

# Surviving the Nineteenth Century: the Antiperspirant

There are two trains of thought when approaching the recreation of the past: the first asks “How did they do it, and how can I duplicate it?” The second asks, “How can I handle it with the least amount of modern inconvenience?”

While sometimes the two are one, most often, you’ll find the first school of thought is prevalent among those who take a “progressive” standpoint. It’s the tack I prefer to take, as it really is less difficult in most cases to handle things in just the same way it was handled historically—and, it leads to less stuff for me to pack (or neglect to pack) before any event, which is a bonus.

For several years now, I’ve been advocating something modern women find revolutionary: the practice of skipping modern deodorants and antiperspirants while dressed in historic clothing.

I can hear the gnashing of teeth from here.

Really, there are some great reasons to avoid modern anti-scent preparations, any one of which might be the one that sways you to give it a go. The primary reason is, of course:

## Historic Accuracy.

If they’d have had them, they *might* have used them. But they *didn’t* have them, so they *didn’t* use them. (Indeed, a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century person might be aghast at the thought of covering odors with chemicals, rather than simply bathing—what sort of unclean person would *do* such a thing, after all?)

So, what does Auntie Maude recommend? There are numerous historically-appropriate ways to handle the normal effluvia of the human body,

all of which produce a pleasant personage. Skipping modern deodorant and antiperspirant doesn’t mean you walk around smelling funky—it just means you skip modern methods to prevent or correct it. I’ve been doing it for a few years now, and people still voluntarily stand downwind, even on day three of a hot event, so something must be working.

Imagine: you’re at a fantastic immersion event. You have a wonderful historic house in which to sleep, you have your reproduction nightgown and wrapper—its going to be perfect! Your companion is likewise situated with repro brushes, tooth preparations, and hair fixatives. The morning is off to a glorious start—and then you pull out your blue plastic deodorant container.

## Exit Magic Moment.

The best thing you can do to prevent unpleasant body odors is to invest about \$10 in muslin, and make *extra sets of undergarments*, until you have at least one set of drawers and chemise for each day of the longest event you ever hope to attend. For most of us, this will be a minimum of 3 sets of underthings; I prefer to have 5-7 sets, which gives me quite a bit of leeway in the length of events I can attend, and lots of fresh clothing to wear at shorter events.

Far too many women have five dresses and one chemise—flip that! Take a look at trousseau recommendations, packing lists, household inventories, suggestions for economical living, and other bits of period advice. A functional historic wardrobe has more undergarments than any other item; those quantities allow you to space the laundering of your outer clothing (thus preserving them). White cotton underthings are easy to launder in hot water as frequently as they are worn.

## How To Take A Sponge Bath

*Be sure to pack 2 small cloths, and one medium-sized huck towel with your things, along with a small basin or two, and a piece of soap. If you have no basins, you can actually bathe very well using a tin cup or two. Warm water is a bonus, but not vital.*

*Use one cloth for soaping, and one for rinsing. This division means you need less water, as the rinse does not get soapy as quickly.*

*Determine which parts you feel most delicate about. Most people choose to wash face and neck first, followed by hands, arms, and legs, and finishing up with underarms and delicate areas. Soap and wash in this order, followed by the rinsing cloth. A dash of essential oil of lavender or mint, or a bit of toilet water in the rinse cloth, adds to the feeling of freshness.*

*After a quick towel dry, you are clean, fresh, and smelling nice. Dressed in fresh undergarments, you’re ready to take on the day (or evening.)*

Beyond changing clothes, what about this revolutionary method: *bathing*. There’s nothing you can get through a sweat gland that won’t wash off with soap and water, or plain water if no soap is at hand, or water with essential oil of lavender or mint, or toilet water. A quick sponge bath in the middle of the day, or before retiring and at rising each day, will go far to keep you pleasant and clean.

## Consider Your Textiles

The chemicals in modern deodorant and antiperspirant are very harsh on textiles. They have a gummy nature that traps bacteria, grinding it into the fibers of the cloth where they are never fully washed away. Not even hot water can remove the residue fully. (Examine the armpits of a man’s T-

shirt—that yellowish, faintly nasty stain is not perspiration, but perspiration trapped in deodorant.)

The result is fabric that stains quickly in the armpits, retains odors, and decays more quickly than it needs to do. **Avoiding modern preparations**, and choosing period-appropriate solutions to body odor, can prolong the life and beauty of your reproduction clothing.

Another textile-based solution is the removable **dress shield**. Simply cut a few rounds of plain white cotton, and fold them in half. Laid across the armpit of your dress, these serve as effective dress shields that may be changed as frequently as they are dampened. They are entirely disposable, or may be made double, with a finished edge, for a reusable shield.

Most natural fiber reproduction clothing can be worn repeatedly without laundering the outer garment, so long as the appropriate undergarment layers are worn and laundered regularly. Give all dresses a good **airing between wearings**: use a soft brush to remove loose dirt and debris, turn the whole dress inside out, and fold or hang the dress to expose the bodice to the air.

Cotton dresses will need laundering the most frequently; silks may require periodic cleaning. Wool dresses, aired frequently, can go literally for years without complete laundering.

### For Personal Health & Safety

Perspiration is the body's natural "air conditioning" system. When combined with period appropriate clothing layers, the whole system works together.

The body perspires; the natural fiber layers wick the perspiration away from the body, and the cloth becomes damp. At this point, even slight breezes cool through evaporation. The body temperature is thus regulated.

Defeat Nature's system by stopping perspiration, and you have removed your best cooling agent, making yourself more vulnerable to heat exhaustion and other complications.

In order for your body to regulate temperature effectively, you need to be **adequately hydrated**. For most of us, this does not mean eight glasses of water per day. My favorite naturopath holds that for adequate hydration, the human body requires approximately one ounce of water for every two pounds of body weight. That's well more than 64 ounces of water for me!

Heat, high levels of activity, pregnancy, and breastfeeding can all increase your water needs. Good hydration allows toxins in your body to exit in a more dilute state, making them less prone to build-up of bacteria and unpleasant odors.

To suddenly subject your body to huge amounts of water is not healthy. You will want to prepare for events by increasing your water intake up to two weeks before the event. (This also gives your bladder time to adjust!) Maintain hydration between events, and you'll be healthier overall.

In deep heat, your body will lose salts and electrolytes during perspiration as well; lose too many, and you may fall prey to cramping and other conditions. For many reenactors, the solution has been to add some Gatorade or sports drink. Again, there is a period solution!

Try adding period-appropriate recipes of **switchel and shrub** to your menu. These drinks replace the nutrients and salts you require, without using modern chemicals. If you have nothing else, mixing a tablespoon of blackstrap **molasses** into a glass of water will restore many minerals and nutrients, all by itself!

Avoid drinking caffeinated beverages, and those with dark caramel colorings;

water should be your first event beverage of choice, followed by switchel, shrub, molasses water, and herb teas.

### One Odd Remedy

This one comes from family lore, and it is possibly the reason for my existence. One great-grandfather of mine was a man of particularly strong scent; it is said that my great-grandmother could not stand the smell of him, even freshly bathed. She insisted he rub oil of lavender (made from her lavender patch) on the bottoms of his feet, every night before retiring. They went on to have ten children (including the great-grandmother from whom I descend), and she never again complained of his body odor.

You may not need this remedy full-time, but massage a bit of lavender essential oil (cut with a carrier such as sweet almond) into the soles of your feet every night for a few weeks before an event. Lavender appears to be a blood cleanser, and has antibacterial properties. And, for some reason, when absorbed into the sole of the foot, it decreases overall body odor. Odd? Yes. Effective? Yes.

### In Conclusion

I realize this approach may be seen as radical. However, you have nothing to lose except a modern anachronism!

I issue the challenge: start using historically appropriate solutions for a pleasant personage with your next event. Let me know your experiences, and how it changes the event for you. If you are prepared, I can practically guarantee you'll get closer to the "magic moments" than ever before.