

# Living The Victorian Life

1890s Comes Alive  
 As Washington  
 Couple Lives A  
 Victorian Dream,  
 Corsets And All

BY TRICIA ROMANO  
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PORT TOWNSEND, Wash. — The dream of the 1890s is alive here. In Sarah and Gabriel Chrisman's Victorian home, there are three high-wheel bicycles and a tricycle, a Perfection kerosene heater, an icebox, numerous paraffin oil lamps and a refurbished 1890s gas parlor stove. A fresh loaf of bread baked in a restored Charm Crawford wood-burning stove sits on a cutting board, ready for slicing.

The couple recently became infamous for Sarah's essay, "I Love the Victorian Era. So I Decided to Live in It," for Vox.com. Published in advance of her third book, "This Victorian Life," out in November on Skyhorse Publishing, it garnered international press attention, including ABC's "Nightline," the Daily Mail and Jezebel.

"There's been so many. I try to keep them straight," says Sarah, 35, a tall woman whose regal posture is due to the corset she wears 24 hours a day. Her pale blonde hair piled atop her head, she wears a high-collared dress she hand-sewed. Gabriel's plaid vest and pants were made by a Seattle seamstress, but his round eyeglass frames are vintage 1800s.

In the essay, she describes how they gradually adopted the Victorian lifestyle six years ago after Gabriel, 37, gave her a corset for her birthday, a gift she initially rebelled against. But, she writes, "When we realized how much we were learning just from the clothes, we started wondering what other everyday items could teach us."

Though the Victorian period is defined as being from Queen Victoria's 1837-1901 reign, the Chrismans focus on the 1880s and 1890s.

Not all of the press they received was flattering. Because in addition to the period-correct accouterments, they also have Wi-Fi. And a landline. And electricity. And a truck, as Gabriel commutes 50 miles to his job at a Bainbridge Island bicycle shop.

"There are many irritating things about this article," wrote Rebecca Onion in Slate. "The irony of congratulating yourself on sticking to 1880s technology in a piece circulated on the Internet is an obvious place to start."

"Based on some of the headlines that have been out there, they believe that we're trying to live exactly like in the 1880s and '90s," Gabriel says. "Well, actually, we more than anyone else know that that's impossible. We do use elements of modern technology."

The Wi-Fi is a necessity because publishers don't accept handwritten manuscripts. (She wrote her book with an antique fountain pen and typed it into a computer). She also posts to their website, her public and private Facebook pages and uploads videos on YouTube. And they download period materials from Google Books, a resource they both love.

But isn't it ironic to electronically download primary-source material to better live an authentic Victorian life?

"It's not an irony," she says, bristling at the observation. "You are calling it an irony; we do not consider it so. Because, as we keep repeatedly telling you, we know when we're living. We're living in 2015."

Another thing that didn't exist in 1890? The DeLorean, the iconic time-travel car from "Back to the Future." They own one.

And critics have also pointed out while the Chrismans may want to live a Victorian life, they do not want to die a Victorian death of cholera or tuberculosis.

"It's the one time we wish we could go to, say, 2115, or even 2215 or 2315," says Sarah of modern medicine.

Criticism of their lifestyle is nothing new.

"I've had women storm up to me and get inches from my face and be screaming at me that I'm somehow oppressing them when I was minding my own business," says Sarah. Her husband is more sanguine.

"All of these things, they're not necessarily all better, they're not all worse, they're all just options."

Their friends accept their lifestyle, and Gabriel, who was home-schooled, says his family is supportive. But, he says, "Sarah's mom was not quite so supportive or helpful, but it's something where she's even gotten better over time and understands us a little



ABOVE: Married couple Sarah and Gabriel Chrisman are living a Victorian life, down to the items in their living room in Port Townsend, Washington. BELOW: The Chrismans are studying Victorian life by living theirs in the mode of the 1880-90s as much as possible.



bit better, I hope."

Why is their choice so polarizing? "I think the sheer novelty of it," said Aditi Roy, who interviewed the couple in October for "Nightline." "Lots of people re-enact history for academic purposes. For them, it's not an academic experiment, it's not a social experiment. It's the way they want to live their life. There's no endpoint," she said. "The central question that we wanted to answer was 'Why?' "

For the Chrismans, it's a chance to correct the misconceptions, like those about Victorian women's lack of empowerment due to their inability to vote.

Besides, says Sarah. "The first election I was old enough to vote in, was an election where the popularly elected candidate did not become president. I have not seen all that much benefit from my much-touted vote," she says. "On the other hand, something that I have seen a lot of benefit from, is my kindergarten education." Victorian women imported kindergarten from Germany, she explains.

The Chrismans compare their lives to being foreign-exchange students in the era.

Susan Casteras, a University of Washington art-history professor focusing on the Victorian and Edwardian periods, isn't so sure. Casteras says books such as "Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management" and "What Charles Dickens Ate and Jane Austen Knew" are excellent primary and secondary sources.

"I have stacks of Victorian novels by my bed. I have a lot of Victorian objects in my house," said Casteras, who was the curator of paintings at the Yale Center for British Art for 20 years. "Does that mean that I feel I need to live it to understand it? No. I do not. That's a personal choice and may be a personal choice

that also involves publicity."

Indeed, this is not the Chrismans' first time at the media rodeo. When she released her first book, "Victorian Secrets: What a Corset Taught Me about the Past, the Present, and Myself," Sarah appeared on ABC's "The View." After Barbara Walters reached out to touch her 22-inch waist, Sarah half-jokingly slapped Walters' hand, wagged her finger in Walters' face and scolded her: "If you had a woman with large breasts on, you wouldn't grab those either."

That book — which she initially self-published — came about for practical purposes. "It really cuts into my schedule if I have to answer the same 20 questions every time I want to go to the grocery store and buy a gallon of

milk," she says.

In more than one way, they have computers to thank for their Victorian life. Gabriel became disenchanted with the technology, ditching his nearly completed computer-science degree for history and a library and information-science graduate degree. After pulling late nights at computer labs, he came to the realization that "this technology was just cutting me off from the real world and the physical world," he says.

As it gets dark, Sarah lights the oil lamp, which burns incredibly bright; Gabriel joyfully explains how the lamp's design lets in more oxygen. They eat their dinner and read: a November 1888 Cosmopolitan downloaded from Google Books for her; an 1875 thriller by Wilkie Collins for him. They don't often read newspapers, learning about current events in passing.

Friends come over for dinner, but they rarely go out to eat, because, says Gabriel, they are essentially below the poverty line. Their jobs — a masseuse-turned-writer, a bike-shop manager and mechanic — don't pay well.

They save on electricity and water bills, but some of their other possessions are costly: Their stove sells for around \$4,000, and similar models of their bikes can cost several thousand dollars.

They don't drink alcohol — "We are people of temperance," says Gabriel. They don't watch movies. For fun, he reads to her while she sews by the windowsill. They'll go for walks and bike rides in town. They enjoy fossil hunting.

With no cellphones, music or television, the ticking of a hand-wound antique clock in the living room is often the only ambient sound in the house, a reminder that the world is still advancing second-by-second toward the next century. Time doesn't stand still, not even for the Chrismans, who insist they won't ever go back to the future.

## Cramer-Kenyon Holiday Open House Slated Dec. 11-13

The Cramer-Kenyon Board of Directors invites the community to attend the 2015 Holiday Tours and Open Houses at the historic Eastlake Stick Style home at 509 Pine Street in Yankton. Dates are Friday evening, Dec. 11, from 5-7 p.m.; and Saturday, Dec. 12, and Sunday Dec. 13, both from 1-4 p.m. There is no admission price for the annual event; however, donations will be accepted.

Visitors will be served a beverage and home-made cookies as they enjoy the holiday atmosphere. Children are welcome but good behavior is expected.

A preview of the interior indicates that traditional decorative elements will be found on the main floor of the beautiful Victorian home, mingling with priceless

mementoes from both the Cramer and Kenyon families.

No reservations are needed; you may enter from the front of the home at 509 Pine Street or park in the lot behind the home and enter through the kitchen. That entrance has a "lift" to enable those who have difficulty walking to ride up the stairs.

Board members will greet you. Bring your cameras: The Home is always camera-ready.

In addition to the holiday atmosphere, the Board will introduce visitors to the present curator of the home, Veronica Trezona, who has added her own special touch to the home's atmosphere.

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