

Epilogue

"Pincushions have come out of hiding.
Sewing is in fashion once more."¹

By the 1920s, many women who ten years earlier would have hesitated before purchasing clothing for themselves and their children were doing so regularly. The combination of simple fashions and cheaper production methods (including, of course, low wages paid to sewing operatives) and social changes such as smaller families and more work for women outside the home meant that the ready-to-wear industry was on a roll. Many women continued to sew throughout the 1920s because of economy and personal tastes, but ready-to-wear had become a permanent fixture. Inexpensive and attractive garments were accessible to increasing numbers of women who now had more options as to how they would clothe themselves and their families.

This gradual but significant trend was shaken, however, in 1929. Hit by the Depression, many families had to reconsider their financial options. The economic horizon had changed dramatically and so did household budgets. Alice Kessler-Harris argues:

For many women, reduced incomes meant less money for recreation and more necessary activity in the home. Women increased their services to household members, making up for lost income by substituting their own labor for the goods and services they had previously purchased. Activities like sewing at home, preserving fruits, and canning vegetables increased.²

The Depression highlighted the importance of women's domestic labor to a household economy. Under these circumstances, sewing was once again valuable as a set of skills that may not have generated income but were central to preserving it. Anecdotal evidence reflects this shift. Roberta Thourot's husband was employed as a teacher, but he made under \$1,000 a year, so she needed to sew to save money.³ Likewise, Marian Goodman

had to sew during the Depression because she couldn't afford "new things."⁴ Sewing was also a way for women to earn money, especially if their husbands were unemployed. When Virginia Yans' immigrant parents were living in the Bronx during the Depression, her mother worked as an assistant dress designer to support the family when her husband, a baker, could not find work.⁵ As the *Woman's Home Companion* spun it, sewing was "back in fashion."

Just as it was a survival strategy for individuals and families, sewing was also part of the macroeconomic plan to improve the national economy. The Federal government, which had assiduously promoted sewing through extension programs before the Depression, included sewing in the New Deal. Relief efforts and the Works Progress Administration included work that paid women for their sewing skills or offered sewing instruction to poor families. Peggy Terry remembered learning to sew in a camp for migrant laborers in Texas, telling an interviewer, "See, we didn't have anything. And they showed us how to sew and make dresses."⁶ Eliza Champ McCabe, an African American teacher who was shut out of white schools because of segregation, got work sewing for the WPA in Washington State. McCabe helped the white woman who sat next to her because "she didn't know how to do a thing, but she had to be on WPA, just as I did."⁷

Sewing-related businesses saw a complex silver lining in the new economic reality. After a decade of devising strategies to combat the pull of ready-to-wear, sewing industries were faced with consumers who had an incentive to sew but little disposable income and spare time. The *Woman's Home Companion*, which by then had an arrangement with Butterick, reminded readers that sewing was a way out of their difficulties despite the demands on their time:

Poof to the idea that you, an efficient business woman, haven't time to make any of your own clothes. It is only a matter of planning and that's your forte.

If you are looking for the will to show you the way, consider what a good Triad pattern can do for you. It can give you three different outfits along the simple

lines you crave. It can set you up with exactly the right colors. It can stretch your clothes budget to include a new accessory or two – these widestrapped black calf shoes perhaps or the neat bow-trimmed kid pumps. And it can accomplish all this with a minimum of effort, since cutting these designs from one pattern is so easy.⁸

The Depression made a frank discussion of cost-saving measures part of the standard patter of the magazines. The domestic adaptations forced by the Depression were familiar to women who had sewn regularly before the crash. Anyone who had sewn to save money, recut hand-me-downs, dress for a job, or stretch a household budget would recognize the new emphasis on thrift brought on by necessity.



However, women also perceived sewing as a creative skill, not just one that helped them get by. Yans notes that while her mother did not want her and her sister to sew professionally, she nonetheless "used [sewing] as a skill that could allow her daughters to have a positive sense of themselves and their appearance."⁹ While its economic role now grew in importance, sewing continued to provide women with an expressive outlet, a means to exert control over how they were perceived. Florence Epstein, whose father had hemmed her skirts while she stood on a table, enjoyed making stylish clothing throughout the Depression. In 1935, she was recently married and working for her husband's dry cleaning business in Rochester, New York. She was secure financially, but sewing was a way to have very stylish things while enjoying the process of making them. At a time when many people felt they had lost control, help with details such as how they could dress themselves and their families was a great help.

The crisis of the 1930s renewed interest in sewing, but these changes were not permanent. Despite the Depression, war shortages, and the emphasis on domesticity in the 1950s, the emphasis on sewing never returned to the levels it had enjoyed

before the 1920s. Women continued to work outside the home and to spend less time on domestic labor. While many women continued to sew, ready-made clothing became the norm.

As sewing became less crucial to a domestic economy, it continued to resonate with cultural understandings of feminine labor. The decline in home sewing generated anxiety because it was a reflection of larger changes – many of which were threatening to those invested in traditional gender and family roles. In 1920, one advocate of home economics education asked:

To what extent does the housewife contribute to the income by her work in the home? If the housewife does her own sewing, cooking, washing, or other housework, her labor is a means of increasing the income.... A trained woman who has a business or profession may desire to continue her work outside the home and have her housework done. By doing so the actual income may be increased, but what will be the effect on the life in the home? It must be remembered that homemaking is a profession and should be recognized as such.¹⁰

Any sign that the home was declining in social importance troubled those who viewed homemaking as a profession or simply the most desirable focus of feminine labor. These institutions and individuals would continue to struggle to assert the value of women's domestic work. The more successful would be the ones who had an adaptable definition of what that work should be.

Institutions invested in home sewing would have to adapt to the changing definitions of women's work. In 1935, Ivor Spafford, supervisor of home economics education for the state of Alabama, published a textbook acknowledging that changing social trends demanded a new look at domestic education. Spafford began by asking, "Why should home economics be taught in the public schools? Is it because girls should know how to cook and sew, manage a home, and rear children, or is it because home economics has a contribution to make in the education of young people, whatever they may do?"¹¹ Spafford argued that a woman's decision to "have her housework done" might not be so

disastrous after all. In a section called "The Challenge Ahead," he argued that given the changing role of women, there was a need to reevaluate the goals of home economics education:

A knowledge of family life and home conditions is essential as a foundation for planning the home economics program, and there is no one answer because there is no one type of home.... The clothing needed today may be purchased ready-to-wear, but many women still do a great deal of family sewing. With increased leisure even more may do these things. Many girls should be taught to cook and sew, but they should be taught other things as well.¹²

Spafford's adaptive view of the future of home economics education – and therefore of women's domestic roles – illustrates the changing understandings of home dressmaking in American households during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over this period, assumptions about home sewing shifted along with understandings of women's roles in and outside the home. For the women who could afford to buy at least some clothing, sewing became more of a hobby and less of a survival tool.

Experts like Spafford had to adapt their expectations regarding women's domestic work to changing times, but as he notes above, this is not entirely a story of declension. Even as some groups sewed less frequently, younger generations learned dressmaking skills. Women like Winifred Byrd learned to sew "out of necessity," and for many, sewing remained a central part of their domestic labor. Many women continued to sew throughout the 1930s, through the war years, and into the 1950s. During the 1960s and 1970s, sewing enjoyed a renaissance as an expressive craft (and one that was counter to the prevailing market economy).

Today, fabric stores display enticing pattern catalogs by Simplicity, McCall Vogue, and other companies. Sales in 2005 of electronic Singer sewing machines costing less than \$200 were more than ten times what they were in 2004.¹³ Like the women who came before them, people sew today for a wide variety of reasons. Some of those reasons are economic: a social services

program in New Haven, Connecticut called Growing Through Sewing teaches sewing as a marketable skill to women recovering from substance abuse.¹⁴ One graduate of the program sewed a last-minute prom dress for a neighbor who paid \$50. Others are drawn to the creative dimension of sewing. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* quoted one young woman who sews because "everyone's starting to look like clones of each other," the same argument put forth by sewing proponents in the 1920s.¹⁵ A diverse population has a wide variety of clothing needs and fabric stores in New York City sell material for saris, Muslim dress, and other culturally specific clothing. With inexpensive clothing so accessible and modern expectations of women's work as they are, it is unlikely that American home sewers will ever produce the volume of clothing that they did in the past – and why should they? But sewing maintains an appeal that is unlikely to disappear any time soon.

The reasons why women sewed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were colored by understandings of their roles in their family and larger community. Home sewing represented both traditional values and economic and cultural changes. Sewing was associated with thrift, discipline, ethnic and racial identity, domestic production, even sexual morality. As these values shifted over time, and as mass-produced clothing became more popular, the cultural meanings of sewing became more important. Sewing continued to represent traditional ideas about women and the home, but it also offered a tool for critiquing those older patterns. Sewing at home was still a way to save money, but that money afforded an increasing independence for women. A young woman's demure wedding dress doubled as an experiment in personal taste, and a homemade child's dress was a symbol of maternal love as well as a way to signal that a working mother had time for her family.

Sewing offers a lens through which we can gain a greater understanding of changing gender roles, class and race identities, educational priorities, business strategies, and domestic labor.

Full of meanings about femininity, class, and work, home sewing is a fascinating way to interpret daily choices and larger social change.

Notes

Note 1: Ethel Holland Little, "You and Your Paper Pattern," *Woman's Home Companion* (January 1937): 47. back

Note 2: Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), 127. back

Note 3: Roberta Thourot, conversation with author, Oberlin, Ohio, 26 May 2001. back

Note 4: Goodman, interview. back

Note 5: Virginia Yans, email correspondence with author, 3 April 2001. back

Note 6: Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: The New Press, 1970, new edition, 1986), 50. back

Note 7: Ruth Edmonds Hill, ed., *The Black Women Oral History Project 8* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991) 361. back

Note 8: "Nine to Five and Five to Nine, A Companion-Butterick Triad for the business girl," *Woman's Home Companion* (January 1937): 43. back

Note 9: Yans, email correspondence. back

Note 10: Edythe P. Hershey, "Putting the Home on a Business Basis," *University of Texas Bulletin* (January 10, 1920, revised 1921), 13. back

Note 11: Ivol Spafford, *Fundamentals in Teaching Home Economics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1935), 1. back

Note 12: Spafford, 5. back

Note 13: Anne-Marie Chaker, "It's Hip to Hem: Sewing Makes a Comeback as 'Project Runway,' Retro Fad Inspire a New Generation," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2006, D1. back

Note 14: Joseph Berger, "These Stitches, In Time, May Save Some Lives," *New York Times* 1 October 2006, back

Note 15: Anne-Marie Chaker, "It's Hip to Hem." back