

In this dress, I thee wed

A wedding gown bought in 1955 has served eight brides in family

By Caroline Dipping

Chantilly lace adorns the bodice, sleeves and cathedral train. A cloud of petticoats plump up the ivory-colored silk skirt. More than two dozen diminutive buttons cascade down the back, completing the gown's vintage charm.

When Carmela Jordan walks down the aisle Saturday at St. Brigid Roman Catholic Church in Pacific Beach wearing this dress, she will be joining an exclusive sorority. She will be the eighth woman in her family to marry in the gown that was bought by her grandmother for her aunt in Philadelphia in 1955.

It is the first wedding for Jordan, 44, a religion teacher at Cathedral Catholic High School in Carmel Valley. Like the familial brides before her, she didn't hesitate to say yes to the dress.

"We all just wanted to wear the dress," Jordan said from her Pacific Beach home. "It is such a part of the history of the family."

For all its trips to the altar in 55 years, the gown has not remained entirely the same. Alterations were made to accommodate the heights and breadths of each bride.

When Carmela Colace bought the dress for her youngest daughter, Marie, she fretted the \$700 price tag was too steep for a garment that was going to be worn only once. Little did she know the generations in the large Italian family that would queue up for the opportunity to wed in the gown.

Jordan's mother, Rose Colace, was the second bride to don the dress when she wed George Jordan in

San Diego in 1959. After the wedding, she shipped the dress back to her sister in Pennsylvania. There it remained, unworn, until 1983 when five of her six daughters — Carmela Jordan's cousins — began marrying. The gown last marched down a matrimonial aisle in 2000.

And then, last Christmas Eve, Jordan's boyfriend, Joe Lonergan, proposed on bended knee. One of the first phone calls Jordan made was to her cousin back East, the keeper of the dress.

"I said, 'Well, Mary, I'm engaged. Can I borrow the dress?'" To get altar-ready, the dress-alteration process began. Again.

"My mom was 90 pounds," Jordan said. "I've been making sure I don't eat a lot ... I'm still trying to lose weight."

When Jordan received the dress in February, she couldn't button up the back. Now, after vigilant portion control and not running calorically amok at her three bridal showers, she is 15 pounds lighter and the dress fits like it was made for her.

Still, after Jordan's willowy mother, extra panels of silk needed to be sewn in for future brides. One statuesque cousin also needed to add 2 inches to the length; another, who could not wear a strapless bra, had to reconfigure the décolletage to avoid a wardrobe malfunction. Along the way, a color-coded bustling system was added so the 6-foot train could be hiked up for dancing.

After all the conga lines, bouquet tosses and years of haphazard storage, the gown was in need of refurbishment to make it wedding-worthy again. Jordan took it to Margaret's Cleaners, a vintage-clothing restoration company in La Jolla, where it essentially underwent a three-month spa treatment.

"The gown was completely yellowed and there were caramelization stains from champagne or sugar or salt that were never cleaned properly," said Carey Emery, bridal coordinator at Margaret's. "To lift the stains from the delicate fabric, the gown was soaked in a Jacuzzi tub for several days.

"Our seamstress had to make brand-new lace-covered buttons, and there were certain areas where



Carmela Jordan, 44, will be married Aug. 7 at St. Brigid's Catholic Church in Pacific Beach wearing the same wedding gown that was purchased for her aunt in 1955 and subsequently worn by her mother and five cousins — she is the 8th person to wear this dress. Jordan's dog Cinders, couldn't resist getting attention while standing on the train.

there were tears and missing or loose pearls that needed to be replaced and tightened. It came out really beautifully."

Four of the seven previous dress wearers will be at Jordan's wedding. One cousin cannot attend and her aunt, the original bride, and her mother have passed away.

"They won't be there physically, but by wearing that dress and my mother's jewelry and marrying in the church where I was baptized, I know they are just all around me," said Jordan of her departed loved ones. "With all my family around me and Joe next to me, that is a great way to start a life together."



Carmela Jordan tries on the wedding gown her aunt bought in 1955, worn by seven brides in her family. Friend Julie Misleh helps in the fitting.



Carmela's mother wore the gown in 1959

Cousin Anne wore it again in 1993

(See our Before & Afters on back)

Gown Restoration – Before & After



Before



After