

The Legacy of Shoe Reform: The Annie Jenness Miller Boots

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The Progressive Era of 1880-1920 was filled with change ranging from new ideas on politics, health, and even fashion. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz states that during this period, women of all races traveled from the home to enter the workforce and live independently.¹ These newly independent women began to question the effects that clothing had on their bodies and overall health. In the Victorian Era, women had worn restrictive clothing that covered much of their bodies. Many considered it scandalous if women even showed a bare ankle. With the changing roles of women during the Progressive Era, female reformers saw the opportunity to adopt a clothing style that was less constrictive and better suited for the body. One reformer, Annie Jenness Miller, saw impracticalities in the way women dressed and looked for an alternative that would suit the modern woman. Her name has been largely forgotten, but the story of her ingenuity and the boots she created is one that should be told. By exploring the career and designs of Annie Jenness Miller, we see the impact she had on women of the Progressive Era and future generations.

Progressive Era health reformers believed that to improve the well-being of women, they needed to reform women's fashion. Stella Mary Newton writes that, "the evils of fashionable clothing, especially that of females, seemed the most urgently in need of reform on hygienic, artistic, and rational lines."² Reformers believed that women's clothing styles caused many health problems. They conducted studies on the harmful effects of corsets, revealing images of rearranged organs and altered bone structures.³ When wearing a corset, a woman would tighten its laces to shrink her waist size. This would create a desired hourglass look, with many women obtaining a sixteen-inch waist. Unfortunately, these tight corsets led to health problems. An article in *The Washington Post* in 1891 noted that "the pull and strain on the waist" of tight corsets-were "making...women weak and sickly."⁴ Health reformers believed that the only solution to these health problems was to remake women's fashion.

Annie Jenness Miller became concerned about the health of women. At the time, many middle-class women were entering the workforce. They found work in factories, sweatshops, and in offices. This new lifestyle caused painful foot problems due to tight, uncomfortable shoes that favored fashion over function. Jenness Miller believed that women should wear shoes that supported the arches of their feet, which would prevent them from enduring foot problems, such

¹Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xv-xvi.

² Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art, and Reason: Dress Reformers of the 19th Century* (London: John Murray Ltd., 1974), 2.

³ Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 95.

⁴ "Modern Dress Reform: Mrs. Annie Jenness-Miller Gives Her Views on the Subject: Current Fashions Condemned," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1891, 6.

as corns and bunions. She decided to create a new type of shoe that would focus on comfort and promoting women's health.

Jeness Miller Boots were a product for the new woman. The increasing number of women in the workforce during this time created a desire for shoes that provided support to their feet, and Jenness Miller's creation offered that support. In 1912, a reporter for *Harper's Bazaar*, a popular publication of the time, opined that, "she who once has a well-made, well-fitting pair of these boots will never again submit to the discomfort of overshoes."⁵ During this period, women's fashion dictated that they wear delicate slippers, impractical for the muck of public streets. The solution to protecting slippers was to wear an overshoe outdoors. As more women ventured to working outside the home, they needed more comfortable shoes.

Historian Joanne Meyerowitz writes that, "among these wage-earning women, a sizeable group, known as 'women adrift,' not only entered the work force but lived apart from the homes of family, relatives, and employees."⁶ This 'woman adrift' as Meyerowitz describes her, began to live on her own and was in-charge of her own livelihood. These women would use their pocket money to spend freely as they chose. As urban development continued in America, and more women had income-producing jobs, they could afford to dress in more modern fashionable styles."⁷ Designers like Jenness Miller provided them with attractive new options.

Annie Jenness Miller was born on January 28, 1859, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. She got her ideas for dress reform at a young age. She and her sister, Mabel Jenness, disliked uncomfortable clothing such as bustles and corsets. They believed that women's clothing was too tight and made movement difficult.⁸ Jenness Miller's discussions with her sister Mabel carried on through her time at Emerson College in Boston in the 1880s. Boston had become one of the leading cities in the United States for dress reform.⁹ This was due to the fact that the New England Women's Club had founded shops in the city that featured new styles that favored comfort and physical activity.¹⁰ Jenness Miller was influenced by the city's dress reform movement and conversations that reminded her of discussions with Mabel on this topic. These influences spearheaded a career into dress reform that helped define Annie Jenness Miller's life. The women likely shared their conversations with members of upper-class Boston society, Boston Brahmins, who attempted to influence society without promoting themselves. Jenness Miller was connected to the Brahmins on her mother's side, as her mother was related to Oliver Wendall Holmes Sr., a famous physician and writer. The opinions of these Boston elites could have motivated Jenness Miller and her sister to promote new styles of comfortable clothing for women.

⁵ "The Feminine Mystique," *Harper's Bazaar*, 1912.

⁶ Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*, xvii.

⁷ Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion*, 15.

⁸ "Originator of Jenness Miller Dress Reform Movement Now a Resident of Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Herald*, March 6, 1904.

⁹ Valerie Steele, *A Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 108-9.

¹⁰ Marlen Komar, "How 19th-Century Activists Ditched Corsets for One-Piece Long Underwear," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2021.

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Jenness Miller became a famous lecturer, writer, and designer during her lifetime. She spent many years speaking about the importance of health reform, giving over eleven-hundred speeches across North America. Her speeches were advertised across the country in Washington D.C., San Francisco, and publicized in various cities in Canada. She also published two books, *Physical Beauty and How to Obtain It* and *Father, Mother, and Babe*. These books helped to educate women on how to properly care for themselves and their families. Despite the changing times, Jenness Miller still had her eyes on the past and the traditional role of women in the nuclear family. She used her books as a tool to teach mothers how to care for their children. She even went so far as to use her own experience raising her daughter, Vivian Miller, as an example for women to follow. Jenness Miller not only wanted to help women dress more comfortably but to teach them how to best care for their children.

In the spirit of clothing reform, Jenness Miller created a new version of the corset, called the Jenness Miller Bodice. This bodice was a replacement for the constricting corset that women had been wearing in the late 1800s. Jenness Miller's bodice became an integral contribution to the dress reform movement. Her bodice was made from similar whalebone materials used in corsets and kept the shape of a woman's body. But she rearranged the whalebone to make it more comfortable for women to wear. Her greatest contribution to American women, however, would come in the form of a comfortable shoe.

Early twentieth-century fashion editor R. Turner Wilcox recounted how shoe designers responded to a market demand for comfortable women's shoes. He wrote, "thus, was developed the 'common sense shoe,' a sturdy, laced boot with a medium-broad heel."¹¹ Jenness Miller's boots followed this design. Her boots were short, cutting off at the ankle. These were traditionally called half boots. The advertisements of her boots show that they were laced and made of kid leather. Kid leather, made from goat skin, was a common material used in designs for shoes and gloves. The material offered comfort and kept women's feet warm.

Jenness Miller widely advertised her "hygienic" boots. She placed advertisements in popular newspapers and magazines, such as *The Washington Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The boot was advertised as the health reform shoe everyone wanted. Some of these ads promoted the shoes to husbands as an 'ideal' gift for their wives. One ad, published in the *Evening Star* in 1898 a few weeks before Christmas, advertised the shoe as the perfect shoe for a woman's Christmas present. According to the ad, "Among these goods are the Jenness Miller hygienic dress reform shoes for women, and it is really wonderful to see how many are being purchased for the making of Christmas presents."¹² This ad promoted the shoes as the shoe every woman wanted for Christmas. To the husband looking for a present for his wife, these shoes sounded like a great gift idea.

The term "hygienic" has changed from its nineteenth-century connotation. In the late 1800s, the term focused on health rather than cleanliness, as it implies today. Consequently, we

¹¹ R. Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Footwear: A Historical Survey with 53 Plates* (New York: Dover Publications, 1948) 144.

¹² "Holiday Scenes," *The Evening Star*, 1896, 6.

would think of the Jenness Miller Boot as the “healthy shoe” rather than the “hygienic shoe.” This use of health reform in her advertisements helped to promote the idea of a market for these types of shoes. Jenness Miller used this need for healthier clothing in her advertisements as the main tagline for the shoe. She promoted her boots as the health reform shoe, and turned her advertisements into a fashionable sale pitch, while at the same time starting a topic of discussion in this fashion health reform movement.

In the Progressive Era, newly developed department stores were focused on selling clothing and shoes to women. Previously, most women’s clothing was made by hand. With the development of ready-made clothes, women started to move away from homemade apparel to more fashionable purchased items. According to Lois Banner, “department stores were palaces bringing an upper-class style to the people. They were also shrines commemorating women’s shopping rituals.”¹³ At these stores, women could choose their own garments and shoes that fit the trend of what women deemed ready-made and fashionable. In advertising her boots, Jenness Miller tapped into this market by letting women know that her boots were available for purchase at the Dalton Shoe Company. She did not have her own storefront to sell her boots, and had to sell through third-party vendors, such as the Dalton Shoe Company. Jenness Miller was trying to reach this new group of women by telling them where to purchase their boots.

Annie Jenness Miller’s brand became one that consumers trusted to provide healthy and less constricting garments. In 1897, a *Washington Post* reporter detailed the work that Jenness Miller put into the creation of her shoes. The reporter wrote, “after years of study and experimenting Mrs. Jenness Miller struck upon a model for a perfect hygienic shoe... Mrs. Miller only allowing her name to be used after she had satisfied herself by its wear that it fully conforms to her idea of the perfect shoe...”¹⁴ The article suggests that Jenness Miller cared enough about women’s feet to spend hours of time designing shoes she thought were comfortable.

Jenness Miller equated her style with the aesthetic movement of the Progressive Era. This movement wanted women to “combine ‘physical, cultural, artistic, dress, and rational undergarments,’ but avoided controversial styling of street dress.”¹⁵ It helped change the period by advancing dress reform. Its followers believed they could educate the public on their newfound views on fashion. This allowed Jenness Miller to tell audiences that her fashion was an improvement rather than a complete shift. According to an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “She [Jenness Miller] now wants to educate women so that in dressing themselves they will give nature a fair show and allow the form to grow as intended”¹⁶ Her goal was to educate the public on how to improve their dress. She used her focus in educating the public to help change the way women viewed their ideas of nature and the body. The body was a changing

¹³ Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty: A Social History... Through Two Centuries of the American Idea, Ideal, and Image of the Beautiful Woman* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 1983), 55.

¹⁴ “Jenness Miller Shoes,” *The Washington Post*, 1897.

¹⁵ Jane Farrell-Beck, Laura Poresky, Jennifer Paff, and Cassandra Moon, “Brassieres and Women’s Health from 1863 to 1940,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 16, no. 3 (1998): 106.

¹⁶ “Improved Dress,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1889, 8.

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form, as reformers pushed for clothing that was not fitted and allowed freedom of movement. These changes in clothing allowed their bodies to grow in the way nature intended, as opposed to the restrictive garments and shoes of the past.

Jenness Miller provided copies of her chapter, “Feet,” from her book *Physical Culture and How to Obtain It* to store owners so they could pass them on to customers.¹⁷ Companies like Crocker’s Shoe Store gave free copies to women with purchase of their boots. Jenness Miller used these copies to help explain how best to care for their feet.¹⁸ Inclusion of this literature with shoe purchases shows that Jenness Miller wanted to sell a product and educate women.

To appreciate Jenness Miller’s innovation, one must consider what types of shoes she was replacing. Women’s shoes from the early nineteenth century were very different from the Jenness Miller Boots. Most women wore slippers, clogs, or other types of slip-on shoes.¹⁹ These were not ideal for women to walk long distances. Most of these shoes were constructed of a combination of fabric and wood, making for an uncomfortable walking experience. To combat the problems women faced while walking outside in these shoes, designers created overshoes.²⁰ In the late 1800s, boots became popular for working-class women.

Jenness Miller was not without competitors. Other shoe companies advertised shoes that followed ideas of dress and health reform. The Manufacturer’s Shoe Company, for example, advertised shoes that were considered perfect for “outdoor weather.”²¹ These shoes came in a variety of colors and advertised to women that they would be comfortable to wear for long periods of time. They were made of fine “kid skin” like the Jenness Miller Boots. Another company, the North Star Shoe Company, advertised shoes that were created to be worn while bicycling. These shoes were designed similarly to the Jenness Miller boots.²² They were short ankle boots with laces. They were sold in 1897 around the same time as the Jenness Miller Boots. While not using the same language as the Jenness Miller Boots, they promoted comfort for women when walking or riding a bicycle. These other products demonstrate that there was a market for shoes that fit the physical activities of Progressive Era women.

Through her lectures, books, and product advertisements, Jenness Miller taught women about health and healthy dress. She wanted to change women’s clothing for the better, and created shoes that were better for their feet. In her book, *Triune Development*, Jenness Miller explained that she suffered from illness as a young woman in the 1870s and 1880s. She believed the solution to her ill health was through comfortable clothing and embracing the physical culture of exercise.²³ These were the ideas she had when she created her reform shoes. These shoes were built to help women stand correctly and have comfortable healthy feet. She did not

¹⁷ “‘Jenness Miller’ Shoe Anniversary Week!” *The Washington Post*, 1897, 13.

¹⁸ There is no definitive evidence that I came across to say whether Jenness Miller created this technique for selling her shoes or if it was even a successful method.

¹⁹ Wilcox, *The Mode in Footwear*, 147.

²⁰ Lucy Johnston and Linda Woolley, *Shoes: Accessories* (United Kingdom: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1999), 31.

²¹ “All the New Shoe Styles,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1896, 30.

²² “Comfort Style Fit,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1897.

²³ Annie Jenness Miller, *Triune Development: The Road to Self-Mastery* (New York: William Green, 1909), 11.

want women to face the problems and ill health she faced, so she created products that were better for women. There is no definitive evidence that Jenness Miller consulted with doctors or orthopedists on the actual design of her shoes, but she did advise women to consult doctors if they were having medical problems. This suggests that Jenness Miller was not trying to push her own medical theories onto her customers and had their well-being in mind.

Within a decade after the Jenness Miller boots were developed, fashion styles shifted, and the public demanded a different style of shoe. With the onset of flapper fashion, boots went out of style. Women preferred shorter shoes, such as heels and flats, that matched their shorter skirts.²⁴ Jenness Miller could not keep up with the changing styles of the flappers. She had moved abroad at this point. Her husband, Conrad Miller, had become ill, and the couple moved to Switzerland to improve his health.²⁵ When her husband passed away, she returned to the United States. She decided to leave the world of fashion and became involved in real estate and land purchases instead. Other than a patent published under her name in 1928, there's little information as to her continued work in the fashion industry.

Jenness Miller Boots helped to further a trend for comfortable wear in women's shoes. Her boots alone could not satisfy the demand for comfortable shoes. This is exemplified in the book, *The Outdoor Girls*, published in 1913 by Laura Lee Hope. Annie Jenness Miller had moved to Switzerland by this time, but *The Outdoor Girls* still shows the relevancy of the movement Jenness Miller helped to start. In the book, the girls take a walking trip across several towns and have a desperate need for comfortable shoes. One of the girls, Grace, decided to wear shoes similar in style to that of the Jenness Miller Boots, but the girls relentlessly mock her for wearing uncomfortable shoes. This causes Grace to order boots like the other girls, ones that are touted as "stout and substantial walking boots."²⁶ This criticism of boots like the Jenness Miller Boots shows that times had changed, and the style of footwear was no longer desired. Young women wanted shoes that matched their changing roles and activities.

The ideas of the "hygienic" shoe and the "health reform" shoe have since fallen from our vocabulary. Today, when people think of comfortable shoes, they imagine tennis shoes and jogging shoes. They think of brand names, like Nike, Adidas, and Sketchers. They look for shoes that have memory foam and feel lighter than air. They buy shoes they can wear on long walks or on trips to Disneyland, where they walk miles a day for fun. Jenness Miller would likely approve. She wanted to help women find comfort in their travels as they walked to work or for exercise, something many women had not done before. She created a legacy with her boots, as she tried to find solutions to women's health. She used her name and social influence to promote women's comfort. While shoe styles have changed, Jenness Miller's influence continues to be seen today.

²⁴ Louis Mitchell and Lindie Ward, *Stepping Out: Three Centuries of Shoes*. (Haymarket, Australia: Powerhouse Publishing, 1997), 54.

²⁵ "Originator of Jenness Miller Dress Reform Movement Now a Resident of Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Herald*, March 6, 1904.

²⁶ Laura Lee Hope, *The Outdoor Girl of Deepdale, Or, Camping and Tramping for Fun and Health*. (New York: Lasso Press, 1913), 59.