



# She Dreamed of Dresses

by Ann Dorer



“HURRY UP! HURRY up!” Ann Lowe wanted to tell her mama. Ann had an idea she could hardly wait to try.

Instead, Ann watched silently as her mama cut out the pieces of rose-colored silk she would sew together. She was making a fancy party dress for the wife of the governor of Alabama.

Ann’s mother could not afford to make a mistake. Silk was expensive. And black seamstresses had to do exceptional work or white ladies wouldn’t hire them.

At last, her mother finished. Ann gathered up the fabric scraps. She grabbed her needle, scissors, and spool of thread. Then she scooted outside to the flower garden.

Ann settled down beside a rosebush and picked out which bloom she wanted to copy. Then her long, brown fingers went to work. With a snip here and there, a fold this way and that, and a few hidden stitches, she turned the silk into a rose. Her idea worked!

Ann could just see how pretty this rose would look sewn onto a long, white evening gown. Maybe a stem of green silk could trail down the length of the dress and have more roses on it.

In this way, yet another dress design took shape in Ann’s creative mind. It happened all the time. Even at night. She’d dream up a gown while she was sleeping. Then she’d have to jump out of bed and draw it—fast—to remember it the next day.



Illustrated by Heidi Younger  
Dresses by Ann Lowe

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Ann's childhood home in Clayton, Alabama

Ann's mother made the money her family needed by sewing dresses for the elite white women of Alabama's capital. Ann's grandmother had done the same. But there was Ann in the middle of her childhood, and she already knew what she wanted to do when she grew up. She didn't want to just sew fine dresses like her mother and grandmother did.

Ann wanted to design them, exquisite gowns like a princess would wear as she glided across a ballroom floor. She wanted to be a top fashion designer in New York City. That's where people wore the kind of dresses that Ann dreamed up.

But this was the early 1900s. Black people were no longer slaves like Ann's grandmother had been. But the doors of opportunity were shut to people with brown skin. They couldn't go to the same schools as white children. They couldn't eat in restaurants or spend the night in a motel. In stores, there were separate water fountains for blacks and whites. Separate bathrooms, too.

And Ann lived in Clayton, Alabama, a tiny town way down South. It was a long way from New York City. Ann knew her dream could never come true. But that didn't stop her from dreaming it.

Her mind kept dreaming up new dress designs, and some of these she sewed for herself. When she was seventeen, Ann was wearing one of her own creations as she walked through a department store. A nearby sales clerk motioned for Ann to come over. A finely dressed white lady stood beside the clerk.

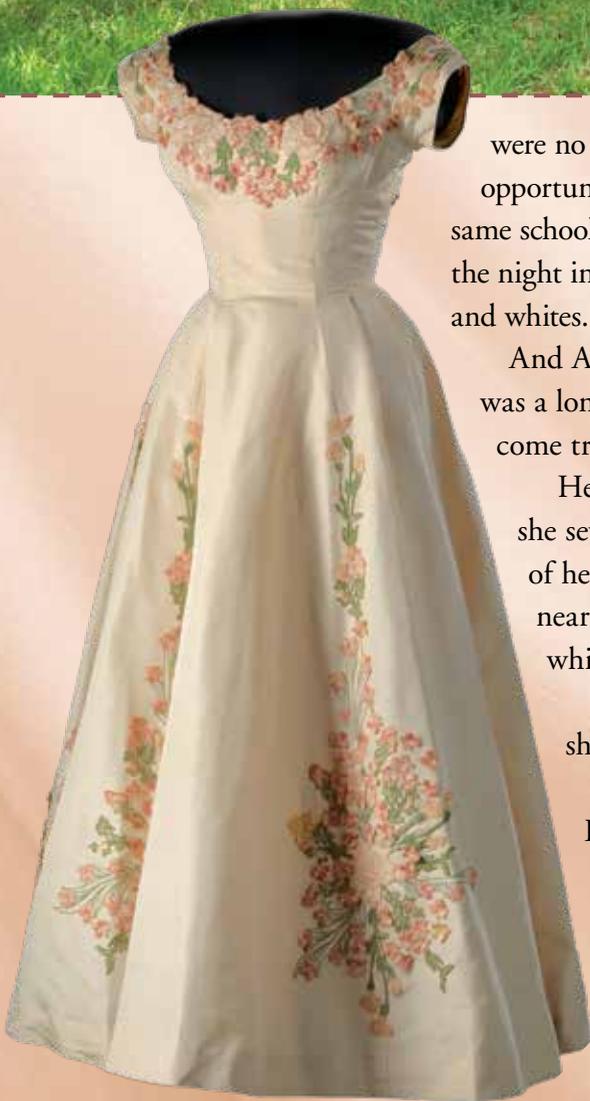
Ann approached hesitantly. Black people were not welcome to shop in such stores. Was she going to be told to leave?

To Ann's surprise, the sales girl introduced Ann to Josephine Edwards Lee, who was visiting from Florida. Mrs. Lee had asked for the introduction because she was so impressed with how Ann was dressed.

"Where did you get this beautiful outfit?" Mrs. Lee asked.

Ann answered simply. It was her own design, and she had made it.

"I'm from Tampa," Mrs. Lee told Ann, "and there isn't anyone there who can sew like that."





Mrs. Lee explained that she was a mother with four daughters. Her oldest two—twin girls—were soon to be married. “Will you move down to Tampa and sew for us?” she asked Ann.

This was Ann's chance to make all the lovely gowns she kept dreaming of, a chance that might never come again. Ann got on the train to Tampa.

There she designed and sewed dress after dress for the females of the Lee family. And when their wealthy friends saw how wonderful Ann's designs were, they, too, asked her to create gowns for them.

Ann was doing what she loved. She was happy. But her dream of being a top New York fashion designer refused to leave her heart. So when she saw an advertisement in a magazine for a fashion-design school in New York City, she decided to go.

It was 1917. Ann was now nineteen years old. When she walked into the school, its director was shocked to see the color of her skin. To him, the idea of a black girl attending a high-class fashion school was absurd. Did she even have the \$1,500 for tuition? Ann showed him her bankbook.

He reluctantly allowed her to stay. But he put her in a room by herself.

Gradually, however, white students began to slip into Ann's classroom. They wanted to see the enchanting designs she sketched so beautifully. They wanted to see the incredible fabric flowers she made to accent her gowns.

With her talent and ability to sew—her mama and grandmother had taught her well—Ann completed the one-year course in just six months. “There is nothing more that we can teach you,” the instructor said. “You are *very* good.”

Ann returned to Tampa. By the time she was twenty-one, she was running the town's leading dress business. Here, eighteen dressmakers worked to keep up with the demands for the exceptional designs that tumbled from Ann's amazing mind.

Still, Ann's biggest dream would not stop calling her. “I want to do the very best,” she said. “I want to see one of those lovely New York society girls in one of my gowns.”

So after twelve years in Tampa, Ann chased her dream with one giant step. She moved to New York City and opened a workspace. She took \$20,000 with



her. It was to keep her going until enough wealthy women discovered her work. But this took too long. Ann ran out of money by the end of the first year. She had to give up her workspace.

She was forced to ask shop owners to give her some fabric and a place to work. "I'll make dresses for nothing," she promised. "You pay me only if they sell."

And oh, how they sold!

Slowly, the ladies from America's wealthiest families discovered the magnificent one-of-a-kind gowns that Ann designed. These socialites quietly shared her name with one another. In fact, Ann Lowe became New York society's best-kept secret.

Surely, however, the world would soon learn this secret. It was now 1953, and the mother of Jacqueline Bouvier asked Ann to design her daughter's bridal gown as well as the gowns of the wedding party. Jacqueline was marrying John F. Kennedy, a man who would one day be the president of the United States.

For two intense months, Ann and her seamstresses worked to transform fifty yards of French silk chiffon taffeta into a glorious wedding dress. With thousands of stitches, they handsewed folded taffeta strips into rows and rows above the hem of the gown and into large circles that ran around and around on its wide-swept skirt.

At last, the bride's gown was completed, and so were the fifteen candy-pink bridesmaids' dresses with red satin sashes. Ann sighed with relief as she locked her workroom door that night.

When she opened that door the next morning, she screamed. The room was flooded with water from a burst pipe in the ceiling. The bridal gown was ruined! And so were ten of the bridesmaids' dresses.

Ann wept. The wedding was just ten days away. When her seamstresses arrived, the room was filled with weeping women. But Ann said, "Girls, we've got to stop all this crying and get this place cleaned up."

Ann's mother and grandmother always delivered quality work, and they did it when promised. Ann would do the same. Sewing night and day, fighting exhaustion, she and her seamstresses remade the wedding gown and the ten bridesmaid dresses. Ann delivered them all on time to the estate where the wedding was to be held. She never told the family about the pipe-bursting disaster.



In her beautiful gown by Ann Lowe, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy poses with Senator John F. Kennedy on their wedding day in 1953.



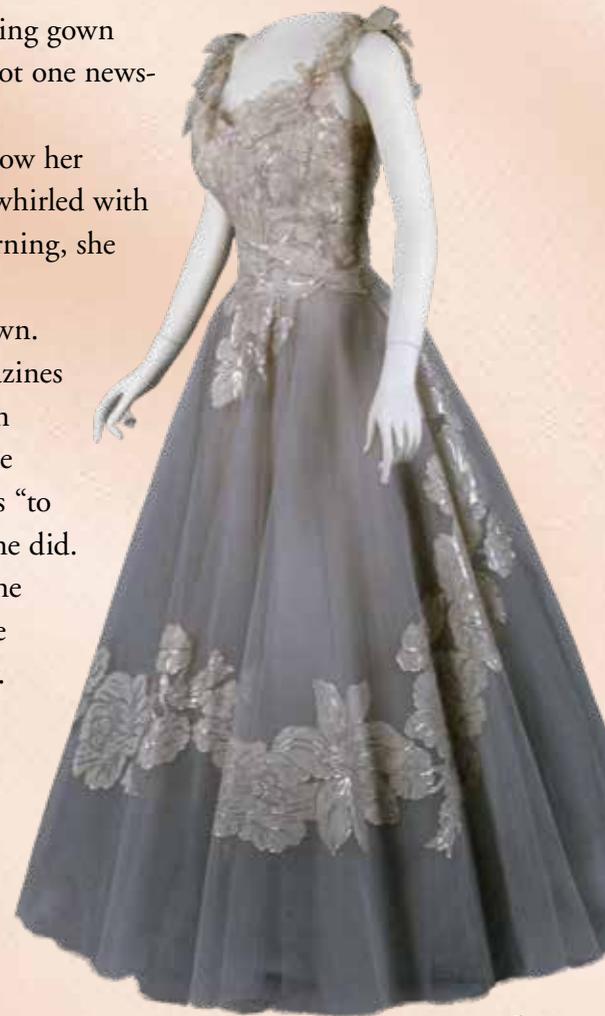
As expected, photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy in her wedding gown appeared in thousands of newspapers throughout America. But not one newspaper gave Ann's name.

The wealthy high-society ladies of New York, though, did know her name. They continued to seek her work, and Ann's imagination whirled with new dress designs for them day and night. Waking up in the morning, she sometimes said, "Don't talk to me right now. I have a gown."

As times changed, Ann's name eventually became better known. Between 1964 and 1968, she was featured in three national magazines and several newspapers. She even appeared on a popular television program, *The Mike Douglas Show*. Ann told the listening audience that her goal was not to achieve fame and fortune. Her desire was "to prove that a Negro can become a major dress designer." Which she did.

Throughout her fifty-seven-year career, the black lady from the tiny Alabama town designed thousands of exquisite gowns for the mothers, daughters, and granddaughters of America's elite society. Ann so loved to hear, "The Ann Lowe dresses were doing all the dancing at the cotillion last night."

At age seventy-four, Ann became blind. She could no longer sketch dress designs and had to retire. But for the rest of her life, Ann Lowe still dreamed and dreamed of dresses. 🐜



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