



PROJECT #1: THE UNDERSHIRT
ALTERING THE PATTERN

Reilly Knowles
Swingout Sewing
swingoutsewing.ca
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My name is Reilly Knowles, and Swingout Sewing is a public journal of my project to handmake a 1920's ensemble that meets my needs as a trans man. All consulted resources are listed in the bibliography of this article, as well as the master bibliography at swingoutsewing.ca. Wherever possible, resources are free for readers to access online. This article was written on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Attawandaron peoples, where I am grateful to live and work.

To start my historical sewing journey, the first thing I had to decide was... well, where to start. Oxford bags and Palm Beach linens were calling my name, but I forced myself to rein in my ambition for the time being, as starting the whole affair with more advanced garments was liable to cause undue frustration. The best course of action, I decided, was to construct my wardrobe from the inside out, starting with the underwear.

I did this for several reasons. Firstly, the foundation layers tend to be of vital importance for trans folks – they shape the chest and groin areas, which can be key for alleviating gender dysphoria and helping to be read as one's gender in public. Secondly, as so aptly put by The Butterick Publishing Company in their 1921 sewing manual, *The New Dressmaker*: “Underwear is the easiest type of sewing. There is practically no fitting to be done and the construction is of the simplest possible kind. It is a very good idea, therefore, for a beginner to start with an underwear garment...”¹ In other words,

¹ The Butterick Publishing Company, *The New Dressmaker* (New York: The Butterick Publishing Company, 1921), 68, <https://archive.org/details/newdressmakerwit00butt/mode/2up>.

sewing the underwear first would be a softball entry into the project, and help to sharpen my skills for more difficult garments later on. Lastly, if the finished project wasn't up to snuff, no one would see it beneath the aforementioned Oxford bags.

Although union suits dominated men's underwear during the 1920's, boxer shorts appeared in the middle of the decade when they were adapted from the trunks worn by professional boxers². These were my style of choice. Since boxers have a waistband, they can more easily be modified into packing underwear (the prosthetic needs a way to be held close against the body). I was fortunate to snatch up an antique pattern from Vintage Patterns Company on Etsy, which included both boxer shorts and an undershirt. I paid \$78.90 CAD (including shipping and handling) for the privilege of using a primary source, which was especially vexing given that the pattern cost \$0.20 USD when it was first printed. However, I consoled myself with the words of Sheree Ogle Paulson of *The Vintage Dressmaker*, who warns:

“I have a strong aversion to patterns meant to be period accurate that are made with modern drafting tools and techniques. The tools and method one used to draft, the overall posture and shape of the contemporary figure, even the way a person was measured by their dressmaker changed from era to era and greatly effected the cut and fit of the garments to be constructed... Designing for certain historical periods can not be done well or easily using modern computerized

² Ethan Trex, “A Brief History of Men's Underwear,” Mental Floss, Minute Media, August 5, 2013, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/22897/boxers-briefs-or-loincloth-brief-history-mens-underwear>.

drafting programs, or even by hand with a modern dressmakers curve and square.”³

I then hunkered down and waited many weeks for my pattern to arrive. According to my parcel tracking updates, it hopped back and forth over the Canada/US border several times before making up its mind to come my way. While I was doing all this waiting, I prepared myself for the project by poring over 1920’s sewing manuals, which I read for free through the Internet Archive. Since the pattern had been so expensive, I was determined to cut costs in other places. The manuals shed light on which techniques, materials and equipment were appropriate for the period. This was especially important given that the instructions on the pattern proved to be vague. Antique patterns assume that you are already an experienced sewer and can fill in the gaps, so my advice to anyone new to historical sewing is to study up on what the sewers of your given decade would have known offhand.

I found my parcel waiting for me in my mailbox after a brief holiday with my family. The pattern is #E2317 from the Excella Pattern Corporation of New York. Vintage Patterns Company did an excellent job of safely packaging the pattern, and it arrived exactly as described. I also received a charming note when the company received my order, so I can give them my recommendation if you’re considering buying one of their items.

This was my first time using an antique pattern, so I was surprised and delighted to find that the envelope was the size of a standard business envelope, rather than the

³ Sheree Ogle Paulson, “1920’s Clothing Construction,” *The Vintage Dressmaker* (blog), January 8, 2011, <http://thevintagedressmaker.blogspot.com/2011/01/1920s-clothing-construction.html>.

larger ones we see in modern sewing. The front features the pattern number, price, size, sewing instructions, a few small illustrations, material requirements, and a measurement guide. The back includes a guide on how to read the pattern perforations, a cutting layout, and a construction layout. Inside is a myriad of delicate tissue pieces, which are very well preserved given they're around ninety years old.



Figure 1: The front of Excella Pattern #E2317.



Figure 2: The back of Excella Pattern #E2317.

I decided to start with the undershirt, as it would be easier than the boxers. I re-typed the envelope instructions in a Word document, filling in the vagueness with information I found in the sewing manuals (but I'll go into that when I describe making the toiles). I then took the advice of Alexandra Reynolds in her article "Working with Vintage Patterns" from *Threads Magazine*, who says to "gently press each pattern piece on a low heat, dry iron setting. Then, lightly trace each piece onto your pattern paper using a pencil... Be sure to transfer all markings, such as straight of grain symbols,

darts, or stop-stitching points and notches.”⁴ I practiced ironing on some scrap wrapping tissue to make sure I wouldn’t burn the antique paper, then went ahead with smoothing out all four pieces for the undershirt (the back, the front, and two pieces for the neck hole facing). The ironing actually built up a lot of static energy on the surface of the tissue, which helped it cling to my sewing table when it came time to trace. Interestingly, the electric iron was a relatively recent invention by the time Isabel de Nyse Conover wrote *A Complete Course in Dressmaking in Twelve Lessons, Lesson I* in 1922, as she says that “An electric iron is a great convenience but not a necessity. A one burner gas stove or a small oil stove and an ordinary flat iron make a practical substitute.”⁵



Figure 3: A pattern piece before being ironed.



Figure 4: The ironed pattern pieces.

⁴ Alexandra Reynolds, “How to Use Vintage Patterns,” *Threads Magazine*, The Taunton Press, Inc., accessed July 17, 2020, <https://www.threadsmagazine.com/2008/11/04/working-with-vintage-patterns>.

⁵ Isabel de Nyse Conover, *A Complete Course in Dressmaking in Twelve Lessons, Lesson I* (New York: E.J. Clode, 1922), 114,

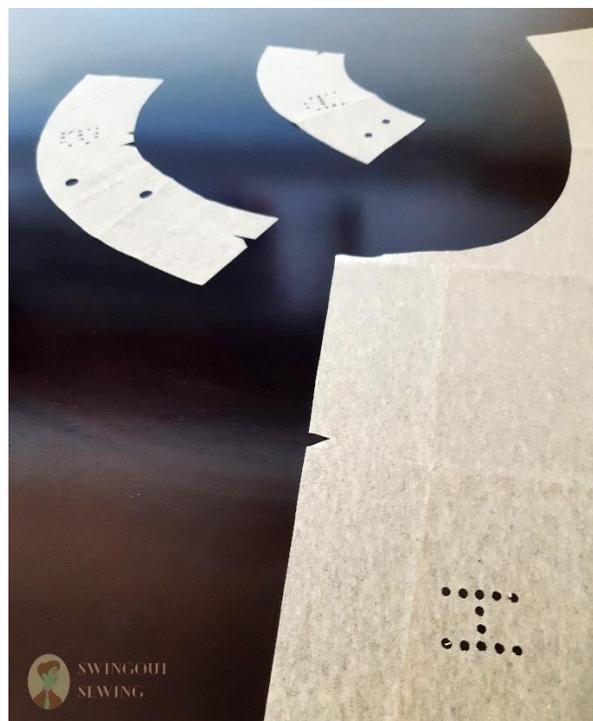


Figure 5: A close-up of the antique pattern.

I was quite intimidated by the perforations. Modern patterns are printed and must be cut from a larger sheet of tissue. Patterns from the 1920's are pre-cut, but give instructions through a schema of differently-sized holes punched through the paper. For example, on my pattern, three large holes in a line indicate the grain line. Thankfully, the undershirt proved simple in construction, and so there were only a smattering of holes to decipher. I transferred the pieces onto some tracing paper I had lying around, wanting to preserve the original antique, then translated the perforations into written instructions that I could comprehend offhand without consulting the perforation guide on the envelope. The only hitch was finding the smallest holes. It was hard to tell them apart from nicks in the tissue.



Figure 6: Copying the pattern onto tracing paper.

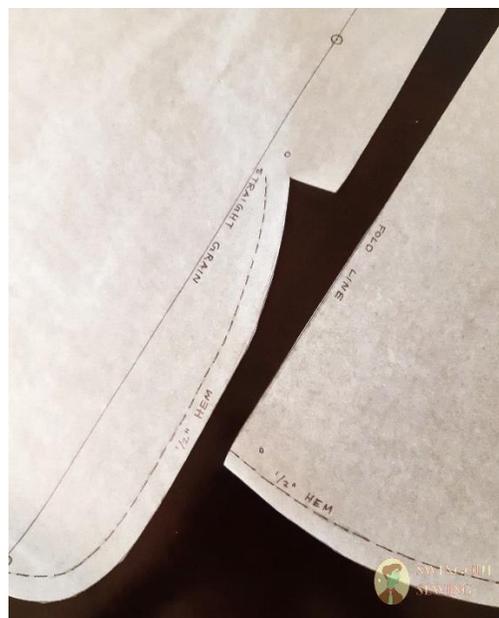


Figure 7: The traced pattern, with the perforations translated into drawn symbols and instructions.

At last, it was time for the task I'd been dreading: altering the pattern. I needed to scale the undershirt down two sizes, from a 91 cm chest to an 81 cm chest (36" to 32"). I decided to use the cut-and-overlap method of pattern grading with help from the article "Quick Reference for Cut-and-Spread Pattern Grading" from *Threads Magazine* by Terry Horlamus. I used his diagrams to determine the best places to cut my pattern, which were places that would not distort the general shapes and proportions of the garment.⁶ I knew I needed to remove about 10 cm (4") from the total width, so I divided

<https://archive.org/details/complecoursein01cono/mode/2up>.

⁶ Terry Horlamus, "Quick Reference for Cut-and-Spread Pattern Grading," *Threads Magazine*, The Taunton Press, Inc., accessed July 18, 2020, <https://www.threadsmagazine.com/2008/11/01/quick-reference-for-cut-and-spread-pattern-grading>.

this equally between the left-front, right-front, left-back, and right-back quadrants of the garment, meaning that 2.5 cm (1") would be removed from each quadrant. Then I divided this amount between two cuts made in each quadrant. This amounted to eight cuts total, and 1.25 cm (1/2") taken away at each cut. I also needed to remove another 10 cm (4") from the length, so I made three more cuts running horizontally, removing 2.5 cm (1") from with the top and bottom cuts, and 5 cm (2") from the middle cut. I also made sure to adjust the facing patterns accordingly. To tidy everything up, I re-traced the pattern with all its changes onto fresh paper, smoothing out any lines that had been broken by the cuts.



Figure 8: Altering the pattern using the cut-and-overlap method.



Figure 9: Comparing the altered pattern to the original antique pattern.

With that, I had my first draft of my altered undershirt pattern. My next step would be to make the first toile, and test my adjustments in three dimensions.

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