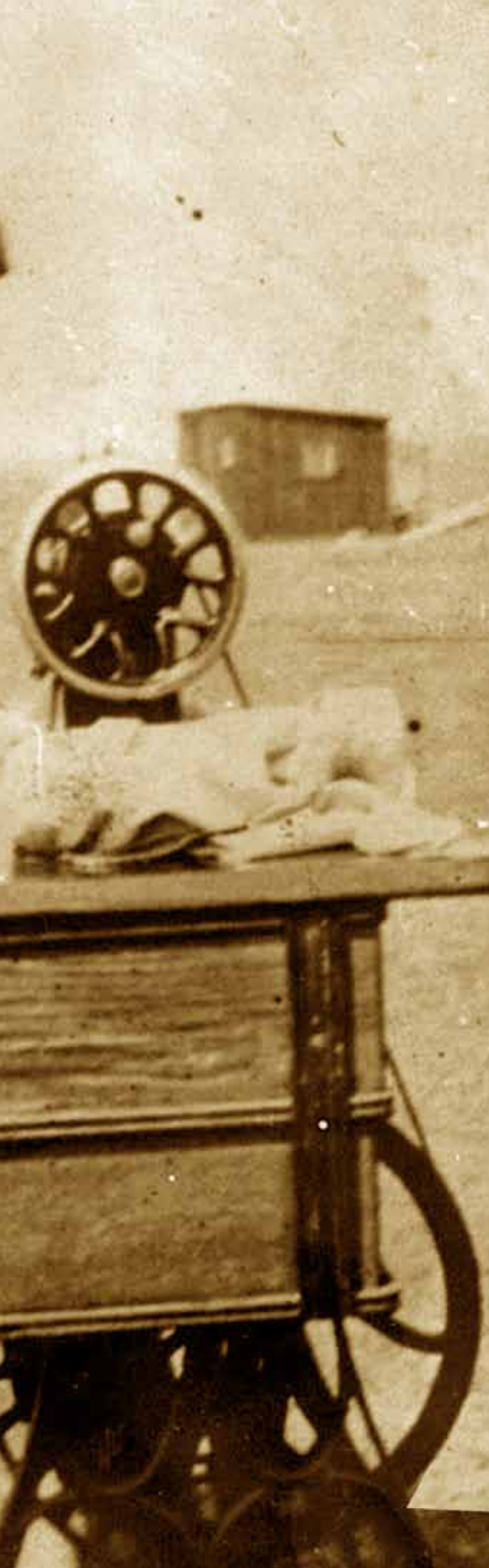
Making Clothing



*L*aura Ingalls Wilder describes a scene in one of her Little House on the Prairie books where her father has purchased a surprise present for her mother. It's hidden under a blanket in the back of their buckboard and he waits till they're home before he reveals what it is.

"He lifted the blanket away and there stood a shiny new sewing machine," Laura writes. "'Oh, Charles,' Ma gasped. 'Yes, Caroline, it's all yours,' Pa said proudly."

Ma wonders how he's afforded the sewing machine and he says he sold one of their cows.

A week or so later, Laura continues, her mother shows her a dress she has made for her. "'I declare,' said Ma, 'I don't know how we ever got along without that sewing machine. It does the work so easily. And such beautiful stitching. The best of seamstresses could not equal it by hand.'"

With those few paragraphs from These Happy Golden Years, Laura Ingalls Wilder captures much of the sewing machine's impact on American life. The scene she describes occurred in 1884 in South Dakota, at a time when sewing machines were still out of reach for many American families, especially those living in remote areas.

Soon Americans everywhere would come to regard the sewing machine as a thing of technological genius. It changed how clothing was created, helped countless women become entrepreneurs, and even changed how we purchase our home appliances. It could cut the work involved in dressmaking up to 90 percent. On the other hand, the sewing machine helped create the infamous sweatshops.

Still, no history of clothing in the American home can ignore the sewing machine – especially because Americans had been stitching their clothes by hand for 200 years before its invention.

Sewing by Fireside

It's difficult for us today to even imagine how much work went into creating a family's clothing from the time the

4th in the "History of our Homes" Series

By Gregory LeFever

PREVIOUS PAGE: This rare daguerreotype from the Nebraska Historical Society shows a frontier woman in 1848 with her treadle sewing machine on the Nebraska prairie. Very likely she moved the machine outdoors and was doing her work where the light was more satisfactory. ABOVE: This hand-tinted daguerreotype from 1853 shows a seamstress posing with her sewing machine.

first European settlers landed in America in the early 1600s until the sewing machine appeared in the mid 1800s.

Most early Americans relied on textile tools dating back to Biblical times. They raised sheep, sheared the wool, cleaned, and combed it. They grew cotton and flax and then harvested, soaked, pounded, and combed them into long fibers. They used spinning wheels to draw out the plant fibers and wool and then twisted them into thread they wove into homespun wool, linen, cotton, and linsey-woolsey. After all of this, women cut and sewed all of their family's clothing, usually in front of the fireplace during the winter when chores were fewer.

As late as 1810, two-thirds of all the clothing rural families wore was made in the home. The exception were the wealthier colonists – usually residents of cities and towns or southern planters – who paid for imported fabrics and hired seamstresses and tailors to create fashionable garments from the cloth.

During the colonial era, a number of cottage businesses arose from clothing creation. Mills sometimes took on the chore of preparing wool for spinning when women would bring in the unfinished wool and then pay the mill owners with a portion of the carded wool. In another example, women sometimes created surplus yarn or cloth, which they sold on consignment in local shops or peddled to weavers who would make the yarn into finished cloth. Likewise, some weavers would travel from home to home with their looms on their backs, to weave cloth for a fee.

Mountain folk, such as this woman in her cabin near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, still used primitive tools to create cloth well into the 20th century. This 1933 photo by Lewis Hine shows Mrs. James Watson creating wool thread with her spinning wheel.

Birth of An Industry

Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution was taking root in England, where textile mills began using machines such as spinning jennies and power looms, newly invented around 1780. But England was highly protective of its new textile industry and made it illegal to export to America any spinning machines or looms or even their designs. England wanted America to provide English millers and weavers with the raw materials, which the English would turn into cloth to sell back to the colonies.

For years this crippled the potential for a textile industry in America, and the plan worked until the 1790s when Samuel Slater (1768-1835), a young apprentice in an English textile mill, sensed an opportunity. Slater memorized the designs of textile machinery and sailed across the sea to Rhode Island, where he successfully designed the first textile mills in America, eventually owning 13 of them. His fame became such that Andrew Jackson called Slater the "Father of the American Industrial Revolution." Back in England, he became known as "Slater the Traitor."

Another inventive young man, Francis Cabot Lowell (1775-1817) took the American textile mill to a new level, creating the first "integrated" mill providing all operations for converting raw cotton into finished cloth. Lowell built the Boston Manufacturing Company in 1814 in Waltham, Massachusetts, where it became the prototype for the 19th century American factory.

Lowell's ingenuity extended to his workforce as well. He pioneered the concept of hiring women age 15 to 35 and providing lodging in chaperoned boarding houses, where the women – most of them daughters of New England farmers – received educational and religious studies. Most stayed with Lowell's mills until they married or became teachers, which at the time was one of the few other professions available to young women.

Essential Seamstresses

One of the most important figures in the history of American clothing is the seamstress. Since colonial days the profession had focused mostly on designing and sewing clothing for women and children.

Typically a seamstress might create the entire garment, or she might do only the design and cutting and leave the sewing to the household women. The seamstress might work at her customer's home, or she might work at her own home, perhaps with an apprentice.

Either way, the seamstress was respected as an independent business person. As a good example of how seamstresses operated, writer and historian Susan Strasser points to the mid-1800s Massachusetts home of the famed American poet Emily Dickenson:

"Emily Dickinson's family hired several different seamstresses, often at the same time. Some came to live with the Dickinsons for a few days, while others worked in their own homes; some were married, others were single; some were friends or neighbors, others the Dickinson letters mention only for their sewing. Their work always supplemented the Dickinson women's sewing."

Seamstresses in America had been making earning money for nearly 200 years, stitching by hand, when their world was shaken in the 1850s with the arrival of a truly functional sewing machine.

Queen of Inventions

Before the sewing machine, housewives and seamstresses devoted several days a month to hand-sewing garments. According to Godey's Lady's Book, a dress took ten hours to stitch, while a sewing machine knocked the time down to about an hour. A man's dress shirt took 14 hours by hand, down to less then 90 minutes with a machine. A pair of summer pants took three hours by hand and only 40 minutes with a machine.

Lizzie Reagan lived near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and made her living as a weaver in the early 20th century, though her loom is of a much earlier style. In this 1933 photo by Lewis Hine, the woman, known as Aunt Lizzie, is weaving jean cloth.

History casts the sewing machine as both a blessing and a curse for seamstresses. At first only textile factories could afford sewing machines, prompting many seamstresses to close their own businesses to join the new workforce. But they paid a steep price in terms of independence as employers set pay-rates per piece, enforced quotas and deadlines, and owned all the work the seamstresses produced. As factory productivity increased, many seamstresses were put out of work.

For seamstresses and families alike, the idea of owning a sewing

machine held considerable promise but the machines were simply too expensive. Though Godey's in 1860 called it "The Queen of Inventions," a sewing machine then cost $125 – far more than a cast-iron cookstove – when the average annual income for a family was $500.

The big change in affordability was due to Isaac Singer (1811-1875) the eighth child of poor German immigrants living in New York City. He had a sharp mind for business and was one of several inventors who battled each other in the 1850s over patents for the sewing machine. Seeing the sales potential blocked by the high price, Singer and his partner Edward Clark in 1856 introduced purchasing by installments.

Under the Singer plan, a family or factory could put five dollars down and pay the balance in monthly installments of three to five dollars. Singer's sales tripled in the plan's first year. A year later the company introduced a trade-in plan of $50 for used machines, and sales shot up by another 50 percent. With revenues way up, the company in 1859 was able to cut the price of a Singer machine by half.

With these innovative purchasing plans, the Singer company established the idea of buying on credit, which has transformed the consumer world ever since.

Ready-made Clothing

So far, we haven't said much about men's clothing. That's because tailors working in shops in towns and cities created most of men's apparel. Clothing for farmers and other laborers – consisting mostly of simple homespun shirts and pants – was still created at home, but tailors capable of creating fashionable outfits satisfied the needs for men having a public presence.

The simple, unadorned lines of men's basic clothing provided opportunity for garment factories popping up in eastern states. The first ready-made clothing factory began operation in 1831 in New York, with several more soon following. While these factories promoted the concept of providing finished clothing to all segments of society, the initial target was working-class men.

But getting a good ready-made fit was a challenge. During the Civil War, the Union Army's need for mass-produced uniforms resulted in measuring more than a million soldiers to determine standard sizes, a move that would benefit the entire garment industry from then on.

This colorful 1881 advertisement for New Home Sewing Machine Company appeals to settlers in America's western states, where the machines were growing in popularity. This is the period when the combination of installment plans and lower prices made sewing machines affordable to many more families.

For women, paper patterns of clothing began appearing in popular magazines in the 1870s. Patterns also helped standardize the sizes and styles of women's clothing and eventually increased the appeal of ready-made garments in relation to homemade clothes.

Ready-made clothing factories such as this one in New York City employed hundreds of seamstresses to create garments available in shops and by mail-order catalogs. This 1937 photo shows a clean and orderly factory, quite different from the sweatshops that had populated the Garment District a few years earlier.

To tap into this large market, factories began manufacturing affordable yet fashionable women's clothing, much of which was available through Sears and similar mail-order catalogs. This way, women of all classes and incomes could purchase apparel in current styles, quickly, affordably, and unhampered by where they lived.

By 1870 a quarter of all garments produced in America were ready-made in factories. Within 20 years, the amount was 60 percent. And by 1950 some 90 percent of all clothing sold in the United States was ready-made in garment factories.

A New Perspective

Heading into the 20th century, rapid growth of the clothing industry – fueled by the demand to create greater quantities of garments, faster, and at lower prices – encountered problems. As immigrants and rural poor women poured into the cities in search of work, a number of unscrupulous factory owners created the infamous sweatshops, the most notorious being located in New York's garment district.

In these small factories, women suffered overcrowded work conditions, poor ventilation, rodent infestations, and the constant threat of fire. Sweatshop working conditions were so bad the government stepped in to set new labor standards, while labor unions organized to protect clothing workers.

But on the whole, America's ready-made clothing industry had incredible momentum. In 1876, profits from American clothing factories were $12 million. By 1929, profits were $1.6 billion. During these years of staggering growth, Americans changed their relationship with their clothing, moving from regarding each garment as precious to adopting a more consumer-oriented mindset resulting in drawers and closets full of stylish yet discardable clothing.

Today we can only look back in amazement at how the creation of clothing in America was transformed in the 19th century, going from painstaking sewing by hand in homes and small shops, to the rapid spread of ready-made clothing factories producing huge quantities of clothes available in stores across the land and even through the mail to people in all walks of life.

And it was the genius of the sewing machine that made it all possible.