

The Long & the Short of It

By Meg Peterson

When I was a kid my greatest competition was Shirley Temple. I hated her—and envied her. She had thick, bouncy, golden curls; I had thin, mousy, straight strands.

For a quarter I would buy the sheets of green rubber curlers bearing her name, pull them apart, and roll my hair up every night. It took quite a while, but it sure beat the rag strips my grandmother recommended. And how nobly I suffered, lying on those hard nubs!

But it was worth it. At breakfast I was sure I looked beautiful—tiny blobs of hair going in every direction, mostly upward. My mother said nothing and just smiled as she watched me bounce down the street to school.

My older sister was more honest. “You look creepy,” she said. “For your information, it’s not Hal- loween yet.”

I was undaunted. She was jealous for sure. But by noon, right after gym class, I was in the girl’s room, once again combing my straight, mousey brown hair.

As we got older, Mother took my two sisters and me to the barber every few months for a routine trim called “shingling”—the straight chop treatment.

There wasn’t much you could do with that, except keep it out of your eyes with a barrette, so I gave up trying to imitate Shirley Temple and concentrated on my growing collection of colorful barrettes.

I was 24 before I entered a real beauty parlor—which began the serious phase of my hair obsession. At three months my oldest son was



My hair style in the beginning—in the 1930s as a child.

getting tangled in the scraggly strands of my long hair whenever I burped him, so I decided it was time for a change. My neighbor suggested Henri’s, the fanciest salon in town.

I went there and said, “Do something.” He certainly did! My husband came to pick me up and circled for 15 minutes before he recognized me standing on the corner.

“Hey, you look great!” he said.

“This is the first time I’ve seen your face.” But it wasn’t right for me. I felt naked—like a shorn lamb—until my hair grew out again.

As the years passed I kept searching for the perfect “do”—one that was self-maintaining, stylish, and made me look gorgeous. I went through the French twist (my husband loved it, because it made me look older, like him), the bouffant, the pixie, and the shag.

The pixie and shag got points in the do-it-yourself category, but my hair was so fine that I was sure both styles made my head look too small for my body.

The bouffant, however, required weekly sojourns to the hairdresser and made sleeping, swimming and everything else difficult (after you’d spent all that time and money, why mess it up?).

Then came the perm, and freedom—or so I thought. I started out with a close-cropped “poodle”—tiny wash-and-wear curls. Shirley Temple at last! Feeling elated and glamorous, I went straight from the hairdresser to my husband’s office. I could hardly wait for his reaction. I knew he liked short hair.

He took one look, put his face down on the desk, and said to the assembled staff, “Oh please, someone tell me it’s a wig.”

Discouraged, I returned to my old standby—long straight hair—and the tedious, time-consuming care it entailed.

Fifteen years later you can imagine how overjoyed I was to discover a perm for long hair—the spiral, giving the wearer tendrils, corkscrew curls and volumes of bushy, wavy hair. The ultimate wash-and-wear style! Finally satisfied, I thought I looked sensational—until one of my grown sons cornered me.

“Mom,” he said, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, “you’re great-looking for your age, but your hair! That wild look would be perfect if you were 25, but you’re not 25 ... no offense.”

“You don’t like my hair, Tom?” I asked.

“It’s a little uneven ... no offense.” He was the polite one. As a child he had wanted me to

look like an “ordinary mother.”

Being my own person was becoming more and more difficult. My insecurity increased as I now began to question the validity of my own perception. Did I really look that bad? And why was I so easily intimidated?

A recent visit from my second daughter was the crowning blow.

“I don’t understand you, Mom,” she said. “You have exquisite bone structure” (that’s a euphemism for age right there) “but all I see when I look at you is two big clumps of curls that resemble withered broccoli sprouting out of the sides of both cheeks. You should cut it all off and show your face for a change. And you’d look 10 years younger!”

“Thanks, Marth. I really needed that,” I said. Martha is a model who has thick red hair. She’d look good in any style—even a Mohawk.

She wasn’t finished. “You really have to examine why you won’t cut your hair short. I think the problem is deep-seated. You have a certain image of yourself, of your femi-



With my autoharp—and a very different style—in 1994.

ninity. But it’s time to move on.”

That made me a little nervous. My Uncle Earl had recently moved on—as had my dog.

Nevertheless I’m convinced that it’s time to put this hair foolishness behind me!

I’m getting rid of all the paraphernalia acquired over the years to back up my obsession—curling irons, sculpting brushes, conditioning balm, sprays for normal and subnormal hair, and the stationary cap in which I used to imprison myself once a week—before hand dryers were on the market.

Even the electric curlers that gave off clouds of steam and burned my fingers and scalp have sunk to the level of coiffure clutter.

I no longer agonize over when to wash my hair so it will look good at just the right time. Nor do I allow myself to primp as I go by a mirror, or duck into the ladies’ room for a thorough combing before making an entrance. (Well, almost never.)

And I’m pretty sure I’ve found the solution to the style problem—one that will please my children and free me at the same time: cut the sides short and leave the back long. This way I can look modern—and young—and still retain my flowing mane.

But no ... the simple, demure ponytail is the answer—a look I never appreciated in its heyday.

Or maybe a breathtaking bun—the kind my grandmother thought I should wear after the birth of my first child. Something simple, something easy to maintain, something I won’t have to obsess about.

What a relief!

I can’t wait to talk this over with my hairdresser. ♦