"I Want a Cotton Dress"

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I WANT A COTTON DRESS. In a few months we shall be enduring the sticky heat of midsummer in Iowa, and I shall need a cotton dress. And anyway I like cotton. It does something to my self-esteem to feel fresh and crisp no matter what the thermometer says. I like the feel of it and the look of it, and above all I like the every-day cleanliness of it. This is not a testimonial for cotton, but a complaint because I can’t find a cotton dress.

When I say I want a cotton dress, I don’t mean a house dress at $1.98, or even one of its more glorified cousins at $5.98, that parade as identical quintuplets on the racks of department stores. I want a cool, sheer, washable cotton dress. I want a well-designed and well-made cotton dress. Moreover I want a cotton dress with some zip to it. It must be a size 18 or 20.

Now all this is the monotonous wail that I have made in every cotton shop and women’s wear department from Dan to Beersheba, summer after summer, and with what results? Answer: I wear rayon on sheer and linen and chiffon.

I believe I am not unique in my demands. I belong to a profession in which standards for dress have to be reasonably high, but I have yet to find a woman, in or out of my profession, who does not search with ever discouraging results for a cotton dress.

I want a cotton street dress. Last summer a friend and I were preparing to attend a meeting for professional people in Chicago. It was toward the end of June and very hot, and though we had been repeating our little formula since February, in desperation we made a final and futile attempt, first in Des Moines and then in Chicago. In the end she found a smart black and white closely woven polka dot cotton print, up to specifications in every respect except as to the paramount one of coolness. Complete with a white linen coat, it cost $35. It would have been ideal for some Labrador lake resort.

I want a cotton afternoon dress. At the first session of the meeting in Chicago on a sultry Sunday afternoon where the large assembly of rather above the average well-dressed women appeared in presumably their best and coolest afternoon frocks, I was able to see just one cotton in all that flock of wilted and perspiration soaked chiffons, and rayons. The wearer said she had made the dress herself from material she had had for a number of years. That let me out.

I want a cotton formal. Well, yes the shops are full of organdies and piques, just the thing for college girls and debutantes. To be sure I once bought a cotton lace, eminently suitable for “the mature woman.” But so did every one else. They still do. In silk materials I have no difficulty in finding every color in the wheel—gorgeous, indefinable shades and tints, gay splashy prints. But I want a cotton dress.

I SPENT A HOT DAY shopping in Memphis. “Ma’am? No, Ma’am, but we have some lovely chiffons. Have you tried the basement?” Finally I found an imported white dotted swiss for $16. Except for the material, it was not distinctive in any way, but it was cool. I wore it to a July Sunday dinner in Greenwood, Miss., down in the heart of the Deep South. I heard much about cotton subsidies and the plight of the cotton grower, but I was the only woman present who had found a cotton dress. Incidentally, that was three years ago and I have found not one white cotton dress other than uniforms since then. Why don’t southern women wear cotton dresses? They can’t find any comparable to other materials in style, and quality and design of material.

Occasionally I find proof that the kind of cotton dress I want does exist. Last summer among the heavy hopsacking and coarsely woven voiles, among the ugly and the ordinary, I found a cotton dress that stood out like a jewel among junk. It was youthful—not kittenish; gay and colorful—not garish; smart—not severe; feminine—not fussy. But it was a size 16.

And now summer is coming on again, and I want a cotton dress!