

Chapter Four

Commodifying "Domestic Virtues": Business and Home Sewing

In 1926, an organization of fabric wholesalers met in New York to discuss what they perceived to be a troubling decline in sales. They announced that at the root of their difficulties was "a lack of knowledge of sewing and the art of dressmaking by young women, who were given over to enjoying themselves and neglecting the domestic virtues of their mothers and grandmothers."¹ Their concerns about losing customers were legitimate. By the twenties, the number of women sewing at home had decreased, since more women were working outside the home and ready-made clothing was inexpensive and attractive. However, those social and economic realities were not nearly as important to the retailers as the idea that business was suffering because women were abandoning their traditional roles.

This chapter examines the relationship between businesses and home sewing. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, most middle- and working- class American women assumed that they would do at least some sewing for their families. While businesses competed with each other for a share of the market, they did not have to justify sewing to their customers. After the First World War, however, as more women worked outside the home or spent their time in other pursuits and ready-made clothing was more available than ever, fewer women needed or wanted to sew. Sewing-goods manufacturers and retailers found that they now needed to convince women to return to their sewing machines.

Businesses devised a variety of strategies to revitalize sewing. A unifying theme was that sewing not only saved money or expressed personal style, but was also a way to be appropriately feminine. Sewing was portrayed as a way to be a good mother and an attractive (yet frugal) wife. The cultural values attached to sewing, among them thrift, discipline, maternal love and feminine beauty, were cultivated by businesses to encourage demand for their goods. Incessantly used to sell products,

traditional femininity and maternalism became commodified. It was in the interest of business and profits to promote sewing and the gendered ideas that accompany it, and so "domestic virtue" became a consumer good.

The home sewing industry turned to the feminine nature of sewing as a way to entice customers back to the piece goods department, but it was primarily interested in profit, not ideology. Advertising executives and others involved in marketing decisions were capable of considering multiple gender constructions. Companies also proved to be relatively sensitive to class and race issues as, perhaps out of necessity, they explored alternative markets for their products. The traditional imagery used to promote sewing was therefore porous and flexible and in the long run, businesses were more wedded to their financial interests than to any particular cultural ideology.

This chapter will first outline how various players in the home sewing industry promoted their products at a time when sewing was assumed to be part of everyday life. It will then explore how some of those strategies changed once businesses could no longer take home sewing for granted. These firms adapted their sales practices to a changing environment, taking into account shifting notions of class, race, and gender. Through the promotion of sewing-related goods and services, companies connected women's consumption to domestic labor and attached social values to household production.

Sewing and the U.S. Economy

Home sewing, while in many ways a private activity done in the home largely for one's self or family, has nonetheless been an important factor in the public setting of the American economy. Home dressmakers welcomed developments in technology and purchased vast quantities of fabric, sewing machines, and paper patterns. They subscribed to magazines that endorsed sewing, took sewing classes, and bought all kinds of "notions" such as needles, buttons, and trimmings. The *New York Times* claimed in

1926 that "home sewing is probably the largest private industry in the country. Wholesale and retail merchants in the tens of thousands exist to supply its needs."²

That observation was made when home sewing had already begun to decline in popularity. During the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when home sewing was in full swing, related businesses used a variety of methods and arguments to sell their goods. Firms promoted the quality and/or cost of fabric, new pattern designs, and the efficiency and ease of sewing machines. Sewing goods and services were certainly associated with women and women's work, and the advertisements and promotions reflect this understanding of cultural roles. However, the sewing industry had not commodified gender values to the extent it would in later years when it was in a state of panic over the decline of home sewing.

Take a look at a magazine or newspaper from the early twentieth century and you will find copious advertisements for fabrics, sewing machines, and related goods alongside promotions for ready-made clothing. These advertisements hawked free samples, claimed to have the most variety and/or best quality of stock, and assured consumers that their prices beat the competition. This high volume of advertising for sewing-related products is evidence of the demand for such goods and of the competition for consumers among producers. Home dressmaking supported a variety of businesses, from manufacturers and retailers to educators and publishers. To clothe themselves and their families, consumers bought fabric or "dress goods," notions, tissue paper patterns, dressmaking guides, sewing machines, sewing lessons, and magazines. According to their income level and where they lived, women could buy these items from department and specialty stores, small-town general stores, mail order catalogues, and pushcarts. Altogether, the home dressmaking industry was an amalgam of very different types of firms, business practices, and ideologies. It represented a significant portion of the economy, especially in major urban areas such as New York City.

Textiles



One industry central to the home dressmaking trade was textile manufacturing and sales. Some materials were imported, but factories mainly based in New England and in the South employed hundreds of thousands of workers and produced more than a billion and a half dollars worth of products in 1909. By 1919, U.S. textile mills churned out more than three hundred million square yards of cotton gingham alone.³ Much of this fabric was intended for use by the garment industry, but it was also sold by the yard in catalogs, at department and specialty stores, and by peddlers. A vast variety of fabrics were available – cotton, linen, wool, silk, and by 1910, artificial silk, later known as rayon – in a range of patterns, textures, colors, and prices. Fabric and related sewing goods were considered normal household expenditures. Many wealthier customers who hired a dressmaker to do the work would still purchase their own fabric, and middle- and working-class women who did the bulk of their family's sewing bought fabric regularly. Textile purchases made up a significant portion of women's expenses, and textile producers and retailers were sizeable players in the economy at large.

Textile companies used straightforward tactics to sell their goods. Sears, Roebuck pushed the quality, affordability, and in some cases, the exclusivity of their fabrics. Catalog shoppers were exhorted to examine the "beautiful new styles" and offered vague explanations as to "how we make our prices so low."⁴ Those prices ranged from wools and silk and wool blends for 25 cents a yard, less expensive cottons as low as 5 cents a yard, and silks at 29 to 39 cents a yard. One of the most expensive fabrics in that same catalog was an imported French silk and wool blend for \$ 1.48 a yard.⁵

Aside from price, women chose fabric according to its appropriateness for a particular type of garment and its visual and tactile appeal. Magazine advertisements focused on the colors, textures, and prints available that season and readers

could send for samples as they planned their wardrobes. Manufacturers sometimes promoted the technological modernity of their goods. One artificial silk by the name of "Himalaya Cloth" was supposedly

developed after years of experiment in response to the demand for a fabric which would be as beautiful as the real Rough Silks, yet would have great durability, would not wear fuzzy and would stand all the tests of the laundry... it is no overstatement to say that an expert can hardly distinguish between 'Himalaya' and silks that cost \$1.00 to \$1.50 a yard.
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Magazine editors discussed fabrics with the same language they used to describe dress styles. As one fashion editor described, "The samples of the new fabrics illustrated on this page were selected as those which will be the smartest and most fashionable for spring" and put significant resources into printing color plates of new designs.⁷ They knew that consumers chose carefully. Lilla Bell Viles-Wyman cared about her fabrics and included swatches of her choices in her journals.



Fashion influenced colors as well as design: Viles-Wyman wrote that "the present rage is for Black & White" and soon thereafter bought material that was black with a white stripe. Texture was also important – as a tactile object, fabric has to appeal to the touch. A magazine spread on the latest fabrics for 1910 described how "the materials showing a ribbed effect are specially in vogue, as well as those in basket weaves."⁸ Jean Gulrich remembered her mother touching the fabrics in the store, claiming "she only wanted the softest ones."⁹

While home sewing remained a given in most women's lives, textile producers and retailers used pricing, variety, style, color, and quality to sell their goods. While businesses competed for customers among themselves, they did not have to justify why

women should buy fabric in the first place. Adult women were assumed to have a basic knowledge of different materials, weaves, and textures, and retailers did not presume to teach consumers the basics. These dimensions of the fabric trade would change, however, as sales dropped after the First World War.

Sewing machines

If the fabric trade with its mind-boggling variety played an important role, sewing machines made up another significant sector of the home dressmaking industry. First introduced for home use in the 1850s, hand-cranked and then foot-powered sewing machines gained rapid acceptance in American homes. Marguerite Connolly argues that the sewing machine was vital to middle-class life in the late nineteenth century, saving women hours of work.¹⁰ Manufacturers marketed their machines as a way to sooth family tensions, reduce women's drudgery, and save money and time. The machines were touted as a fitting piece of furniture for a middle-class home (some models folded into attractive wood cabinets) and appealing to feminine taste. Trade cards showed flowery pictures, placid homes, and happy seamstresses.¹¹ Retailers used middle-class values to sell their goods, arguing that machines were a route to domestic harmony, since mothers would spend the time and money saved on their family and home.

Once they had convinced Americans that a sewing machine would contribute to the family economy and quality of life, producers and retailers competed with each other for consumer dollars. Price was, as always, an important selling point. While a sewing machine was a significant expenditure, many households saw it as a worthwhile investment that would help the woman of the house save money in the long run.¹² Unlike textiles, however, machine manufacturers often had to convince the man of the household to make the investment. After the dissolution in 1877 of what was essentially a cartel created by patent protection laws, machine prices slowly fell. In 1856, a Singer cost about \$125

when the average annual income was \$500. By 1902, consumers could purchase a *Minnesota* brand machine for \$23.20 from the Sears, Roebuck & Co.¹³

Machines were accessible to working-class families from fairly early on. According to an 1875 study of about 400 white, working class families in Massachusetts, 34 percent owned sewing machines.¹⁴ Singer sold machines on an installment plan, suggesting that families could make the payments easily as women earned and saved money using the new purchase. Women who did not have their own machines often had access to those owned by relatives and friends. In some ways, sewing machines were especially desirable for working-class women. After all, they provided a way to make a living in an accepted feminine line of work. An undated pamphlet claims that "[a] respectable woman, black or white, without a cent to pay, can get a machine from any leading company that will enable her to support herself and dependent children or friends."¹⁵ As condescending as this might be, it nonetheless underscored the reality of the types of work available to women at the time.

Singer Sewing Machine Company, the world's first multinational corporation and the giant of the industry, also acknowledged that working-class women were major customers and encouraged training on sewing machines as a means to get a job. The instruction booklets that accompanied Singer machines emphasized the role of sewing machines in the lives of working-class women. One argued, "[A] girl who has been properly trained in the use of a Singer Machine is not only able to save herself and family much money and time, but is equipped to quickly earn her own living, should she require to do so, in one of the great sewing industries."¹⁶

Sewing machines crossed ethnic and racial lines as well, often representing American culture. Jane Simonsen describes how a particular Native American couple in Nebraska owned a sewing machine along with their stove and rocking chair in their frame house. The couple, who were Omaha but had converted to Christianity, had received funds from the Women's National Indian Association, an organization of white women focused on

assimilating Native women through "model homes" and Anglo-style domesticity. For these white reformers, sewing machines were part of a lifestyle that represented "civilization" and domestic industry.¹⁷ Likewise, in her study of women in the Southwest, historian Sarah Deutsch writes that sewing machines were among the "female centered items" acquired by Hispanic families in the early twentieth century.¹⁸ Whether or not the machines represented "civilization" to the women who actually used them, or were merely a convenience, we do not know.

Tissue Paper Patterns

Along with textiles and sewing machines, a third pillar of the home dressmaking industry was the paper pattern. Tissue paper patterns had first been commercially developed by Ebenezer Butterick, a tailor, in the 1860s. A decade later, his company produced almost six million patterns annually.¹⁹ By the 1880s, several firms competed for consumers. Some of the biggest names were Butterick, Demorest, and McCall. During the early twentieth century, several other firms and publishers tried their hand at pattern design and marketing, including the *Woman's Home Companion*, *Sears, Roebuck*, *Vogue*, and *Pictorial Review*.



When they could assume a regular customer base, pattern companies promoted their products on the basis of style. Advertisements emphasized the variety and attractiveness of their designs, and magazines that sold patterns took pains to show off their distinctive fashions. The *Woman's Home Companion* depicted one pattern as "the most stylish design of the season," and the *Delineator* described a model as a "stylish waist, uniquely designed."²⁰ The flexibility and variety inherent in patterns was also a major selling point. Turn-of-the-century Butterick patterns often came with a subtitle explaining the variations one could employ, such as the "'Ladies' Surplice Blouse-Waist (to be made with a high or v-neck, full-length or elbow sleeves and with or without the peplum and

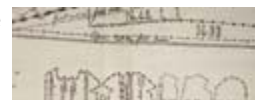
revers.)²¹ Lengthy descriptions of the patterns discussed the appropriate uses of the garment and suggested a variety of fabrics, colors, and trims.

While style was important, price and convenience mattered as well. In the early twentieth century, Sears, Roebuck offered very inexpensive patterns for 5 cents, claiming that they were offering them "without any idea of profit." This was clever marketing, as the minimum order was 50 cents and they expected a woman to choose a pattern along with her dress goods.²² Anecdotal evidence suggests that a wide variety of customers bought sewing patterns, either for individual use or to bring to a dressmaker.

The mainstream pattern companies did not address the race of their customers, although the women portrayed in illustrations and, later, photographs were invariably white. Publications intended for an African American readership, however, also discussed patterns and styles. The *Colored American Magazine* offered fashion advice and sketches "designed exclusively" by a Mme. Rumford of New York City who gave detailed advice to "the Ladies of Fashion" as to the cut of the new shirtwaists and the latest fabrics and trim.²³ Her sketches evoke the style used by the *Delineator* – showing multiple views of a shirtwaist and variations on skirts – but it is not clear whether her designs were available as commercial patterns or whether they were intended to serve as guides to skilled home dressmakers who could cut their own from an illustration.



When home sewing was the norm, the magazines and catalogues selling the patterns assumed a high degree of skill by the reader. At the turn of the century, many patterns were a dizzying maze of dashes and dots as the outlines of different pattern pieces were drawn over each other.²⁴ Once the seamstress had divined the pattern pieces she wanted, traced them onto paper, and cut the paper shapes, she would follow instructions for the most efficient way to lay those paper pieces on her fabric to cut. Patterns became easier to use over time. By the 1890s, many



patterns included a seam allowance so the user did not have to calculate it herself, and by the early twentieth century, some patterns were more recognizable as blueprints for garments, but these changes were not used as a major selling point. Whether or not their patterns were simple to use, the pattern companies did not emphasize ease of use as part of their marketing strategies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the different companies had to persuade customers to buy their particular brand, they did not have to convince women to buy patterns in general.

Magazines and Books

Women's magazines, whether multi-purpose or specifically focused on sewing, promoted sewing through regular articles, advice, and products.²⁵ Magazines aimed at women had been available for much of the nineteenth century but were usually aimed at an elite audience who could afford high subscription rates. By the 1890s, however, the magazine industry relied on advertising revenues and could therefore afford to charge fairly reasonable subscription and single-copy rates, making mass market magazines available to the middle class.²⁶ Together with low prices, an expanded postage system, higher literacy rates, and urbanization, the 1890s began a growth period for women's as well as general-interest magazines.

Women's magazines were especially good sellers, with higher circulation rates than the general-interest publications. In February 1904, the *Ladies' Home Journal* was the first U.S. magazine to have more than a million subscribers. Of the ten magazines with the highest circulation in 1916, six were aimed at women and focused on or included material on sewing: *McCall's*, *Pictorial Review*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Delineator*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Woman's World*.²⁷ Because of their high circulation rates, these magazines attracted advertisers like ants to a picnic. Companies knew that not only did many women turn to magazines for advice, they also often made household spending decisions. A 1917 analysis of advertisers in Butterick

magazines showed that a range of products, from furniture to toiletries to food, were advertised; 12 percent of the ads were for clothing and 2.9 percent were for piece goods.²⁸

The popular women's magazines at the turn of the century were arrayed along a spectrum of interests but all included some discussion of sewing. Some, such as the *Delineator*, *Pictorial Review*, and *McCall's* were published by pattern producers, whereas others such as the *Woman's Home Companion* and the *Ladies Home Journal* ran regular columns on dressmaking advice. Most columns assumed a rather high level of expertise, but some targeted less experienced sewers by emphasizing the ease of making particular garments. These columns provided guidance for making new styles, often using the patterns supplied by the particular magazine, and promoted themes such as thrift and individuality as an incentive to sew.

This sewing advice ranged from information on the latest styles to instructions for making over old dresses. For years, the core of the *Delineator* was a feature on the latest fashions, most of which, at least through the First World War, were elaborate, tight-fitting confections with all kinds of ruffles, braid, fringe, and contrasting underlayers. The magazine gave little attention to the difficulties of sewing and rarely acknowledged that its designs might challenge the average home dressmaker. Other magazines were more forgiving. Diana Sturgis, the long-time editor of the "What to Wear and How to Make It" column in the *Ladies' Home Companion*, offered advice and responded to readers who expressed difficulties with their sewing projects. One tip implied that readers had trouble cutting cloth correctly:

It is very important to cut linings and dress-goods on the same thread of the goods. If one is cut straight way and the other ever so little on the bias, they do not receive the strain alike, and soon become awry.²⁹

Other suggestions often concerned what sort of materials to choose, what colors were most useful, and how to get the best fit.

Columnists consistently wrote features aimed at saving money. A *Delineator* column called "Dressing on Dimes" aimed at thrifty use of fabric, and "What to Wear and How to Make It" regularly gave advice on making over old dresses to be more fashionable. Sturgis announced at one point:

Let it be taken for granted at the outset that those who are reading these cogitations are on the lookout for some suggestions that can be inexpensively carried out. Expense, to be sure, is a relative term....Still, we will keep within the bounds of moderate expenditure as more likely to suit the majority at all times....³⁰

Sturgis regularly answered letters that asked how to use fabric from an older garment to make something new, or what sort of dress was most useful if the reader could only afford one new outfit. Judging from the anxiety evident in the letters, much of her audience was most likely lower-middle-class or even working-class women: they would be the most eager for advice on how to fit in to a middle-class aesthetic. There was a clear understanding that readers looked to the magazine's sewing advice to help them get the most from their limited resources.

While they took customer support into consideration, and individual editors may have been sensitive to the pressures of clothing costs, the primary goal of magazines was to present themselves as avatars of fashion. Publishers that printed how-to books had a slightly different set of needs and strategies. There was significant overlap, however, as some texts and how-to guides were published by familiar names like Butterick and McCall. Textbooks intended for use in school sewing and home economics classes were consistent through the 1910s, offering basic outlines of necessary skills and their use in the household. The methodical structure of these books is reflected in one published in 1913: "After the various stitches and seams have been learned, the pupil's knowledge is applied to the making of small articles and miniature garments. These small garments are an excellent preparation for the making of the full-size clothing in the upper grades."³¹ A survey of a number of sewing texts shows

a standard progression from basic skills to assembling garments, with limited discussion of why the reader might choose to sew in the first place.

Publishers saw a market for instructional books aimed at adults as well. Books such as Butterick's *The Dressmaker* gave illustrated instructions for making garments and showed how to adapt paper patterns for different figure types. The step-by-step instructions included in these manuals supplemented the patterns sold by the same companies. Another book offered very detailed instructions on different kinds of seams, linings, sleeves, etc, while assuming the reader was working with a commercial pattern. Lesson 304, "Routine of Making a Skirt," explained that "practically all skirts are made according to a well formulated, closely followed routine. The following guide will prove of value, as each step has been carefully explained in detail in the lessons given for reference."³² The skirt lesson contained thirty separate steps, starting with "obtain the necessary skirt measurements" and finishing with "put on hangers," with each step referring to various lessons covered elsewhere in the guide.³³ The very existence of these guides acknowledges that women did not always understand every step the pattern asked them to follow.

While these guides offered detailed instructions, they rarely discussed why women should sew to begin with. The preface to *American Dressmaking Step by Step* explains that "the woman who knows practically nothing about sewing or dressmaking must be taught from the beginning," yet does not question whether nor explain why the reader should make the effort.³⁴ Publishers recognized a market for sewing advice manuals but took home sewing for granted.

Facing the Changes in Home Sewing

The people and companies that presumed that women would always sew at home were in for a shock. Economic and social factors such as industrial production practices, demographic shifts, contraception, and women's increasing presence in the workforce had a significant impact on those sectors of the economy that relied on traditional behavior. Following World War

I, trends which had begun before the war accelerated. More women were working outside the home, and ready-made clothing was both cheaper and better fitting than prior to the war. Home sewing went into a marked decline, but many women continued to sew out of necessity or pleasure. To reach those women and to convince old customers to return to the fold, sewing-oriented businesses were forced to rethink their assumptions and strategies.

A survey of department stores by the Bureau of Business Research at Harvard showed that until 1920, sales of fabric kept pace with sales of ready-made clothing. However, as of 1920, the balance tipped and people bought less fabric and more clothing.³⁵ Another survey, done in-house for Singer Sewing Machine and using figures from the federal government, noted that between 1924 and 1927 alone, retail sales of cotton fabric dropped 27 percent.³⁶ At the same time, annual sales of factory-made dresses rocketed from under 500 million dollar's worth in 1914 to over a billion dollar's worth five years later.³⁷

Why such a drastic change? One reason was a matter of design. Women's clothing had changed dramatically by the 1920s, and the simpler and less fitted designs – such as the straight lines of "flapper" dresses – made it easier to buy stylishly fitting dresses off the rack.³⁸ These straight lines combined with shorter hemlines meant that less fabric went into each dress, and fewer details and a looser fit required less work to make, resulting in lower costs to the manufacturers and cheaper retail prices.

The causes were demographic as well. By the 1920s, more women than ever, especially from the middle class, were working outside the home. In 1870, women made up 14 percent of the paid workforce, a figure that grew to 20 percent by 1910 and 22 percent by 1930.³⁹ Higher education became more of a possibility among the middle class and female graduates found work in pink-collar jobs, giving them more disposable income to spend on ready-made clothing, dress codes to meet, and less time to spend sewing. In addition, a lower birthrate meant less sewing for children by even full-time homemakers.⁴⁰

This decrease in sewing was part of a larger socioeconomic trend in which households produced less and purchased more. All sorts of goods and services, from bread to entertainment, had become commercialized and clothing was just one element of this pattern. As people bought more items instead of making them at home, fewer women wanted or needed to sew – especially those in the middle class who could afford to buy off-the-rack clothing and preferred to spend money instead of time.⁴¹

This is not merely a story of declension, however. Not all women changed their habits. Many continued to sew at home, especially those who lived in rural areas where they were less likely to work for wages; had limited access to factory-made clothing; and often maintained more traditional family roles. In fact, one study found that many rural women sewed *more* in the 1920s than they had earlier.⁴² After all, the new designs that were cheap to manufacture were also easier to make at home! It was still more expensive to buy clothing than to make it, so poorer women, young women, and girls, all of whom had less disposable income, were more likely to sew as well. Others sewed for non-economic goals such as charity. Many women preferred to sew because they did not like the new styles, found store-bought clothing to be poorly made, or enjoyed sewing as a creative outlet. Still, home dressmaking declined overall in the 1920s and it was in the interest of sewing-goods manufacturers to encourage home sewing. The question was how to promote a traditional activity in a society that was rapidly inventing new roles and behaviors for women.

New Business Strategies

Changing consumer habits threatened industries that were invested in traditional behaviors.⁴³ Now that home sewing could no longer be assumed to be the norm, businesses had to adjust their marketing and sales practices. In an effort to regain customers and rescue their falling profits, some of these industries promoted a return to long-established gender roles, asserting that sewing was central to being a good mother and wife. Other approaches were based on adapting services and products. Firms assumed that women needed more training or

wanted patterns that were easier to follow. Other tactics involved changing the image of home dressmaking and presenting sewing as easy, fun, and modern. Advertisements implied factory-made clothing was shoddy, expensive, and unimaginative. Some businesses sought to regain the affections of lost customers, while others focused on new recruits. In many ways, the industry chose to encourage women to sew by emphasizing supposedly natural feminine traits such as love of fashion, maternalism, and household thrift.

However, these companies were ultimately more interested in selling goods than in reforming society. After all, the people who made marketing decisions were also living in a context of social change. As a result, sewing-related businesses were flexible in their choice of tactics and arguments. They assiduously promoted traditionalism when it was convenient, but they also managed to use the very nature of the changes around them as selling points. They sought to accommodate customers by offering better prices, products and services, and by encouraging home sewing as modern -- a means to earn extra money and express creativity. To a certain extent, retailers and advertisers acknowledged the changing lives of their customers and sought to accommodate new ideas about women's work and place in the home. The people calculating how to appeal to a shrinking pool of customers evidently wanted to appeal to women's sense of identity but did not want to alienate their customer base by seeming out of touch with social change.

These ideas were not new: firms had promoted all of these aspects of sewing in the past. The difference was that when sewing was no longer an automatic assumption, sewing-related businesses had to push harder, in any way they could, to convince women to sew. One of the ways the sewing-related businesses sought to regain customers was by blatantly associating home sewing with motherhood. Singer, for example, was eager to convince women that, even if they purchased clothing for themselves, at the very least, they ought to sew for their children. Singer machines were touted as ideal for a busy yet loving mother. One advertisement cried:

"Mother - Let *me* sew!" Even a child is tempted by the ease of sewing with a modern Singer Electric...Mothers are finding this Singer Electric the quick and easy, inexpensive way to have more clothes for the children....⁴⁴

Singer published a series of how-to books written by Mary Brooks Picken, a sewing expert who had her own dressmaking school and taught "Economics of Fashion" at Columbia University. In *How To Make Children's Clothes the Modern Singer Way*, Picken described children's clothing as easy to make, appealing to natural maternal instincts and important to child development. Her introduction proclaims, "The mother who knows the treasured virtue of good taste will consider it as important to cultivate good taste in clothes in her children as good manners and correct speech."⁴⁵ The book would serve two purposes: it would teach women to sew and it would help them raise their children according to middle-class standards.

Children's clothing was portrayed as considerably easier to sew than a dress for an adult woman. A 1923 article in the magazine *Inspiration* exuberantly declared:

Spring sewing is bound to have a fascinating aspect when looked at from the romper point of view, for 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.⁴⁶

The author conceded that it was easy enough to buy such things, but that when shopping "for the dearest little one in perhaps the whole wide world," mothers would naturally want to buy the best outfits which were inevitably too expensive. The solution? Make your own, preferably using patterns by McCall, *Woman's Home Companion*, or *Pictorial Review*.

Inspiration was, not coincidentally, put out by the Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences, which had an obvious interest in encouraging the joys of homemaking. To persuade women to subscribe to correspondence classes in sewing and cooking, the organization put out the message that those skills helped women provide a nurturing environment for their families.

A do-it-yourself guidebook published by the Woman's Institute entitled *Home Sewing Helps* argued that "plenty of well-made articles for home, self and family, which bespeak womanly pride and forethought, are assets in every home...."⁴⁷

Part of being a "good" housewife was clothing one's husband. While men's clothing had been the first to be absorbed by the ready-to-wear industry in the nineteenth century, some women had continued to make men's shirts. Some businesses sought to expand this niche market with kits that had the pieces already cut out and the hardest part, the neck and collar, pre-assembled. An advertisement for the kits claimed, "Women, who have learned how simple it is to make men's shirts with ready-made neck bands and how much better and more economical such shirts are, are very glad that they can perform such a service for the men of the family."⁴⁸ This sort of kit was appealing because it was a compromise – women could get the credit for making their husband's shirts while not having to do all of the work.

What if the potential customer did not feel a need to sew in order to prove her maternal or spousal skills? Another common strategy used to interest consumers was to emphasize that sewing could be easy, if one had the right supplies and equipment. In this light, women and girls were giving up too soon if they bought their clothing. Technology helped sewing machine manufacturers, largely because they could now make small motors to drive the machines. Singer emphasized the hours saved by users of these new electric machines: 20 minutes spent sewing a yard of straight seam by hand became a miraculous 20 seconds on a Singer Electric.⁴⁹ They had used the same argument of saving time to entice their earlier customers, who went from sewing all seams by hand to using hand-crank or treadle machines. Now, modern science was to be harnessed by the housewife once again. The argument was that with such savings of time, sewing was no longer work at all, eliminating one more excuse for not sewing for your family.

The new patterns were also easier to follow than their antecedents. Butterick's "Deltor" instruction sheet, first patented in the U.S. in 1919, led to the company's reputation for simplicity.

Soon, Butterick pattern envelopes read: "The Deltor, enclosed with this pattern, shows you with pictures how to lay it out, put it together and finish it, so that it retains all the style and beauty of the original model."⁵⁰ A number of women interviewed for this project recalled Butterick's clear instructions; Edith Kurtz remembered that her mother found Butterick patterns "easy to follow."⁵¹



Paper patterns became even easier to decipher in just a few years. In 1921, Butterick rival McCall patented a way to print near-photographic quality images and instructions on the pattern pieces themselves. Also printed on the patterns were "Four Reasons why every woman should use the new McCall Pattern". Reason number one, "the instructions are clearly printed on every piece of the pattern. No more puzzling perforations", referred to competitors' products which had perforated numbers on each piece. The McCall pattern pieces are in fact clearer to read and handle. Whether the changes would live up to their promise to eliminate "that home-made look" is harder to discern.⁵²



Publishers were also eager to promote the joy of sewing, and magazines ran regular features on quick and easy projects. The straight and loose styles of the 1920s, which helped make ready-to-wear clothing successful, were also easier to sew and magazines encouraged women to try out the new silhouettes with articles like "Straight Cuts to Style – Without any dangerous curves to plague the home dressmaker."⁵³ This emphasis on the ease with which women could sew, complemented by the magazine's advice, may have encouraged some readers: one reader thanked the *Woman's Home Companion* for its "pretty and practical" patterns.⁵⁴ Another letter writer remarked, "The dressmaking hints...are very interesting and helpful to inexperienced sewers like myself."⁵⁵ The campaign to render sewing less intimidating achieved considerable success.

This emphasis on ease could be misleading, however, and did not always acknowledge or address the difficulties faced by poorer or more isolated women. For example, many rural areas were not yet linked to municipal power grids. Others may not have had the cash to electrify their homes or replace a perfectly satisfactory treadle machine with a new electric model. The new patterns were of no use to women who could not afford them in the first place; sharecropper's wives in Texas could rarely afford to buy new patterns, and instead shared them amongst themselves.⁵⁶ While the new styles were easier to make when one had plenty of yard goods, it could be especially tricky to convert an older dress into a modern style. The buzz about the "new, improved" face of sewing products demonstrates the urban middle-class slant of the majority of these businesses.

Another strategy intended to convince women to return to their sewing machines was to focus on the individuality of homemade clothing and to emphasize women's "natural" desire to be attractive. The December 1923 issue of *Inspiration* included an article entitled "Husbands, Unlike Trains, Don't Always Stay Caught." A Dr. Frank Crane reminded women that their appearance was important in keeping their marriages healthy. He noted, "My point is that the woman who is careless about her appearance when she and her husband are alone is adding to her chances for unhappiness." While the commentary did not mention

sewing per se, much of *Inspiration* was oriented toward sewing skills.⁵⁷ The same organization published a series of advertisements containing supposedly true stories of women who had changed their lives by sewing. In one such ad, a woman wrote:

As I look back now, I can see that I was so busy with the baby and the housework that I wasn't giving as much attention to my clothes and myself as I did when I was single. And 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.⁵⁸

She found the means to make herself desirable again – and therefore save her marriage – by learning to sew her own clothing.

Other companies claimed that store-bought dresses were numbingly boring. Singer declared that home sewing would rescue women from the "endless duplication" of factory-made dresses, arguing:

All women want to be "well dressed" – which means the attire most becoming to their personality. To accomplish this is real Art, for it implies a knowledge of draping the figure, of harmony in color and the colors best harmonizing with personality. This knowledge is the stock in trade of the highly paid dress designers, but it is innate to most girls.

If properly taught in the use and productive value of a Singer machine and its appliances, the young woman can not only be well dressed but have the pride of individual dress-creation suited to her personality, and this at minimum cost, without tiresome shopping for suitable 'ready-to-wear' garments....⁵⁹

Butterick made similar claims; anyone could buy something, but a more discerning woman would prefer a home-made dress. Butterick, Singer, and other firms were eager to encourage the notion that home dressmaking was a way to acquire individuality and style 8211; and thereby feminine attractiveness.

While magazines ran articles on how sewing at home was an easy way to have original clothes, advertisements belied their true identity as profit-driven vehicles. As one scholar writes, "The magazines' twin missions as profit-making firms and advisors to women could sometimes operate at cross-purposes."⁶⁰ This was evident when articles on sewing were published adjacent to advertisements for ready-made clothing. Take, for example, an article promoting a pattern for a slip-on dress, described as "one of those comforting adaptable patterns that turns out a pretty frock," printed directly next to an advertisement for a mail-order catalog featuring blouses and dresses.⁶¹ The advertisement and article are the same dimensions and feature similarly styled and sized images. A reader who sewed regularly and liked the pattern design might not have been distracted by the advertisement, but it is easy to imagine someone weighing the time and energy needed to make a unique dress versus the expediency but expense of buying one.

Most likely, expense was a significant factor for our hypothetical reader. While firms and trade organizations insisted that women were naturally maternal or drawn to fashion, they could not ignore an even more basic reason why women had sewn for decades: to save money. In order to cajole women into sewing, businesses had to appeal to this basic rationale. Even as it expanded its reach, ready-to-wear clothing was still more expensive than items sewn at home; women could make equivalent or even better-quality dresses for up to two-thirds off the price of a store-bought dress.⁶² If women did not earn wages, sewing remained a way that they could make a significant contribution to the family economy.

Businesses were well aware of the economic reasons for sewing and promoted the savings affected by using their products. In this case, they were perhaps more sensitive to questions of socioeconomic class than usual. Magazines ran regular columns on how to keep expenses down through sewing and sold patterns for inexpensive designs. The *Woman's Home Companion* claimed that its "Economy Dress" included

all the essentials of smartness – printed crepe silk, a circular skirt generously wide, long flowing sleeves.

And if you make the dress yourself the cost is less than \$11. To be exact, the findings total \$10.95. Or, if you have an old chiffon waist or tunic, scratch seven-eighths yard of chiffon from your shopping list and your purchases will come to only \$9.32.⁶³

The writer included a detailed list of necessary supplies and their cost, and then added, "Of course it couldn't be done if it wasn't for the fact that this dress has a circular skirt that doesn't waste the goods."⁶⁴ Such a blunt discussion of thrift may seem counter to the interests of the magazine, which, after all, sought to sell advertising space, but the editors were also keenly aware of the needs of their readers and evidently believed that a frank discussion of economical sewing would serve them well.

This set of circumstances gave a new twist to marketing strategies. Much advertising was directed at middle-class consumers, who were the ones with money to spend, but it was working-class women who were the most likely to make a significant portion of their clothing. A study in 1919 by the Bureau of Municipal Research of Philadelphia found that families with an income of less than \$2,000 a year tended to wear more home-made than store-bought clothing.⁶⁵ In 1927, another survey claimed that 90 percent of respondents sewed because of "economy." Most of these women were in families in which the annual income was between \$2,000 and \$3,000. In 1927, the average yearly salary for all industries, including farm labor, was \$1,380.⁶⁶ Therefore, women in families earning *over* the national average still found it helpful to sew in order to conserve resources, making it even more likely that women in families with smaller incomes felt considerable pressure to sew. Home dressmaking industries needed to do more to address the interests of women who were concerned about their home finances, whether they were working class or middle class.

Sewing machine companies had been attuned to the cost and class dimensions of their product from the beginning and they continued to promote the long-term benefits of investing in a

machine when sales began to dip. Singer's instructional booklets often spoke of the lower cost of home sewn items. One booklet asked consumers to

think of the saving effected – with only the cost of materials involved, the average home made dress costs only about one-third the price of a similar dress ready made. And the materials purchased are usually of far better quality, which means they give better service.⁶⁷

But many women did not have to be reminded that a machine, if affordable, could save hours of work and a considerable amount of money. A sewing machine was a great help to poor women who had no choice but to make all of their family's clothing as well as work in the fields or for wages. Inez Adams Walker, an African American woman who sewed for her children during the 1920s, told an interviewer, "I had four girls. And before I was able to get my machine, I made them dresses on my hands. Get a needle and thread and made them on my hands."⁶⁸ Since Walker had little choice but to sew to clothe her girls, it was simply a question of how long it would take. At a time when the vast majority of black women in that area worked in the fields chopping cotton, a sewing machine could make a huge difference in their quality of life. Machine producers and retailers would have been remiss had they not been keenly aware of the class and racial dimensions of selling their product.⁶⁹

While sewing as a cost-saver was essential to working-class women, it was an issue for middle-class women as well who were often responsible for household spending but depended on their husbands to make the bulk of the family income. By emphasizing the thrifty nature of sewing at home, magazines and producers could appeal to the fact that home sewing gave women a degree of control over family finances.⁷⁰ A Singer manual bluntly described this scenario, claiming that "a large part of the family income is usually spent by the woman and her knowledge of how to plan and make proper clothing for the family has a great influence on the purchasing power of the income."⁷¹ The industry was careful

not to provoke too much thought about household power dynamics, however, preferring to argue that the resulting thrift would help women fulfill their domestic roles.

Another population that had limited funds to spend on clothing was girls and teenagers. Magazines and producers used cost-conscious marketing to attract young consumers, who, even if they came from a middle-class family, would have had little money to spend. The Girl Scout magazine *American Girl* encouraged girls to try easy projects such as making slips and nightgowns. One installment of the regular feature, "Let's Talk About Clothes," focused on undergarments and reads, "As a matter of fact, if you don't mind work (and by that I mean sewing), you can save a little money on your underwear by making it yourself."⁷²

Home economics books and magazines aimed at teenaged girls often included advice on budgeting. *American Girl* described a "typical" girls' clothing budget as

drawn up in collaboration with the Altman School and College Bureau which is constantly working on these problems and really knows what girls need, like and buy. It indicates a general minimum. Some girls will want more. It would probably be possible to get along with less. And it can be varied to suit the individual, locality or special circumstances.⁷³

These advertisements and articles embraced thrift, presenting cost-consciousness as a virtue to be admired and desired by teenaged girls. *American Girl* regularly included articles about girls who wanted a new dress for a party and who cleverly made their own instead of pestering parents who might be unwilling or unable to buy one.⁷⁴ One author claimed she could think of nothing

more satisfying than to be the clever girl who can make it herself – a new party dress, for instance, when a party comes up unexpectedly that you just have to have a new dress for, or lots of simple summer dresses that you can make for very little and that do cost a lot when you have to buy them.⁷⁵

Sewing was promoted to cash-poor teenagers as a means to obtain a degree of financial independence and style. For this particular group, their age largely defined their access to clothing. Companies like Singer that were interested in promoting sewing or groups like the Girl Scouts that wanted to appeal to girls identified thrift as a virtue.

A number of firms poured resources into sewing education while claiming to improve women's quality of life. Singer supplied schools with sewing machines for decades and the instructional booklets that accompanied each machine include photographs of girls and young women sitting in Singer-filled classrooms in schools and colleges around the country. One booklet, published in 1923, insisted that "no matter what station in life a woman may occupy, she should at least understand the elementary principals of sewing, but to those who have the ambition to cultivate skill in machine sewing there is a world of happiness at hand."⁷⁶ It did not hurt that women who learned to sew on a Singer were more likely to buy one, too.

Pattern companies also put significant resources into sewing education, betting that if girls were taught to sew they would continue to do so as adults. The *New York Times* supported this tactic, stating in one article that there were more than 16 million schoolgirls in the country who were all potential customers.⁷⁷ Butterick and McCall supplied public schools with textbooks that claimed sewing – including, of course, learning to use patterns 8211; was crucial to girls' future home life. Butterick created a "School Department" and participated in curriculum conferences.⁷⁸ An in-house document claimed that Butterick "is active in school work and has what is considered one of the best prepared books on the teaching of sewing that is being requisitioned for use in schools everywhere."⁷⁹

The same companies encouraged girls to sew by introducing an element of competition. Butterick organized a series of contests for girls, with the finalists' designs judged by "experts" in New York and awarded prizes.⁸⁰ Florence Epstein recalled winning a prize in a Butterick contest in the early 1920s. At 89 years old,

she still remembered winning a "pretty purse" when she was twelve. Clearly, these companies made an impact, impressing their brand names on the minds of future customers.

In addition to pursuing these and other strategies independently, sewing businesses joined forces to promote common interests. To a certain degree, they were already working together. Magazines and how-to books hawked machines and patterns, fabric shops ran sewing classes on Singer machines, and pattern companies had long described the latest fabrics to use with their designs. Still, as the pool of women who sewed at home shrank, businesses made concerted efforts to cross-pollinate.

One obvious way for firms to take advantage of the audiences at each other's disposal was to increase advertising. Until sewing began to decline in popularity, the big pattern companies had offered their goods solely through their *own* magazines and through designated vendors around the country. As of the 1920s, however, there is evidence that they bit the bullet and began advertising in magazines that they did not control. For example, Pictorial Review, Butterick, and McCall started advertising in Crowell-Collier magazines, publishers of *Woman's Home Companion*, as well as *The American Magazine*, *Colliers*, and others.⁸¹

Other sewing-related companies, such as Corticelli Silks and the Spool Cotton Company, increased their advertising expenditures around the same time. The Woman's Institute was among the seventy-five top sources of advertising revenue for Crowell-Collier in 1922.⁸² Of course, without evidence of other factors influencing decision making, it is impossible to fully understand a rise in advertising budgets. Still, it is likely that dramatic jumps in advertising spending, such as the 700 percent increase in expenditures between 1913 and 1922 by the Armory Brown Company, a Boston-based textile firm, is an indication that textile producers felt it necessary to reach customers by new means.⁸³

While advertising in each other's publications was one way for companies to try to work together to increase interest in sewing, another more overt form of cooperation was to form a trade association to determine problems and coordinate strategies.

Butterick helped form the National Costume Art Association in the late 1920s, which then became part of the National Retail Dry Goods Association based in New York. One strategy promoted by this umbrella organization was to focus on customer service. Butterick argued that customers were not to blame, and, in fact, were eager to sew. Instead, it was the producers and retailers who had failed customers by not providing sufficient support. An internal document in the Butterick archives argued that the heart of the problem was that stores were not accommodating customers. Stores were urged to hire a "consulting costume artist" who could help customers with their sewing projects. The author claimed that while women and girls were eager to sew, they

need a little guidance whether it be in selecting becoming styles and fabrics, cutting out their first few dresses, in fitting or adjusting the nearly completed dress, or in some sewing operation; and it has been proven that they are willing to pay for such help because with it they can now have dresses which are as attractive and becoming as any.⁸⁴

The *New York Times* praised these collaborative efforts, noting in 1926 that home sewing "has been an industry lacking in coordinated effort to maintain and stimulate it by those who manufacture the products it absorbs."⁸⁵ The article noted that the National Costume Art Association, which at press time included twenty companies, was reaching out to women's clubs, the Y.W.C.A., and charities. Plans were in the works for further school outreach and national dressmaking contests. These efforts were intended to rekindle and support what producers claimed were innate desires in women. According to the Butterick documents, "Most women and girls are deeply interested in individuality, good taste and beauty;" retailers just had to work together to harness those naturally female inclinations.⁸⁶

Throughout this revamping of marketing strategies, sewing businesses, and interested media found themselves in an incongruous position. They were largely urban entities promoting an activity that was becoming a predominantly working class and rural art. A *New York Times* article in 1923 praised a network of Home Dressmaker's clubs in Wisconsin, remarking on how "farm

