approachable and starts a conversation.”

Visiting the store turns into a personal experience pretty quickly. Conversations bring people together; couples remember certain items or eras. Men encourage their partners to try something different. The

stories flow.

“Fashion is really a great way to foster community. I have found that people who don’t think they like fashion, or who think they don’t like vintage, they come in and they will always find something that they can connect with and start a conversation,” says Behling. “If you go into a store where there are 50 of the same thing, it’s just not the same. It’s very interesting what happens in this store.”

Behling comes naturally to her appreciation of historic items. She was born a Kaufman, great-granddaughter of M. R. Kaufman (brother of A. R. Kaufman). She grew up in a now-demolished mansion on Margaret Avenue in Kitchener. Mementoes from her well-known family fit perfectly with the high ceilings and exposed brick in her vintage store.

“My family goes everywhere with me,” she says as she points out various heirlooms, including a photograph of her grandfather

on the desk he used. “He watches over me.”

“The chandeliers and the mantel at the front of the store are from the home I grew up in on Margaret Avenue. All of the doors and the ladders are from my grandfather’s lumber mill which was on King Street. He kept all of those things. I can see where my grandfather and I are very similar. He would look at pieces of furniture and remember where they bought it, when they bought it, how much they purchased it for. A client can come in, who hasn’t been in the store for a year, and I’ll say – red dress. It’s the history and where it came from.”

The historical pedigree reveals the difference between items sold in a vintage store and pieces you find in a thrift store. Behling knows the provenance of each item and can tell you what has been done to it. Some pieces are so delicate or historically significant that she will keep them or offer them to a museum.

“I’m a firm believer in history and passing down stories. It doesn’t always have to be orally. Sometimes it’s through fabric. It’s through one piece that’s been held onto – a pristine gown or a sweet little ’60s dress that was worn to a dance.”

Behling curates her items and is picky about what she buys. She buys directly, not on consignment. Her workspace is a beautiful laundry room her husband built where she can meticulously examine each item. She will do any required repairs and make sure everything is freshly laundered before it appears in the store.

“You can’t find this at a thrift store. It’s something that has been loved and it’s in someone’s cedar chest,” she explains. “They have nobody to pass it down to or their children aren’t interested. They want it to go to a place where it’s going to be loved. It’s not thrown away. It’s not put in a bag and taken to landfill. I have a lot of clients who believe in only wearing second-hand and I feel like I’m filling a niche in many

different areas with this store.”

Behling develops strong client relationships and will search for items that customers collect. She also sources vintage in larger sizes. “It is a challenge but I’m up to it. I have sized up to a 26 modern-day.”

These days Behling pays more attention to the educational part of her job. There’s an environmental aspect to repurposing clothing – “mending things, making them into clothes the way people used to.”

She also wants shoppers to understand that wearing vintage can mean adding one spectacular item to your wardrobe or incorporating pieces slowly. It’s important to her that the next generation, such as her teenage daughter, Brontë, appreciate the value in beautiful items, well-crafted and made to last a lifetime.

“I want her to have things that I have made or kept, not something I ran out to buy just because I felt I had to. It’s like slowing things down and really appreciating what you have. Having those special few pieces.”

For avid customers such as Annett, it’s about incorporating vintage items into a modern wardrobe.

“It’s more than just putting clothes on,” Annett says of wearing vintage. “It’s about a feeling.”

That feeling will be at an all-time high on June 9 when Annett dons her wedding gown from the 1940s and walks down the aisle at historic Hauser Hall in Heidelberg. Women in the bridal party will carry vintage brooch bouquets, sourced from local vintage and antiques stores, as well as family and friends.

The gown Annett chose is the first one Behling purchased for her store. She says it’s like saying goodbye to an old friend, but there are many more sartorial treasures to be discovered.

“When the time comes that I am willing to say goodbye, then I know that it’s going to go to someone who loves it as much as I do.” 



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