

## Chapter One

### "Sewed Considerable":

#### Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women's Domestic Work

In 1934, a Mrs. H.S. from Illinois wrote to the editor of the *Woman's Home Companion* to ask for advice on how to arrange her furniture in the house she shared with her railroad engineer husband and seven-year-old son. She went on to explain that she "reads everything" in the magazine as she "tries to be a good wife and mother."<sup>1</sup> Part of her efforts included sewing, even though by the 1930s, she could have easily purchased clothing for her family. Mrs. H.S. ostensibly lived in a comfortable home; after all, she had furniture and a living room and dining room to arrange. She was probably white, had one school-age child, and does not mention working for wages herself. From this short letter in a women's magazine, we have a snapshot of a member of the middle class.

Mrs. H.S., however, was anxious about her class status and her ability to fulfill her domestic role. After all, she was asking for advice from "experts" on setting up her house and found it necessary to say how hard she tried to fulfill her roles. As a member of the middle class, she was the target market for the rapidly expanding ready-made clothing industry and could probably afford to purchase her family's wardrobe. Nonetheless, she still did some sewing at home and evidently believed that this work was an integral part of fulfilling her role as family caretaker. Like many women, she felt that sewing was one way to allay some of the anxiety she felt about her place in the home and in the larger culture.

Sewing provided a refuge of traditional ideas about women in an age of dramatic change. This chapter will explore how sewing was understood to be a key aspect of women's duties and roles. Sewing was for many a routine component of a household economy, usually (but not always) cheaper than buying items ready-made. Many women of a variety of backgrounds expected to make at least some clothing for themselves and family

members. Sewing represented the home, women's conventional role of caring for her family, and was associated with concepts of thrift, discipline, domestic production, even sexual morality. These values intersect with other issues of identity and cultural understanding. What can we learn from looking carefully at this routine and often invisible work? What exactly does it mean to be "thrifty" or to provide a "good home" and to whom? Meanwhile, cultural meanings are not static. This chapter will also examine the reasons why women sewed clothing for themselves and their families even as items became increasingly affordable and more women worked outside the home. As sewing became less of a basic economic function, how did it persist as a cultural behavior? Did the gendered assumptions surrounding sewing shift along with the expectations and experiences of the women and girls who were taught – or not taught – to sew?

Because sewing offers a distillation of ideas about women's role in the family and home, it also illuminates class, ethnic, and racial distinctions. This chapter will therefore examine how sewing served as a way for people to enforce ideas about their position vis-à-vis others of another class or race. Because sewing was an embodiment of gender roles, it could also serve to propagate social hierarchies. Sewing could be used to express personal and group identities, but it could also reinforce social divisions. Home dressmaking was a task shared by working- and middle-class women, black and white, native-born and immigrant. The same skills could be used for different purposes according to one's economic, cultural, and geographical circumstances. Sewing fulfilled white, middle-class ideals of domesticity and provided African Americans and working-class women a way to dress "respectably." In some ways, sewing was a unifying behavior, connecting women of different backgrounds. In other ways, it served to underscore distinctions between them and enforce social and racial hierarchies.

### **"Women Just Sewed"**

For most of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, most women had few choices other than to sew at home. Factory-made men's clothing was available for purchase starting

in the mid-nineteenth century, but the women's ready-to-wear industry took longer to gain a foothold. In 1890, women's styles accounted for only 25 percent of factory-made clothing.<sup>2</sup> According to the Middletown survey of an Indiana community in the 1920s, advertisements for fabric far outnumbered those for dresses in local newspapers until 1910.<sup>3</sup> As Edith Kurtz, who grew up in the Midwest in the early 1900s, put it, "Women just sewed. It was cheaper to make your own clothes, and I presume that had something to do with it, but ready-made clothes were not available."<sup>4</sup>

An alternative of course was to engage a dressmaker.<sup>5</sup> Wealthy women would almost always have their clothing custom-made by a professional. Those with less to spend might have someone make just their best dresses or pay a dressmaker to cut out a garment – often the most difficult and potentially costly part of the process – which the client would sew together at home. Gabrielle Josephine Crofton, a young woman in Illinois, had her better dresses made by a dressmaker but made her own nightdresses.<sup>6</sup> For many women, however, the cost of a professional dressmaker was prohibitive and they would have to choose between buying items and making them themselves. Until the ready-wear industry grew to the point where desirable clothes were available at low prices, many middle-class and most working-class women had little choice but to sew the majority of the clothing they and their families needed.

During the early twentieth century, changes in production methods, cheap immigrant labor, and other structural changes made ready-made clothing more affordable. By the 1920s, a competitive and increasingly mechanized garment industry offered a wide range of prices, and looser, less fitted styles fit well off the rack. Ready-to-wear blouses, skirts, and dresses became increasingly popular and fewer women sewed. A survey of department stores from 1911 to 1925 showed that until 1920, fabric sales kept pace with ready-made clothing, but after 1920, the ready-mades overtook fabric.<sup>7</sup> One businessman surveyed in

the Middletown study recalled that in 1890, a fabric sale would clear ten bolts on the first day, whereas a similar sale in 1924 drew many fewer customers.<sup>8</sup>

During and despite this shift, many women continued to sew.<sup>9</sup> A series of surveys reveals the tenacity of sewing habits. One small study of families in Pennsylvania in the early 1910s found that at least half made "a few" garments at home.<sup>10</sup> A few years later, in 1919, a more extensive survey of farm homes found that in some regions 95 percent of households did some of their own sewing.<sup>11</sup> In 1926, despite the growing popularity of ready-made garments, 98 percent of rural respondents and 92 percent of urban respondents owned a sewing machine.<sup>12</sup> A fourth survey, by the Bureau of Home Economics (then part of the Department of Agriculture) and also reported in 1926, found that at least 80 percent of women surveyed made at least some clothing for themselves and their children. Although the women in the classic Middletown study may have bought an increasingly large proportion of their family's clothing, they continued to sew. About two-thirds of the "working class" women and three-quarters of the "business class" women spent up to six hours a week sewing and mending.<sup>13</sup>

The decision of whether to sew or purchase clothing was part of a complex arithmetic of time, energy, expense, and skills. Working women, the ones most likely to need to sew for economic reasons, often felt the pinch of other demands on their time and a lack of sewing education. Up to a third of the respondents to one survey bought clothing because they were "unable to make clothes at home." Moreover, in the same survey, the largest percentages of those without sewing skills were in the lowest income bracket.<sup>14</sup> Other women may have known how to sew but were too tired to do so. Twenty-five-year-old Lucy Cleaver, interviewed by members of the National Consumers League in 1909, worked long hours in a department store and saved money by walking to work and doing her own washing. However, "as she could not spend any further energy in sewing, she bought cheap

ready-made clothes." Cleaver spent more than she could really afford on these clothes, but was "ill, anaemic [sic], nervous, and broken in health."<sup>15</sup>

At times, it simply wasn't worth buying fabric and spending the time to sew. Constance W. Simons, a woman who received numerous hand-me-downs from her sister, justified her purchase of a skirt:

I went down... and bought a black skirt that I actually need... Do you think \$10 much for a black silk skirt... with godets, plaits all, all braid... a little pattern enclosed [she drew a simple sketch]: I *need it so much* and could not begin to get material and have it made for that price.<sup>16</sup> (emphasis in original)

Likewise, Margorie Durand, who grew up in Montana during the 1920s, recalled that while her mother made the bulk of the family's wardrobe, she would order things from mail-order catalogs when the choices were cheaper or better than what her mother might make herself. Like Simons, Durand's mother sewed a great deal but recognized that it was a better use of time and money to buy the occasional item.<sup>17</sup> Still, other women may have had the skills and time but did not *want* to sew. For example, Florence Epstein recalled that her mother just "wasn't inclined to sew."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to time pressures, skills, financial calculations, and desire, whether not a woman sewed at home was also a factor of household power relations. In a family where a woman did not earn wages, whether to sew was often a question of a man's money versus a woman's time. Wendy Gamber points out that even though women were largely considered to be responsible for household consumption, they were spending "what their husbands frequently regarded as *'their* money."<sup>19</sup> Sewing was considered part of normal housework and many men could not or would not spend more in order to alleviate their partner's workload.<sup>20</sup> The "tipping point" at which women and their families decided to buy instead of make clothing depended on a range of

factors including income level, whether a woman worked for wages, access to shops, amount of spare time, sewing skill, family dynamics, and personal taste.<sup>21</sup>

Judging by the proliferation of agricultural extension services, school sewing curricula, adult classes, pattern companies, and magazine articles and guidebooks, even into the 1920s, a substantial proportion of American women chose to sew. Many did so for practical reasons – a home seamstress could afford a higher quality fabric if she did the work herself or had little access to ready-made clothing – but sewing was also tightly bound to ideas of motherhood, community, domesticity, and femininity. The remainder of this chapter will examine why women sewed, while exploring the cultural resonance of the popularity of a traditional "feminine" skill.

## Economy

In 1901, the *New York Times* advertised a ready-made cotton percale dress for \$4.88.<sup>22</sup> That style required about seven yards of fabric. With "fancy imported printed percale" costing about ten cents a yard, plus a five-cent pattern and some trimmings (all available from the Sears catalog), a homemade dress required less than a dollar's outlay.<sup>23</sup> A retrospective report by a national retailing organization recalled that "in 1910 the home dressmaker still ruled the average household for even in that period you could not buy a quality dress for less than about \$30 retail while the home dressmaker could make one of equal quality for much less."<sup>24</sup> In 1927, a government-sponsored survey found that an overwhelming number of women who sewed did so because it was cheaper than buying ready-made clothing and nearly all of the respondents to another survey agreed that sewing was "an economy."<sup>25</sup>

If making a dress at home was an outright savings, it could also prove to be a better value over time. Many women argued that by sewing at home, they could afford higher quality fabrics and their garments would last longer than store-bought items. Jane Dunn, who grew up in New Jersey in the 1910s and '20s, recalled that "we all felt it was better to have one thing of high quality rather

than more than one of cheap quality. By purchasing the good quality fabric and making it at home we achieved that goal."<sup>26</sup> Margorie Durand recalled wearing silk blouses made by her mother and said it would be a waste of time to sew clothing from inferior fabrics.<sup>27</sup>

In the early twentieth century, as it had been for long before then, home dressmaking was usually more economical than purchasing clothing. Of course, this discounts the cost of a woman's time, but if you are not paid – or underpaid – for your time in other contexts, your time is cheap and therefore better spent than cash. Sewing to save money supported middle-class values of feminine thrift and provided a way for women to influence the household budget without earning a wage.<sup>28</sup> Women's magazines that offered fashion and sewing advice were quick to recognize that their mostly middle-class readers often sewed to stretch household budgets and editors portrayed economy as a virtue and not a sacrifice. If thrift was appreciated in middle-class households, it was a necessity for working-class women. They were the least able to afford dressmakers and the most likely to continue to sew once ready-mades were prevalent. For the average domestic worker earning \$264 a year who read the 1902 Sears catalog, whether to order the dress or the fabric seemed a straightforward decision.<sup>29</sup>

Progressive-era social workers believed in this logic and often predicated their policies on the assumption that working-class women would sew much of their family's clothing. A survey published in 1920 determined that in order to maintain a "minimum standard of health and decency," a worker's wife would need to sew a significant proportion of clothing for herself and her hypothetical three children, including one apron, ten cotton dresses, one wool dress, and three cotton blouses a year.<sup>30</sup> Her husband's clothing would be primarily store-bought.

In fact, many working women did sew some or all of their clothing. A study by the National Consumer's League of working women in New York City, published in 1911 but undertaken two years earlier, sheds light on the difference it made for working women to be able to make at least some of their clothing.

American-born Emily Clement, an unskilled envelope-machine operative earning \$6 a week, made all of her clothes and some of her sister's. She was able to make a "stylishly cut and becoming" three-piece suit for \$5.20, about half of what an inexpensive ready-made suit might cost.<sup>31</sup> Corset operative Katia Markelov earned \$10 a week in good times but much less when the season was slack. She could afford to buy books and opera tickets by "making her own waists" as well as doing her own laundry.<sup>32</sup> A Mrs. Green, a widow who worked in a New York department store as a skilled corset fitter for the high salary of \$12 a week, used her own skills to dress well at little expense. A National Consumer's League writer noted that "Mrs. Green seemed extravagantly dressed; she said, however, that she continued to have effective waists and hats by making and trimming them herself, and by purchasing materials with care at sales."<sup>33</sup>

As the example of Mrs. Green demonstrates, working women had to be resourceful in finding affordable material. Women on the Lower East Side bought bargains from peddlers or used remnants. Jewel Jimana Woods, an African American woman supporting a disabled husband and five children in Colorado Springs in the 1920s, often received fabric from her daughter's teacher.<sup>34</sup> Many rural families bleached the cotton sacks that had contained animal feed or flour. By the 1940s, feed and flour companies produced the sacks with attractive patterns. Still, finding affordable sewing materials could be a challenge. A large-scale survey published by the Department of Agriculture in 1927 found that the lower the household income, the more trouble women had finding materials and patterns.<sup>35</sup>



Of course, if a woman's sewing skills were mediocre, all the patterns and materials in the world could still lead to frustration. Barbara Burman writes that "clothing which was known to be home-made was an ambivalent sign. Whilst it spoke of respectable thrift or neighbourly generosity, it was also an unwelcome badge of poverty."<sup>36</sup> A photograph from the 1910s demonstrates how observers could often discern whether clothing was home made. Her stripes do not line up; this

is in part due to the folds at the waist, but it attracts attention. With no supporting context, it is not possible to judge this woman's economic status, but the photograph is testimony to the difficulties of producing a successful dress, despite the promises of the fashion pages.<sup>37</sup> Clothing that was obviously home made could be a source of embarrassment, as it was a clear sign of a family's economic status.

That said, many women could sew very well and were not at all self-conscious about the results. In fact, much home made clothing was more attractive than what was available for sale. Marjorie Durand remembered her disappointment when she found it difficult to find dresses that fit as well as her mother's creations, and Edith Kurtz recalled a cousin who waited eagerly for her homemade hand-me-downs, which were nicer than her own mother could purchase.<sup>38</sup> Both women grew up in farm families and their mothers sewed out of necessity, but instead of feeling ashamed, they enjoyed their homemade clothing.



In any case, many families did not have a choice whether or not to sew. In her study of sharecroppers' wives in Texas, Rebecca Sharpless found that "numerous people recalled their mothers making virtually every stitch of the families' clothing, with the possible exception of men's dress shirts and the families' supplies of stiff denim overalls."<sup>39</sup> One woman in that study told the U.S. Senate Committee on Industrial Relations in 1914, "I never have got a dress ready-made for myself in my life since I have been a married woman."<sup>40</sup> Edith Kurtz told me "I never had anything brand new."<sup>41</sup> Because of their economic vulnerability, black women were especially pressured to sew. Jewel Jimana Woods made the family's clothing while working full time.<sup>42</sup> For many women, therefore, the "choice" of whether to sew or buy was nonexistent. Clothing their families was an ongoing challenge that required significant time and effort.

## Meeting Standards

For many, sewing primarily served as a way to save money. Homemakers contributed to the family economy by substituting their time, effort, and skills for cash expenditures. Women who worked for wages could supplement their earnings by making their own clothing. But home seamstresses' motivations often went beyond the purely economic. Women who sewed for themselves and their families were also engaging in a process of performance, of self-representation. Home dressmaking was an important way to literally keep up appearances in the eyes of friends, neighbors, strangers and employers. As one historian put it, "Fashion was not simply about looking good. Fashion was about being good as well."<sup>43</sup> By making their clothing, women could try to meet community standards of fashionable and respectable appearances.

The thousands of female operatives who worked in clothing factories and sweatshops could rarely afford the garments they made. Instead, they used their skills, and often fabric remnants from the industry, to make their own clothing at night or during slow periods at work. A newspaper article described a woman's purchase of a piece of normally expensive lace for 50 cents, explaining that, "pieces of fine cloth, in sizes from half a yard to several yards, are often sold at low rates."<sup>44</sup> A different journalist described a young woman whose family was "in genuine poverty" but to his surprise dressed so stylishly that "one who did not know East Side girls would have said, uncharitably, that the heartless young woman was spending on clothes the money needed to buy bread for her old mother and small sisters," but the mystery was soon explained:

The waist, thin and charmingly cool looking, she had made herself, buying the material from a Hester Street pushcart for 20 cents. Its "style" came from the really handsome neck arrangement, which she had made herself: she worked at neckwear, and the "boss" had allowed her to take the odds and ends from which she had fashioned the pretty thing. The skirt her brother-in-law, who "works at skirts," had made for her at odd times, and it cost, getting the material at wholesale, \$2.50. Her hat her "chum"

made at an expense of 60 cents. To the uninitiated the costume represented an outlay of \$20, at least, although she had achieved it at an expense of \$3.30, and was able to go abroad without proclaiming to the world the dire poverty at home. Her cleverness and the kindness of others had saved the proud old mother a severe humiliation.<sup>45</sup>



A working-class woman who could make high-quality garments (or who had the good fortune to be related to a skirt-maker) could pass, at least superficially, for middle-class, sparing herself and her family the embarrassment of being poorly dressed. Another example of the skills of working women is a photograph taken in New York around 1907, showing a group of women outside the building where they worked as milliners. As would be expected of professional hatmakers, their headwear is fantastic, and their clothing – matching skirts and jackets, worn with shirtwaists – is stylish as well. Dina Goldberg Gelowitz, who worked as a milliner in Boston in the early twentieth century, cared about fashion and made much of her clothing.<sup>46</sup> It is very likely that the women in the photograph also created their own outfits, especially because they were trained in the clothing trade.

The same art of self-presentation was important for the many women entering the growing "pink-collar" workforce at the turn of the century, but looking presentable could be expensive. In her study of department store saleswomen, Susan Porter Benson notes the "hidden cost" of being "impeccably dressed on the job."<sup>47</sup> She gives the example of the same Lucy Cleaver mentioned earlier who bought twenty-four poorly made shirtwaists at less than a dollar apiece for her job as a saleswoman. These would soon fall apart, but she could not pull together the additional 50 cents for better quality blouses. While a 1909 *New York Times* article urged the new "business girl" to go to "as good a tailor or dressmaker as she can afford," the reality was that women's office jobs paid only marginally more than skilled factory labor; for example, a female typist might earn \$12 a week in 1911.<sup>48</sup> This gap had to be filled somehow and many women sewed in order to dress according to white-collar standards. Pattern makers and magazines advertised suit

patterns from the turn of the century through the 1930s as appropriate for "business girls."<sup>49</sup> A *Ladies Home Journal* reader won a prize for her essay "How I Dressed on \$100 a Year." The winner, who worked in New York City, made most of her clothes. She explained how she did the preliminary work at home and sewed the seams during visits to her parents, who owned a sewing machine.<sup>50</sup>

This struggle to dress appropriately was experienced acutely by African Americans. The sewing skills used on the job by women who worked as domestic servants and laundresses were employed at home not only for everyday use but also to counteract criticism and abuse.<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Shaw argues that African American families stressed the importance of decent dress, as they "hoped that extremely upright behavior would ward off dangerous attention and counteract the negative stereotypes of African Americans that were common throughout white America."<sup>52</sup> E. Azalia Hackley, an African American singer and activist, wrote *The Colored Girl Beautiful*, a booklet aimed at African American women desiring professional work. In it, she admonished readers that dress was part of "race pride," noting:

On the streets and as the street cars pass our homes, colored people should give the best pictures possible of themselves, if they can not of the houses in which they live. We are a poor people but we can be quiet, clean, becomingly and fittingly dressed. We must stifle the desire to be conspicuous unless it is to be conspicuous by quietness.<sup>53</sup>

Hackley suggested that her readers stick to classic designs and not follow the latest fashions, in part because "few colored women can afford to keep the pace of styles."<sup>54</sup> She did not write specifically of sewing, but her acknowledgement of practical as well as political decisions in dress was accurate; many African American women had to sew to make ends meet. Those who could not sew literally paid the consequences. Alice Owens Caufield and her sister, who lost their mother in 1912, strained their financial resources to buy inexpensive dresses until they had sewing classes in high school and were able to make their own clothes.<sup>55</sup> Jewel Jimana Woods made nearly all of her family's clothing in the 1910s and '20s, especially after her ailing husband

could no longer work.<sup>56</sup> Woods, who was trained as a teacher but worked as a custodian, re-used tissue paper patterns (at 35 cents, they were considered expensive) and re-made second-hand clothing. In the eyes of her daughter, Winifred Byrd, Woods succeeded in dressing her family well. Byrd remembered the matching dresses her mother made for her and her sister and claimed that she never minded wearing home-made clothing as a child.<sup>57</sup> Byrd's memories may be shaped by time and affection, but they may also demonstrate how some children understood the financial realities their parents faced.

### Farm Culture



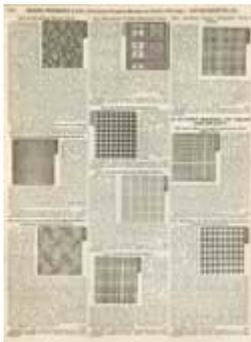
While many middle-class women made a calculated decision whether to sew or not, and urban working women could buy cheap clothing if they could not manage to sew, women who lived in isolated areas, regardless of their economic status, had fewer options. Women and girls who lived on farms consistently sewed more than urban women. Rural women's sewing was based in part on traditional gender roles, which may have run deeper in less urban areas. Many rural women worked full-time on the farm itself and rarely went to work for wages. Perhaps their household labor was more immediately visible as work, but they also had less access to ready-made clothing, making their home dressmaking that much more vital to the family economy.



Rural women often had to plan ahead and buy material on rare visits to town. Mabel Price of Oliver County, North Dakota recalled:

When you went to town you planned for a week and went for two days. We stayed overnight because Mom's cousins were there. We went with a horse and buggy. If Papa was along, we took the wagon, otherwise we took the horse and buggy. We would walk the streets, and my folks got groceries and some clothes, stuff we needed, always had to have clothes.<sup>58</sup>

Price was a child in the 1900s and the situation was the same more than twenty years later. Edna Zimmerman, born around 1922, recalled that when her mother took a load of wheat into town after the harvest, "she'd buy herself material to sew dresses over the winter, and the groceries, like sugar and flour."<sup>59</sup> Margorie Durand recalled that there were few dresses available in Warden, Montana during the 1920s, and said that instead of buying clothing, all the local women sewed. Her mother made dresses, aprons, children's things, and household items such as towels.



Rural women were eager patrons of the mail-order houses. Montgomery Ward started its catalog in the 1870s and Sears, Roebuck debuted in 1893, but catalog shopping boomed after the implementation of Rural Free Delivery in 1896, when package delivery became financially sustainable.<sup>60</sup> Montgomery Ward, Sears, Roebuck and smaller companies sold fabric and other sewing supplies, including sewing machines, through the mail. Of course, shoppers missed the tactile quality of shopping for fabrics, but the catalogs accommodated customers by offering samples. For a penny, Sears, Roebuck shoppers could order as many swatches as they wanted – an especially helpful service given that the catalog images were black and white.<sup>61</sup> The major catalogs also carried ready-made clothing, the selection of which increased over the decades in proportion to its prevalence in stores. For women in isolated rural areas, these catalogs were one of the few ways they could obtain ready-made dresses or sewing materials.

Women who were raised in rural areas remember shopping from catalogs. Marion Goodman grew up during the late 1910s and early 1920s on a forest station where her father was the ranger. With the nearest town fifty miles away, Mrs. Goodman's mother had little choice but to sew. She would order all of her supplies from Montgomery Ward and her husband would travel to the post office in town once a week. Margaret Durand's mother was not

nearly as isolated, but when she wanted something ready-made, such as men's overalls, she might order it from Sears, Roebuck and other catalogs when on sale.<sup>62</sup>

Another source of fabric for rural women was sacks in which flour and animal feed were packaged. Lu Ann Jones addresses the history of using sack material in her study of Southern farm women. She writes that women used sacks for clothing by the late nineteenth century, but it was during the 1920s that sack material became "an emblem of poverty, a testament to ingenuity, and a badge of pride."<sup>63</sup> Before companies started to make their bags with attractive prints, in approximately 1940, women worked hard to remove company logos. A woman from North Dakota recalled that her mother was good at bleaching the bags but thought "some people had Pillsbury, probably, on their seat."<sup>64</sup> Marion Goodman's mother bleached flour sacks, which Goodman used to make towels for her grandmother's Christmas gifts.<sup>65</sup> As Jones points out, however, "For a woman to have access to a lot of 'free' bags required a certain degree of affluence" since having many sacks meant you could afford a lot of flour or had a large flock of chickens.<sup>66</sup> Other women used bags that were directly linked to their hard work in the fields. Alice Caufield recalled how African American sharecroppers

bleached the cotton sacks, what you put cotton in. They would bleach them and sleep on them. You know it comes about this wide [three feet] and they'd sew it up each side, so if you're going to make a sheet, you just unrip one side and hem the ends. And I know they have made sheets out of it and they have used it for tickings to fill pillows.<sup>67</sup>

There was an extensive infrastructure aimed at teaching rural women to sew. A series of federal acts, including the Hatch Act of 1887, organized federal funds for land-grant institutions. The original intent of creating land-grant colleges was to offer practical as well as more academic studies to the working class. The fact that home economics was regularly part of their curricula demonstrates how rural culture recognized the value of women's domestic labor.<sup>68</sup> The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 made these programs more accessible by creating cooperative extension services to provide education to rural populations. The text of the

act stated that the federal government and the states would organize and fund "useful and practical information on subjects related to agriculture and home economics." Such initiatives suited Progressive ideas of professionalizing home work and improving family welfare through rationality and science. Women were included from the start. For example, one of the bill's namesakes, Senator Asbury Francis Lever of South Carolina, specified that lawmakers had not hitherto appreciated rural women's contributions and that this bill was a way to rectify that neglect.<sup>69</sup>

Course offerings at rural educational institutions reflected these pragmatic ideas. The Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts recommended that "if the student expects to live in the country, she may fit herself more fully for her life there by taking some agricultural subjects or by enrolling as a student for a combination course in home economics and agriculture."<sup>70</sup> Students could take a college-level course that required them to spend a third of their time studying "technical" subjects such as sewing and laundry. If they did not qualify for the college course, women could also take a two-year program in which

...much time is given to sewing and its related subjects. Students learn to draft patterns, to make garments and to dress appropriately at moderate cost. In the two years, each student makes a complete set of underwear, two cooking dresses, a shirt waist, a wool skirt, a lingerie waist, an unlined silk and a tailored linen dress. She also renovates and alters an old dress.<sup>71</sup>

The Alabama Polytechnic Institute, later renamed Auburn University, offered similar courses. The dressmaking classes were held in the agricultural building, a sign of how sewing was ingrained in rural culture. Photographs from the 1920s show students sewing at machines and modeling dresses they had made. Their dresses are stylish and fit well for the straight shapes of the 1920s.



Some of the students in these courses likely expected to use their skills to run a household, but many went on to become state-employed home demonstration agents. One photograph of Auburn students is in fact labeled "Students at API preparing for Home Demonstration Work by studying methods in teaching clothing and millinery." To provide the "useful and practical information" specified in the Smith-Lever Act, college-educated male and female extension agents worked with communities and families, providing instruction as well as social activities such as clubs and picnics. The agents sought to increase farm productivity and improve home life by teaching a range of skills, including how to remove stumps from fields, fight pests, raise chickens, pickle vegetables, improve nutrition, and make clothing. In Alabama, female agents were designated as "foods and nutrition" or "clothing" experts and designed their curricula at subject-matter conferences. Judging from their annual reports, the sewing goals were quite sophisticated, including creating fabric "permanent patterns" fitted to an individual that could be used again and again "to cut other dresses which can then be made up without fitting."<sup>72</sup>

The agents who taught sewing ran meetings at which women and girls helped each other make dresses. One agent described a whirlwind of a day:

At one meeting I had 25 girls and they all wanted a pattern, all of them except two wanted the dress cut. Fortunately 4 ladies came to help me. By taking the older girls and giving them the directions for cutting the dress pattern from the individual measurements, then cutting the dress, I was able to cut 25 patterns and 22 dresses in 3 hours.<sup>73</sup>

Another agent described a "rally" featuring a fashion show exhibiting dresses and hats made by members of different clubs, and exhibits of extension service work included dressmaking.



While extension clubs were social events, the sewing education was more than entertainment. For the poorest families – often African American – help with making clothing made a real difference. The southern extension service was segregated and African American agents dealt with the effects of racism and poverty. One supervisor of African Americans reported:

On account of financial depression, there was very little money handled by rural people who need the help of community workers. In some instances, while there was food, which had been raised on the farm, there was no money with which to buy the necessary winter clothing. In many instances the children were able to remain in school because the agent instructed the mother in collecting, ripping, dyeing and making over old garments.<sup>74</sup>

The training provided by the extension services led to noticeable changes. Agents' reports included improvements in sanitation, reductions in numbers of underweight children, and increased quantities of home-canned food – changes that affected the health and overall quality of life of rural families. One report that counted the dollar value of canned food revealed that like the financial savings of home sewing, canning was another way to squeeze more value out of home production. The agent reported that in 1923, women in Alabama preserved at least \$258,233 worth of fruit, vegetables, and meats.<sup>75</sup> The act of promoting these skills and giving them an actual dollar amount reinforced the value – cultural as well as economic – of women's domestic work.

### **Good Wives**

Extension programs focused on the pragmatic advantages of sewing. However, home extension programs were more than practical – they were also ideological. In her study of home demonstration work in the south, Lynne Anderson Rieff argues

that "agents continually urged women to improve and perfect housekeeping techniques rather than teaching them quick ways to perform household duties so they might engage in non-domestic activities."<sup>76</sup> In other words, the home demonstration agents' agenda was to focus on the value of domestic skills, not to train women to leave the home. But women already knew that sewing had deep connections to abstract ideas of what women should do. In addition to saving money, providing for a family, and meeting community standards of dress, sewing was tied up with ideas of class identity, domestic security, and feminine morality.

Among these more ideological understandings of sewing was its relation to being a good wife. While the definition of "good wife" changed according to the social ethos of the day, the ability to run a household has remained a central theme in American conceptions of family harmony. In the idealized (white, middle-class) Victorian family, the breadwinner husband made key decisions and was supported by his homemaker wife who considered sewing to be part of her duties. This ideology of "true womanhood" was echoed in domestic science courses in the early twentieth century.<sup>77</sup> The Garland School of Homemaking in Boston was devoted to this scheme. A course in ethics was also a study in gender and class ideology. Students were instructed that the father was to be the head of household, whereas the mother was its "heart." The same course taught that if a woman earned money, it diminished the dignity of the man in her household.<sup>78</sup>

In keeping with this theme, Garland students were taught to sew. They made decorative items like hemstitched tablecloths and garments as complicated as a fitted shirtwaist, even when someone of their social class could have purchased such things ready- or dressmaker-made. Sewing skills were assumed to be important, regardless of whether or for what purpose the student might use them. Garland students were taught that it was inappropriate for white, middle- and upper-class women to earn wages. They nevertheless learned forms of work that were acceptable for their class and laden with ideas about what a woman should be able to produce.

The education offered at the Garland School was, however, becoming obsolete. At least one Garland student (or her daughter) sarcastically called the school the "Garland School of Matrimonial Bliss."<sup>79</sup> New education and employment possibilities, together with lower birthrates, expanded views of a woman's role in the home. Women comprised 40 percent of college students in 1910 and nearly 50 percent by 1920.<sup>80</sup> Working-class women, both white and black, had fewer opportunities for education but took evening classes in topics like economics and literature through organizations such as the Women's Trade Union League or the YWCA. Those who took domestic science courses were encouraged to see homemaking as a profession, complete with scientific justifications for kitchen design and childrearing.<sup>81</sup>

Nancy Cott writes that during the 1920s, marriage came to be seen as "a specialized site for emotional intimacy, personal and sexual expression, and nurture among husband, wife, and a small number of children."<sup>82</sup> These changes affected how women – at least those in the middle class -- perceived and performed household work. Instead of being seen as a woman's duty, or a way to enforce respectability, or rendered optional (for those who could afford it) by the growing ready-to-wear industry, sewing was portrayed less often as a useful form of household labor than as a way to nurture a family and encourage sexual attraction.

The Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences, a correspondence school for sewing and cooking, reflected this changing understanding of a desirable home and marriage in its advertisements. One full-page ad in 1922 told the story of a subscriber who resuscitated her marriage by learning to sew. Before taking the course, she wore dowdy old dresses or "purchased some cheap, ill-fitting dress at the store." She and her husband argued about money, he no longer found her attractive, and their marriage was suffering, but help was on the way:

One day I heard of a woman just like myself who had learned to make pretty, becoming clothes at home, through the Woman's Institute ... I realized with startling clearness that here might be the solution to my own clothes problem – that if I could

really learn to make my own clothes it would be easy to get the pretty things I had been needing so badly.

When the narrator wore her spiffy new outfits, her husband became attracted to her once more. She claimed, "I don't care what the poets say – no man is going to love a woman with the same old fervor of the sweetheart days unless she keeps herself attractive." <sup>83</sup>

Enterprises such as the Woman's Institute and the magazines in which it advertised recognized changes in women's lives. They could see that women, especially those in the middle class, had more access to education, family planning, and paid work. They also came under more pressure to look young, stylish, and sexually appealing, but most family finances were still controlled by men. The Woman's Institute therefore touched on insecurities and desires that emerged as demands on domesticity waned. Such advertisements appealed to readers for whom sewing was not a household fixture but a way to fulfill desires for less money.

### **Caring Mothers**

Despite smaller families, or perhaps because of them, sewing was linked with motherhood. Maternalist ideology became more important as the material base for traditional behavior declined – when someone had the opportunity to buy a child's outfit, it became more meaningful to make it at home. This connection between caring for children and making at least some of their clothing persisted whether ready-made children's clothing was available or not. Poor women had little choice but to sew for their children, and wealthier women felt making baby clothes demonstrated their love and devotion. Schoolgirls of all backgrounds were taught to make doll clothes, and home economics textbooks argued that learning to sew was crucial to taking care of a family. One text defined household arts, including sewing, as "the scientific study of all matters and means which will contribute to the happiest, healthiest, and most efficient family life."<sup>84</sup> One how-to guide emphasized the link between sewing and motherhood:

As a matter both of sentiment and economy, many mothers prefer to make baby's little things themselves. It is only natural that the interested expectant mother should be able to express much individuality and daintiness not present in little ready-made garments.<sup>85</sup>

Even as interest in sewing waned in the 1920s, women continued to sew for their children. In 1922, a small survey of married graduates of college home economics courses revealed that a high percentage of respondents made practically all of their children's clothing. The survey analysts acknowledged that theirs was a select group but hoped that the idea that college-educated women might be expected to sew less than those without access to higher education would be offset by their experience in home-economics courses. A "large majority" claimed to make "most of the clothes for all of the children, except the older boys." They admitted they "sewed for their children more than for themselves because 'children's clothes are easier to make' and 'can be made from used materials to advantage.'"<sup>86</sup>

However, some women felt they were better mothers if they spent their time earning a living or playing with their children rather than sewing for them. One woman wrote to the *New York Times* to explain that she bought clothing so that she could "find time to play with my baby once in a while, instead of frantically imploring, 'Oh, please, please go away until I finish stitching this sleeve.'"<sup>87</sup> A survey of 300 Georgia homemakers undertaken in the late 1920s indicated that ready-to-wear children's clothing was catching up with home-made: 65 percent of the respondents bought children's rompers and 55 percent bought little girls' dresses.<sup>88</sup> (Those same women made 83 percent of their children's coats. This apparent discrepancy might be explained, however, when we realize that women often cut down and remade an adult's coat for a child.) Pattern makers and publishers fought mothers' reluctance to sew by offering more appealing children's designs and declaring that "when a romper suit for a wee lad or lassie who is the pride of the household is the point in question, sewing most certainly cannot assume a foreboding nature."<sup>89</sup> This insistence on the superiority of

homemade clothing assumed free time and implied that sewing was a pleasurable way to nurture children. In this light, sewing was not work but a gift of love.

These ideas about children's clothing held fast as many women who could afford to buy ready-made or have clothing made by a professional still chose to sew for their family. The Bureau of Home Economics survey revealed that women in the highest income bracket sometimes made *more* items for children than women in the lowest bracket.<sup>90</sup> After all, with the income to pay someone else to do the laundry, cooking, cleaning, and child care, wealthy women had plenty of time to sew if they cared to. In her letters to family and friends, Joanna Maria du Pont Dimmick often mentioned sewing for her young daughter. In a note to her sister-in-law, she discussed making underwear for the girl, and another letter indicates that the two women often exchanged sewing patterns for children's outfits. The two women were members of an affluent family and Dimmick does not mention making things for herself, yet both she and her sister-in-law were active in sewing for their children.<sup>91</sup> These women had little need to earn or save money, but they chose to undertake labor that had meaning for them as mothers.

Many women, of course, did not have the luxury of deciding to sew for their children; they simply could not afford any other options. Poor women with many children bore the largest burden. Sharpless acknowledges that among the many jobs of Texas farmers' wives, "keeping large, growing families of children clothed may have been the most difficult part of women's sewing duties."<sup>92</sup>

Whether or not a mother felt making an outfit for her child was a way to express her love, she was aware that others formed their opinions of a woman by looking at her children. Sometimes, this pressure came from outside institutions. Spelman College, for example, demanded adherence to a strict dress code until the 1920s with rules about acceptable colors, skirt widths and lengths, collar height, and decoration. The idea was to enforce a virtuous sobriety by requiring "simple, suitable, and healthful clothing," but the rules also served to announce the

professionalism and respectability of the African American pupils.<sup>93</sup> Given the notion that African American women were sexually available, modesty in dress was paramount. Some students may have made their own clothing and other families bought school clothing at a store, but no doubt many mothers worked hard to make suitable outfits for their daughters, knowing that the results would be judged by teachers and administrators and would reflect upon their home.

The pressure to dress in a certain way could also come from within a family. Some Middletown girls threatened to leave school if they lacked the right outfits. One working-class mother told the Lynds, "Most of my time goes into sewing for my daughter. She's sixteen and I do want her to keep on until she graduates from high school and she wants to too, but she won't go unless she has what she considers proper clothes."<sup>94</sup> The definition of *proper* was a source of contention as the younger generation gravitated toward new styles and tested the boundaries of what their mothers considered acceptable. Other girls rejected their mothers' efforts altogether, believing that cheap store-bought clothing was superior to anything home-made.<sup>95</sup> Still, many petulant teenagers took advantage of their mothers' skills and vulnerabilities, aware that their mother's sewing was a tool for keeping up appearances.

### **Helpful Neighbors and Citizens**

Making clothing for children, even when they could afford not to, was a way in which women used sewing to perform traditional gender roles. However, some people did not have children to sew for, or they wanted to extend the reach of their dressmaking. These women could sustain traditional ideas of femininity by sewing for charity. Individual women and women's aid societies made practical things like clothing, blankets, and diapers to give directly to others or fancier items like embroidered pillowcases to sell at fundraising fairs.

Women from the upper or middle classes had a history of belonging to social and philanthropic sewing groups. Frances Trollope, visiting the United States in the 1820s, recounted how

wealthy women in Philadelphia formed a charitable sewing circle; they would sell articles at a fair and then donate the proceeds to a charity.<sup>96</sup> During the Civil War, women on both sides of the conflict made uniforms, bandages, and quilts for soldiers. This behavior persisted during the late nineteenth century; for example, in a note to her sister-in-law Dimmick mentioned that she had finished an "afghan" [sic] but that "the society has ordered another, so I will have enough work to last me some time."<sup>97</sup> The Cambridge Sewing Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts noted in its constitution that each member be responsible for at least one garment per year to be donated to the Cambridge Visiting Nurses Association.<sup>98</sup> In 1915, they amended the club's constitution to require "that each member be obliged to make during the year 1 woman's nightgown, 1 child's nightgown and as many diapers as possible."<sup>99</sup>

Charitable sewing began early. A home economics text asked readers, "Do you belong to a sewing club or society? Perhaps you can form a sewing club at your school or in your town as the girls of Pleasant Valley did." These fictional girls apparently "make garments for the little children who come during the summer to the Fresh Air Home near their town."<sup>100</sup> A novel about college girls included this kind of project: the young women sewed clothing for dolls that were then given to a settlement house. At one point, the characters talk about the work that went into the dolls:

"Well," sighed Georgie, "I'm hungry, but I suppose I might as well go in and dress that doll for the College Settlement Association. The show's to-night." "Mine's done," said Priscilla; "and Patty wouldn't take one. Did you see Bonnie Connaught sitting on the back seat in biology this morning, hemming her doll's petticoat straight through the lecture?" "Really!" laughed Patty. "It's a good thing Professor Hitchcock's nearsighted."<sup>101</sup>

Charitable sewing became militarized once again during the First World War. The Red Cross and other organizations oversaw the efforts of thousands of women who sewed and knit articles for soldiers. Ellen S.V. Motter's April 1918 letter to her daughter conveys the passion these women put into their war work:

Last night was my surgical dressings class, & we meet two evenings now, – & are glad to do it – as the need is so great. My Unit work this week is to make pillow cases, & I'll have at another sweater, but how pitifully little that is when one longs so to do with all one's powers ...<sup>102</sup>

Motter also wrote of making pajamas and of her frustration when the military stopped accepting bandages made by volunteers. Even children contributed to the war effort. Edith Kurtz, born in 1904, recalled knitting washcloths for soldiers while her mother and other local women made more complicated items.<sup>103</sup>

Charitable sewing, like many philanthropic efforts, came with its own ideas of class behavior and prerogative. The dolls in *Patty Goes to College* were sent to New York City settlement houses with the intent that "East Side mothers could use them as models for the clothing of their own children."<sup>104</sup> The fictional story reflects the idea held by many in the middle class that immigrant women needed help with sewing. In a study of Italian and Jewish immigrants, Kathie Friedman-Kasada cites a settlement sewing instructor's comments on the Italian women with whom she interacted:

In the matter of clothing the women were equally ignorant and equally teachable. The mothers were sincere in protesting that they would be glad to make cheap, simple garments for themselves and their children if they only knew how. In these cases they were supplied with a pattern and enough material to for one garment and given one or more lessons in cutting, fitting and fashioning it.<sup>105</sup>

The settlement worker accepted the immigrant women's comments at face value because she assumed they would need help, but Friedman-Kasada argues that such assumptions failed to recognize that many immigrants already knew how to sew. She

suggests instead that the immigrants understood the idea that the Americans perceived sewing to be part of American motherhood. They used the same language as the magazines and pattern advertisements – they wanted "cheap simple garments for themselves and their children" – to get free materials, free patterns, material, and assistance. In the end, both sides walked away with something they needed. Charity sewing was not only for the intended beneficiaries but also served to reinforce middle-class ideas of their social role.

## Conclusion

Charlotte Louise Jewell Jencks studied at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and was certified to teach sewing and cooking as a home economics teacher. When Jencks ran her own household, she sometimes hired a young woman to do some housework. More than once, her helpers lacked sewing skills and were unable to do even basic mending.<sup>106</sup> Their families had been unable to teach them and they had not learned the skills in school, probably because they dropped out in order to work for a living.

To a woman like Jencks, who was invested in sewing both personally and professionally, not being able to sew was more than an inconvenience – it was a disgrace. For a woman of her generation and background, home sewing was an important feminine domain. It represented maternal responsibility, financial caution, feminine attractiveness, social connections, and household respectability. Sewing was in a sense a distillation of American ideas about what women should do with their time and for their families. However, there is more to this story. Sewing was work, but it was also fun. Sewing helped women to be thrifty wives, but it also gave them some control of household finances. It was a way to dress according to the rules and also a tool for making new rules. The following chapter will look at the many ways in which women and girls used sewing to confront ideas about how they should dress and act.

## Notes

**Note 1:** Mrs. H.S., letter to the Editor, *Woman's Home Companion* (May 1934): 134. back

**Note 2:** Strasser, *Never Done*, 134. This would soon change: between 1890 and 1914, the value of factory-made women's clothing grew from \$ 68,000,000 to almost a half a billion dollars. Victor S. Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., for Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1929, volume 2), 224. Another option may have been a used-clothing market. In her study of eighteenth-century French saleswomen, Jennifer Jones notes that there was a thriving market in secondhand clothing, and it is probable that such goods were popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America as well. See Jones, "Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien-Régime Paris," in Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things*, 25-53. back

**Note 3:** Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929). back

**Note 4:** Edith Kurtz, interview by author, tape recording, Oberlin, Ohio, 25 May 2001. back

**Note 5:** For a fascinating look at dressmakers, see Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). back

**Note 6:** Gabrielle Josephine Crofton, Diary, 1894, Crofton/Shubrick Papers, Hagley Library. back

**Note 7:** "Sewing at Home Decreases as 'Ready-Mades' Gain Favor - but Survey by Bureau of Home Economics Discloses Rural Women Still Ply the Needle," *New York Times*, 18 December 1927, sec. 10, p.10. back

**Note 8:** Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 165. back

**Note 9:** Barbara Burman notes that the exact extent of home sewing is difficult to determine. For example, sales figures for fabric do not distinguish between fabric produced for home use versus industrial use, and consumer expenditure statistics list "clothing" as one category. back

**Note 10:** J.B. Leeds, *The Household Budget, With A Special Inquiry Into the Amount and Value of Household Work*, Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1917, quoted in Ruth O'Brien and Maude Campbell, *Present Trends in Home Sewing*, Miscellaneous Publication No. 4 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, September 1927), 2. back

**Note 11:** F.E. Ward, *The Farm Woman's Problems*, Circular 148 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1920), cited in O'Brien and Campbell, "Present Trends In Home Sewing," 2. back

**Note 12:** Mabel Hastie and Geraldine Gorton, "What Shall We Teach Regarding Clothing and Laundry Problems?" *Journal of Home Economics* 18 (March 1926): 127-133, 129. Hastie and Gorton sent their survey to 2,989 city families and 1,450 rural families in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Nebraska, New York, and Texas. They do not specify the response rate. back

**Note 13:** Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 165. Women were classified according to their husbands' professions. back

**Note 14:** Katherine Cranor, "Homemade Versus Ready-Made Clothing," *Journal of Home Economics* 12 (May 1920): 230-233, 230 and O'Brien and Campbell, 13. back

**Note 15:** Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet: The Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1911), 7. back

**Note 16:** Constance W. Simons to Elise Simons du Pont, 18 May 1895, box 17, Francis Gurney du Pont Papers. back

**Note 17:** Marjorie Durand, interview with author, tape recording, telephone interview, 12 April 2001. back

**Note 18:** Florence Epstein, interview by author, tape recording, telephone interview, 2 May 2001. back

**Note 19:** Gamber, *The Female Economy*, 120, emphasis in original. back

**Note 20:** Elaine Abelson argues that middle-class women "had virtually no control over money. A woman's allowance or pocket money was generally a gift bestowed, not something to which she was entitled." See Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 166. Abelson discusses an earlier period but many of the same issues would have persisted into the twentieth century. back

**Note 21:** Severa shows how during the late 1800s most people used a combination of homemade and mass-produced clothing. The shift to buying *many* items came during the 1910s and 1920s. back

**Note 22:** Scott Derks, ed. *The Value of a Dollar: Prices and Incomes in the United States, 1860-1989* (Lakeville, CT: Grey House Publishing, 1999), 59. back

**Note 23:** Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalog No. 111* (Chicago: Sears, Roebuck & Co., 1902), 869. back

**Note 24:** Tobe, "Women's Apparel," in *Twenty-Five Years of Retailing, 1911-1936* (New York: National Retail Dry Goods Association, 1936), 154. back

**Note 25:** O'Brien and Campbell, "Present Trends in Home Sewing," 9, and Clara Brown, "Open Forum: Are We Justified in Teaching Clothing Construction?" *Journal of Home Economics* 15 (February 1923): 88-90, 90 back

**Note 26:** Note from Jane Dunn as follow-up to telephone interview, 4 May 2001. back

**Note 27:** Durand, interview. back

**Note 28:** Household guides urged thriftiness as an admirable trait. An early guide by Lydia Marie Child entitled *The American Frugal Housewife (Dedicated to those who are not ashamed of economy)* warned against profligacy in the household (Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Co., 1833, reprint by Applewood Books). back

**Note 29:** Derks, *The Value of a Dollar*, 53. back

**Note 30:** United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Minimum Quantity Budget Necessary to Maintain a Worker's Family of Five at a Level of Health and Decency* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1920), 20. back

**Note 31:** Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet*, 88, and advertisement for Stern Brothers, *New York Times*, 8 December 1912, sec. 1, p. 14. back

**Note 32:** Clark and Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet*, 104. back

**Note 33:** Clark and Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet*, 18. back

**Note 34:** Winifred Byrd, interview by author, tape recording, Plainfield, New Jersey, 24 May 2001. back

**Note 35:** O'Brien and Campbell, *Present Trends in Home Sewing*, 10. back

**Note 36:** Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 37. back

**Note 37:** McBurney Family Photographs, 1873-1913, folder 4, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library. For more on studying clothing in photographs see Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1995). This dress would have been more successful if made with a solid color fabric or more subtle print. back

**Note 38:** Durand and Kurtz, interviews. back

**Note 39:** Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 98. back

**Note 40:** Beulah Steward, testimony, in U.S. Congress, *Report by the Commission on Industrial Relations*, 64<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document 415 (1916) 9 and 10, p. 9041, quoted in Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, 98. back

**Note 41:** Kurtz, interview. back

**Note 42:** Byrd, interview. back

**Note 43:** Joselit, *A Perfect Fit*, 5. back

**Note 44:** "Thursday in Hester Street," *New York Daily Tribune*, 15 September 1889, 7. back

**Note 45:** "East Side Fashions," *New York Tribune Illustrated Supplement*, 26 August 1900, 13. "Waist" is shorthand for a shirtwaist, or blouse. This young woman may have been particularly talented, but figures like Clara Lemlich often noted how garment workers made their own clothing on factory down time. back

**Note 46:** Jackie Day and Benjamin Gordon, personal correspondence with the author. Dina Goldberg Gelowitz was my paternal grandmother's half-sister. back

**Note 47:** Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 194. back

**Note 48:** Mary Mortimer Maxwell, "How Should a Business Girl Dress?" *New York Times*, 28 February 1909, sec. 6, p. 9, and Derks, *The Value of a Dollar*, 98. back

**Note 49:** Mary Katherine Howard, "Tailor-Made Suits for Summer," *Women's Home Companion* (May 1900), 36 and "Nine to Five and Five to Nine, A Companion-Butterick Triad for the Business Girl," *Woman's Home Companion* (January 1937), 43. back

**Note 50:** Mary Haniman, "How I dressed on \$100 a Year," *Ladies' Home Journal* (October 1911), 102, quoted in Connolly, "The Transformation of Home Sewing," 159. Connolly argues however that as standards of dress rose and ready-made clothing dropped in price in the 1920s, office workers were increasingly likely to buy their clothing, 281-2. back

**Note 51:** The nursemaid and ladies' maid courses offered to African American students at the Brooklyn YMCA included sewing. "Young Women's Christian Association of Brooklyn -- Lexington Avenue Branch," *The Colored American Magazine* (February 1906): 99-101. back

**Note 52:** Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15. back

**Note 53:** E. Azalia Hackley, *The Colored Girl Beautiful* (Kansas City: The Burnton Publishing Company, 1916), 75. back

**Note 54:** Hackley, *The Colored Girl Beautiful*, 72. back

**Note 55:** Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, 96. back

**Note 56:** Byrd, interview. Jewel Jimana Woods was Mrs. Byrd's mother. back

**Note 57:** Byrd, interview. back

**Note 58:** Sagness, *Clothes Lines, Party Lines, and Hemlines*, 32. The book lists Mrs. Price as being 90 years old; if she was 90 at time of publication, she would be recalling a childhood in the 1900s. back

**Note 59:** Sagness, *Clothes Lines, Party Lines, and Hemlines*, 25. Zimmerman would have been a child in the 1920s. back

**Note 60:** In *Dressed for the Photographer* Joan Severa argues that changing postal services and catalog shopping put many rural stores out of business, 454-55. back

**Note 61:** For example see the "Department of Colored Dress Goods" in the 1902 Sears, Roebuck *Catalog #111*, 830. back

**Note 62:** Durand, interview. back

**Note 63:** Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us To Work*, 172. back

**Note 64:** Arlene Sagness, ed., *Clothes Lines, Party Lines, and Hemlines* (Fargo: North Dakota Extension Homemakers Council, 1989), 79. back

**Note 65:** Marian Goodman, interview with author, tape recording, Wallingford, CT, May 9, 2001. back

**Note 66:** Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work*, 174. back

**Note 67:** Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 82. It is not clear whether sharecroppers had to purchase these bags. back

**Note 68:** National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, *The Land-Grant Tradition* (Washington, DC: NASULGC, 1995), unpaginated website, [http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/land\\_grant/land.htm](http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/land_grant/land.htm). back

**Note 69:** Lynne Anderson Rieff, "'Rousing the People of the Land': Home Demonstration Work in the Deep South, 1914-1950," Ph.D. Dissertation, Auburn University, 1995, 50. back

**Note 70:** "Education in Home Economics," *Official Publication of Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts* 16 (25 July 1917): 5. back

**Note 71:** "Education in Home Economics," 31. back

**Note 72:** "Report of Committee Work," circa 1923, 4. Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, Auburn University Archives. back

**Note 73:** Unpublished report, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, "Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, State of Alabama," 1923, 93. Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, Auburn University Archives. back

**Note 74:** State Home Demonstration Agent, 1921 Annual Report, Extension files, Auburn University Archives, 1, cited in Mary Amanda Waalkes, "Working in the Shadow of Racism and Poverty: Alabama's Black Home Demonstration Agents, 1915-1939," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1998, 1. back

**Note 75:** "Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, State of Alabama," 1923, 152. That figure was for thirty-one counties and did not include statistics from an additional four counties. back

**Note 76:** Lynne Anderson Rieff, "'Rousing the People of the Land'", 206-207. back

**Note 77:** The phrase "the cult of true womanhood" has become entrenched in women's and gender history; see Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174. back

**Note 78:** Elizabeth Chafee Gamble, Class Notes, ca. 1910, Elizabeth Chafee Gamble Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. back

**Note 79:** See notes by Sheila Gamble Cook in Elizabeth Chafee Gamble Papers, folder 1, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. back

**Note 80:** Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 40. back

**Note 81:** For more on the professionalization of the home economics profession see Joan L. Sullivan, "In Pursuit of Legitimacy: Home Economists and the Hoover Apron in World War I," *Dress* 26 (1999): 31-46, 33. back

**Note 82:** Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 156. back

**Note 83:** Advertisement for The Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences, *Woman's Home Companion*, January 1922, back

**Note 84:** Anna M. Cooley, *Domestic Art in Woman's Education (for the use of those studying the method of teaching domestic art and its place in the school curriculum)* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1911), 9. back

**Note 85:** *Home Sewing Helps: Ideas and Instructions That Make Possible the Development of Many Lovely Garments and Articles of Use in the Home* (Scranton, PA: Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts & Sciences, Inc., in association with the International Educational Publishing Company, 1925), 7. back

**Note 86:** Brown, "Open Forum," 89. The surveyors wrote to 200 women graduates of five schools. Approximately 67 women responded, of whom 85 percent of had children. Therefore, out of about 56 women, about 20 made all of their children's clothes. back

**Note 87:** Mrs. Freddie P. Hoose, "Women and Spare Time," letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 4 January 1928, 24. Hoose was reacting to a sarcastic article that questioned what women did with all the time they gained by buying clothing. back

**Note 88:** Cora M. Winchell, *Home Economics for Public School Administrators* (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University Bureau of Publications, 1931), 133. back

**Note 89:** Awilda Fellows, "Rompers in Fascinating Variety," *Inspiration* (March 1923): 5. back

**Note 90:** O'Brien and Campbell, "Present Trends in Home Sewing," 7. For example, 35.3 percent of women in households earning less than \$1,000 made children's rompers, compared to 36 percent of women in households with \$5,000 or more. back

**Note 91:** Joanna Maria du Pont Dimmick (Minnie) to Elise Simons du Pont, n.d., box 14, Francis Gurney du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum and Library. The undated letter was marked "after 1880" by an archivist. back

**Note 92:** Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, 99. back

**Note 93:** *Twelfth Annual Circular and Catalog of Spelman Seminary for Women and Girls, 1892-93*, 29-30, *Thirtieth Annual Circular of Spelman Seminary for Women and Girls, 1910-1911*, 14, and *Catalog of Spelman College, 1929-30*, 55, quoted in Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 89. back

**Note 94:** Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 163-4. back

**Note 95:** See Barbara Schreier, *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880-1920* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1994), 68. back

**Note 96:** Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. Donald Smalley (New York: Vintage books, 1960), 281-82, cited in Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 133. back

**Note 97:** Joanna Maria du Pont Dimmick to Elise Simons Du Pont, 23 January "after 1880," box 14, Francis Gurney du Pont Papers. back

**Note 98:** Constance Hall to "Hatty," 1 January 1960, file 1, Cambridge Sewing Club Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. back

**Note 99:** Records, *Cambridge Sewing Club Papers 1910-*, file 2 of 2, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Schlesinger Library. back

**Note 100:** Helen Kinne & Anna M. Cooley, *Clothing and Health: An Elementary Textbook of Home Making* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916), 4. back

**Note 101:** Jean Webster, *When Patty Went to College* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1903), 50-51. back

**Note 102:** Ellen S.V. Motter to Margaret Motter, 11 April 1918, box 23, Margaret Motter Miller Papers, Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library. back

**Note 103:** Kurtz, interview... back

**Note 104:** Jean Webster, *When Patty Went to College*, 51. back

**Note 105:** Olivia Dunbar, "Teaching the Immigrant Woman," 1913, cited in Kathie Friedman-Kasada, *Memories of Migration: Gender, Ethnicity, and Work in the Lives of Jewish and Italian Women in New York, 1870-1924* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1996), 113. back

**Note 106:** Patricia Gordon, interview by author, tape recording, Wallingford, Connecticut, 9 May 2001. Charlotte Louise Jewell Jencks was her mother. back