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The Disappearance of the Domestic Sewing Machine, 1890–1925

Marguerite Connolly

MONTGOMERY Ward Company seemed almost apologetic. In describing the merits of a full cabinet sewing machine in its 1912 catalogue, the company admitted, “You know that the sewing machine is not a very attractive addition to your parlor, bedroom or dining room furniture. The cabinet machine is. Inconspicuously it will fill a corner of a room, and when noticed, it is in words of admiration.”¹ When the cabinet of this model was closed, the sewing machine head dropped completely out of sight. By the early twentieth century it had become most desirable to hide the sewing machine.

This desire for concealment was a product of the sewing machine’s gradual loss of status, a process that began in the late nineteenth century and continued into the early twentieth. During this period, the availability of inexpensive machines as well as the emergence of the ready-made clothing industry resulted in the devaluation of the sewing machine in the minds of Americans, which led to its “disappearance” in American culture. Since it was no longer a status symbol, the sewing machine became an object whose use was assumed but not proclaimed—something akin to a wash-

tub or broom. This, however, had not always been the case.

Before 1890: “The Queen of Inventions”

When the domestic sewing machine was introduced to American homes in the 1850s, it was heralded as a mechanical wonder that would transform the lives of women. The popular and influential *Godey’s Lady’s Book* called the sewing machine “The Queen of Inventions” and in 1855 proclaimed the sewing machine’s indispensability to its female readers: “Every family in the United States ought to have one, and would if they only knew the saving and the quantity of work that can be done in a day. . . . The spring sewing or the fall sewing for half a dozen children loses its formidable aspect, when a yard of handsome and substantial stitching can be run off in two minutes.” Five years later, the *New York Times* stated outright that the sewing machine was the “best boon to woman in the nineteenth century.”²

The sewing machine was hailed as a great labor saver in the mid nineteenth century because at that time sewing was a never-ending, time-consuming task for virtually every woman: farm and city dweller, young and old, rich and poor. The availability of yard goods, or fabrics sold by the yard, in unprecedented quantities contributed greatly to the ubiquity of home sewing. The

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¹ *Montgomery Ward and Co. Catalogue No. 81* (1912): 432, Winterthur Library.

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² “The Queen of Inventions—The Sewing Machine,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 61, no. 1 (July 1860): 77; “Grover, Baker, and Co.’s Sewing-Machines,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 51, no. 2 (August 1855): 185; “The Story of the Sewing-Machine,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1860, p. 2.

industrial revolution had mechanized and transformed the fabric industry in both the United States and Europe by the early decades of the nineteenth century, and by 1850 power looms were creating vast quantities of fabric at prices that made yard goods available to almost everyone. Although fabric was now cheap enough to be fairly plentiful, it remained expensive enough to discourage waste, and American women spent a great deal of time and labor constructing, mending, and remaking garments and household linens.³

The list of items that women were responsible for sewing was a long one. Although men's and boys' garments were available ready-made (at least in urban areas) by the 1850s, women's and girls' ready-to-wear clothing was not available in quantity until late in the nineteenth century.⁴ Therefore, the nineteenth-century woman's repertoire of sewing included all or most of her own and her children's garments, including underclothing, plus some garments for her husband. In addition, each household had to be supplied with an assortment of linen, including sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths, and towels for bathing and kitchen use, as well as household furnishings such as curtains and throw pillows. All were stitched, hemmed, and mended by the woman of the house and her daughters.

An examination of women's diaries from the period reveals that sewing was indeed an onerous task. A number of diaries from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been published in recent years, as their value has been increasingly recognized by historians. The strength of these diaries as a historical source lies in their attention to the details of everyday life. Several scholars have pointed out that while men's diaries tend to stress action and concentrate on public and political events, women's revolve around everyday, private life, human interactions, and emotion.⁵ And

although each diary represents a highly personal response to the world, as a group they can reveal general historical trends.

One clear pattern revealed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is the enormous amount of sewing expected of women at all economic levels. Typical was this matter-of-fact comment noted by Rachel Bowman while staying in New York City in 1859: "I spent the day in sewing." Emily Hawley, a young woman living in Michigan around the same time, noted tersely in her diary, "Sew, sew, sew all the time."⁶

Although many women used the services of a hired seamstress or dressmaker, diaries reveal that such assistance did not remove the burden entirely from their lives, even for the wealthy. As the pampered daughter of an extremely wealthy Georgia planter in the early 1850s, young Ella Gertrude Clanton was expected to sew and to do it well. Unfortunately, throughout her life she had an aversion to the task; this was perceived as a fault, which her fiancé tried to correct diplomatically: "He gave me a beautiful acorn with a thimble enclosed formed of ivory," observed Gertrude wryly in her diary. "Quite a hint to learn to sew."⁷ Given the amount of sewing done in nineteenth-century America, it is not surprising that many people hailed the sewing machine as a great labor saver and emancipator of women.

From the beginning, sewing machines represented a sizeable investment for American families. The first domestic models, made by the Wheeler and Wilson Manufacturing Company and by I. M. Singer and Company, cost \$125 when they were introduced in the mid 1850s. Although prices decreased to approximately \$50 for the simplest models by 1860, the cost nonetheless represented a significant portion of the average family income of less than \$500 a year. To tap the huge potential of the family market, Singer inaugurated the hire-purchase, or installment, plan, which enabled women to take home a Singer sewing machine for as little as \$5 down. Other companies soon followed suit, and sewing machine sales rose throughout the nation. By 1863 *Scientific American* estimated that there were

³ Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. 125–31.

⁴ Nancy Page Fernandez, "If a Woman Had Taste . . .": Home Sewing and the Making of Fashion, 1850–1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Irvine, 1987), pp. 3–8.

⁵ See, for example, Christiane Fischer, ed., *Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849–1900* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977), pp. 11–22; John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 129–30; and Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), pp. 10–16. For a discussion of women's diaries as a historical source, see Margo Culley, ed., *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1985), pp. 3–26.

⁶ Bowman is cited in James C. Mohr, ed., *The Corman Diaries: A Northern Family in the Civil War* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), p. 40. Judy Nolte Lensink, ed., "A Secret to Be Buried": *The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858–1888* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 32.

⁷ Virginia Ingraham Burr, ed., *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848–1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 101.



Fig. 1. Trade card, Household Sewing Machine Co., 1870–80. (Author's collection.)

about 75,000 sewing machines in use in American homes. By the mid 1870s, more than half a million sewing machines were being produced a year in America. Although this number included exports and manufacturing machines, the quantity is nonetheless impressive.⁸

Because of its cost and the fact that it enabled women to sew quickly, the sewing machine was a status symbol in American homes throughout much of the second half of the nineteenth century. Women could spend less time and labor on sewing and concentrate on other important tasks—such as childrearing—or even use the extra time for relaxation. Moreover, the sewing machine's presence in the home proclaimed the family's ability to afford its price tag. Not only did the possession of a sewing machine denote a certain level of economic achievement, it frequently indicated that the man of the house thought

enough of his wife's time and labor to ease both with this household convenience.

More than one woman linked her sewing machine with domestic happiness. For Rachel Haskell, writing in her diary in Nevada in 1867, her machine was an integral component of her secure home environment: "How comfortable and cozy the sitting room did look this evening by twilight. The shelves laden with books, specimens, minerals, shells. The Piano, the Sewing Machine, comfortable sofa and easy chair, with healthy, happy, prattling, chippy, little children."⁹ Trade cards issued by sewing machine companies in the latter part of the nineteenth century capitalized on such idyllic scenarios. In one card from the 1870s, the sewing machine is placed squarely in the center of a home scene (fig. 1). Mamma looks up from her sewing to glance lovingly at her son, while the child plays with a pair of kittens. The richly furnished room, complete with potted plants at the window, lends the scene an aura of peace, security, and contentment.

A humorous Domestic Sewing Machine Company trade card dating from around 1880 equates

⁸ For the Wheeler and Wilson price, see "A. B. Wilson's Improved Sewing Machine," *Scientific American* (June 4, 1853): 298. For the Singer price, see Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1977), p. 116. On sales, see Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine*, pp. 116–17; "Sewing Machines in Europe," *Scientific American* (May 16, 1863): 314. On numbers of machines, see Frederick G. Bourne, "American Sewing Machines," in Chauncey M. Depew, ed., *One Hundred Years of American Commerce*, 2 vols. (New York: D. O. Haynes, 1895), 2:534.

⁹ Richard Lillard, ed., "A Literate Woman in the Mines: The Diary of Rachel Haskell," in Fischer, *Let Them Speak for Themselves*, p. 61.



Fig. 2. Trade card, Domestic Sewing Machine Co., ca. 1880. (Author's collection.)

the possession of a sewing machine with future domestic happiness (fig. 2). A young man has just proposed, and the coy young woman acquiesces—if he will give her a Domestic sewing machine. Meanwhile, Cupid, poised on tiptoe, is telephoning the powers that be to send a Domestic right over.

Although the sewing machine was intrinsically a machine, manufacturers stressed its role as a piece of furniture as well. Historian Diane M. Douglas has pointed out that with the advent of the domestic sewing machine in the 1850s, the outside world of industrialization collided with the inner world of the home. "In the collision," she observes, "the machine was adapted to its new domestic setting." Middle-class Victorian Americans naturally encased the sewing machine in a respectable exterior that was suited to the home environment.¹⁰

¹⁰ Diane M. Douglas, "The Machine in the Parlor: A Dialectical Analysis of the Sewing Machine," *Journal of American Culture* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 20, 20–29. For a discussion of early sewing machine cabinet production, see David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800–1932* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), chap. 3. The complex question of technology in the Victorian home is beyond the scope of this

Sewing machines were available in a variety of styles, ranging from simple to elaborate. Although early machines were simply placed on tables, very quickly the cabinet case, which fully enclosed the machine's treadle mechanism, appeared on the market. By the early 1870s, tables with drop leaves and extra drawers were available as well. It was the cabinet case that allowed sewing machine manufacturers to exploit their best cabinetmaking skills, and they created elaborate and fashionable pieces.

A trade catalogue of Wilson sewing machines dating from 1876 illustrates a typical range of styles and prices. The least expensive, a plain table, cost \$50 (fig. 3). Drawers and a drop leaf were extras and increased the price to \$65 (fig. 4). Silver plating on the machine head cost an additional \$10. The most expensive option was the cabinet case, which cost up to \$125, depending

essay. For some further exploration of this cultural dilemma, see Douglas, "Machine in the Parlor"; John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776–1900* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976); and Elizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915," *Journal of American Culture* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 752–75.

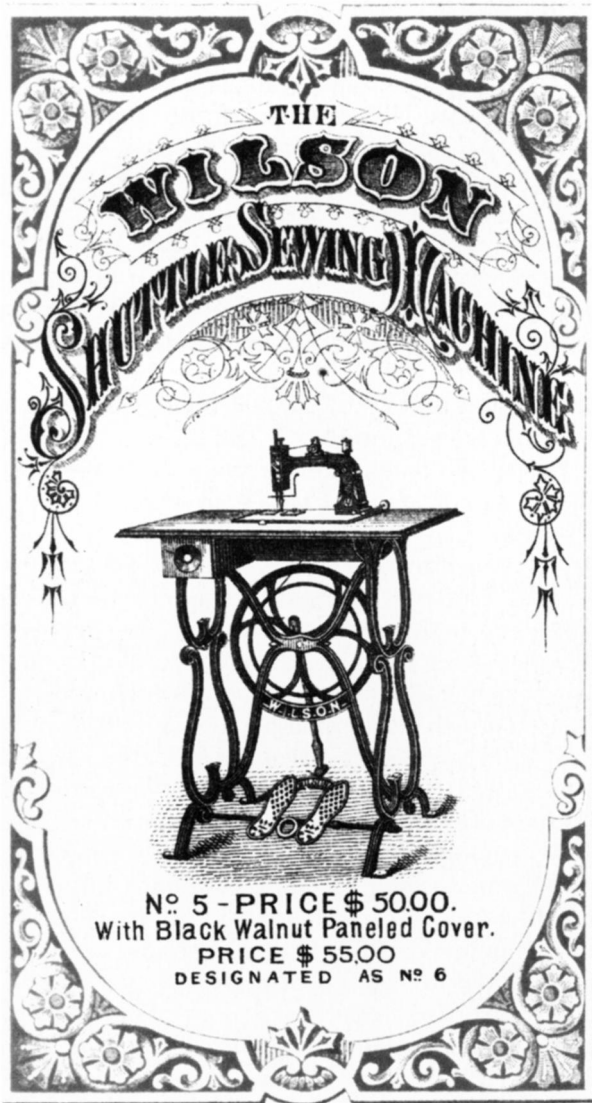


Fig. 3. Plain table model. From Wilson Sewing Machine Co. trade catalogue, 1876. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

on the finish selected (fig. 5). Prices frequently included a wooden box to cover the machine head when it was not in use.¹¹

Sales literature stressed the sewing machine's role as furniture; manufacturers frequently cited beautiful woodwork as a selling point. Singer, for example, boasted in the early 1870s that "no distasteful *daub* is sent from our establishments to give offense where works of art adorn the household." Ann S. Stephens, editor of the popular ladies' magazine *Peterson's*, saw her sewing machine

¹¹ Wilson Sewing Machine Co. trade catalogue, 1876, Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.



Fig. 4. Model with drawers and drop leaf. From Wilson Sewing Machine Co. trade catalogue, 1876. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

in the same light, describing her Wheeler and Wilson as among the "most elegant adornments" of her parlor.¹²

During the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, the burgeoning sewing machine industry provided American women with an ever-increasing number of machines. Women from all across America were taking advantage of this mechanical innovation, which enabled them to sew better and faster than ever before.

¹² Singer Manufacturing Co., *Singer Sewing Machines* [ca. 1872], Winterthur Library. [Wheeler and Wilson Manufacturing Co.], 1868: *The Golden Calendar* (1867), p. 39, Hagley Museum and Library.



Fig. 5. Cabinet case model. From Wilson Sewing Machine Co. trade catalogue, 1876. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

1890–1920: The Disappearing Sewing Machine

By 1890 the sewing machine had lost its novelty and had become an accepted part of domestic life. It was now too common for its prior status symbol role, and the American public had begun to take it for granted.

One factor contributing to the sewing machine's loss of status was the flood of cheap machines: as prices lowered, so did the prestige that owning a machine afforded. Almost from the beginning, inexpensive models had found their way onto the market. To supplement this trade, sec-

ondhand models were available at a reduced price, at least into the early twentieth century.¹³

After the early 1890s, a viable and increasingly popular option appeared for those who did not want to pay the high price of "name brands," such as Singer and Wheeler and Wilson, which were sold by traveling agents and in company showrooms. Customers could purchase reliable yet extremely inexpensive machines from department stores and mail-order houses. These mass retailers, products of nineteenth-century business and economic developments, were able to utilize vast economies of scale to sell their wares at low prices to a wide audience.¹⁴

Sears, Roebuck, and Company, especially, sought to corner the market; in 1897 the company's top management decided to cut their already-low prices to acquire a bigger share of the market. The ploy worked: thousands of orders poured in—19,000 in October alone. By 1902 Sears was boasting in its catalogue, "We are the largest dealers in sewing machines in America," a statement that may well have been true.¹⁵

A comparison of prices reveals that department stores and mail-order houses in particular offered substantial savings to the consumer. In a trade catalogue dating from around 1900, the New Home Sewing Machine Company offered a model with four drawers for \$65.00. In 1899 the John Wanamaker department store sold a comparable model for \$24.50, and the 1902 Sears catalogue advertised one for \$10.45. The contrast held true for the more expensive cabinet models as well: while New Home's cheapest cabinet model cost \$70.00, Wanamaker's cost \$35.00, and the Sears model could be purchased for \$23.20.¹⁶

The sewing machine's newer, plebeian image was further heightened by the fact that many poor people now owned them. A number of Progressive-era studies of urban, working-class

¹³ "The Old Issues Again," *Sewing Machine Times*, December 25, 1902, p. 8, Library of Congress.

¹⁴ For a full discussion of business developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1977).

¹⁵ Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck, and Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 67. *1902 Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue, with an Introduction by Cleveland Amory* (New York: Bounty Books, 1969), p. 721.

¹⁶ New Home Sewing Machine Co., untitled trade catalogue [ca. 1900], Hagley Museum and Library; *Spring and Summer Catalogue, 1899*; John Wanamaker, p. 143, Hagley Museum and Library; and *1902 Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue*, pp. 722, 740.

populations noted the frequent presence of sewing machines in America's poorer homes. In social worker Margaret Byington's description of a Slav family's dwelling in early twentieth-century Homestead, Pennsylvania, the sewing machine was a component in an overall picture of poverty: "One morning I entered a two-room tenement. The kitchen . . . was steaming with vapor from a big washtub set on a chair in the middle of the room. The mother was trying to wash and at the same time to keep the older of her two babies from tumbling into the . . . scalding water. On one side of the room was a huge puffy bed . . . near the window stood a sewing machine."¹⁷

The sewing machine was ubiquitous in America by the end of the nineteenth century. Sewing and dressmaking columns in women's magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* assumed their use. By 1907 *Sewing Machine Advance*, a trade publication, complained that sewing machine salesmen faced the challenge of trying to sell something "that already has found its way into almost every home." Such pervasiveness contributed to the new attitude that the machine was something to conceal rather than to display proudly in the home. A Wheeler and Wilson trade catalogue dating from around 1889 reveals this change. The manufacturer described its folding parlor cabinet as "an elegant piece of furniture which, when closed, presents no suggestion of a sewing machine."¹⁸

The sewing machine's invisibility, despite its widespread use after 1890, can be gleaned from the pages of women's diaries of the period. From 1890 through 1920, women *were* sewing on machines, some of them intermittently and others a great deal. Yet although their use of a sewing machine can be inferred (usually from the speed and volume of their sewing), these diarists rarely, if ever, mentioned their machines. Rural Georgia housewife Magnolia Le Guin recorded a seemingly endless round of household chores in a voluminous diary that spanned the years 1901

through 1913. Although she did a substantial amount of sewing for her constantly growing family (she eventually had eight children), Le Guin mentioned her sewing machine only once and did so in an offhand way. Writing in 1905 while expecting her sixth child, she despaired of getting her family's sewing done before the baby's birth: "I have so much to do between now and January 1906 and I don't see how I can do it all—so many little garments to make and such little time to sew. . . . How I am *ever* to get it done I don't know. I don't have no chance some days to sit down to the machine; some days I'm tired out of reason—no strength so overtaxed."¹⁹

Although Lella Secor, a young wife and mother of two, living in the Northeast, recorded a fair amount of sewing in her letters to her family from 1915 to 1923, she never mentioned using a sewing machine. In 1920 she was greatly touched by an unusual Christmas gift from her mother-in-law. Writing to her own mother, she exclaimed in wonder, "Mother Florence sent me a magnificent silk lounging robe [of] which she made every stitch herself—without a machine. I am deeply touched and greatly complimented by this evidence of her affection."²⁰ A garment put together with hand stitching was quite a novelty to Secor; despite her failure to mention a sewing machine in her letters, she was apparently accustomed to using one.

Although these women seemed to take their sewing machines for granted, several of the diarists studied evidently considered them necessary. One woman who depended on machine sewing was Margaret Sloan, a middle-class southern bride who chronicled her life from the time of her engagement in 1900 through the early years of her marriage. She and her husband spent most of their married life in boardinghouses, and Sloan, a talented seamstress, sewed eagerly whenever she had access to a sewing machine. Staying with her parents, who owned a sewing machine, before joining her husband in another boardinghouse in 1902, Sloan confided in her diary that she was glad her departure had been postponed: "Well I worked hard on my skirt yesterday and today and still it is not finished, and I am glad I

¹⁷ Robert Coit Chapin, *The Standard of Living among Workingmen's Families in New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Fndn., 1909); Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (1910; reprint, Pittsburgh: University Center for International Studies with University of Pittsburgh, 1974); J. C. Kennedy et al., *Wages and Family Budgets in the Chicago Stockyards District* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1914), p. 60. Byington, *Homestead*, p. 145.

¹⁸ *Sewing Machine Advance* 29 (November 1907): 83, Library of Congress. Wheeler and Wilson Manufacturing Co., *Something New! Wheeler and Wilson's New High-Arm Family Sewing Machine, the "No. 9"* [ca. 1889], Hagley Museum and Library.

¹⁹ Charles A. Le Guin, ed., *A Home-Concealed Woman: The Diaries of Magnolia Wynn Le Guin, 1901–1913* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 175.

²⁰ Barbara Moench Florence, ed., *Lella Secor: A Diary in Letters, 1915–1922* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1978), p. 236.

did not leave today for I have no way to sew [while] boarding."²¹

Sewing by machine was a prerequisite even for a young woman living in the sparsely settled Southwest at the turn of the century. In her memoir of her family's cross-country wagon trip in 1900, Katherine Davis, mother of four, explained that she had brought along her sewing machine, "For where there are children there is always sewing." She decided, however, to lighten the wagon load by trading the heavy machine at a remote trading post. The woman who worked at the trading post, newly married and from California, was extremely grateful for the machine. She had been driving some thirty miles across the desert to use the nearest sewing machine.²²

Despite the sewing machine's continued use, its change in status is evidenced in its declining appearance in women's magazines, where, by 1890, interest in the sewing machine was largely diminished, and stories addressing its care and use became less frequent. *Godey's Lady's Book*, the former champion of the "Queen of Inventions," barely mentioned sewing machines at all between 1890 and the magazine's demise in 1898. The periodical that succeeded *Godey's* as the foremost women's magazine in America, *Ladies' Home Journal*, provides a rich vein of information on how the sewing machine's image had changed since the mid nineteenth century. Yet it is where the sewing machine does *not* appear in the pages of this magazine, rather than where it *does* appear, that is so significant.

Founded in 1883 by Cyrus H. K. Curtis, *Ladies' Home Journal* was popular from the start, and circulation reached 100,000 by the end of its second year of publication. Although the monthly magazine was aimed at middle-class women, it was widely read by men as well. The magazine's varied subject matter included fiction, advice columns, religious pieces, and articles on home and child care as well as on needlework and fashion. By 1903 circulation of *Ladies' Home Journal* had topped one million. According to magazine historian Frank Luther Mott, even President Theodore Roosevelt envied the magazine's editor, Edward Bok, for his power over the public.²³

²¹ Harold Woodell, ed., *The Shattered Dream: A Southern Bride at the Turn of the Century—The Day Book of Margaret Sloan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), p. 217.

²² On Katherine Davis, see Sharon Niederman, *A Quilt of Words: Women's Diaries, Letters, and Original Accounts of Life in the Southwest, 1860–1960* (Boulder, Colo.: Johnson Books, 1988), pp. 109–10.

²³ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1885–1905*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1957), 4:536–55.

Although *Ladies' Home Journal* assumed that its readers were sewing on machines—its columns on dressmaking treated hand sewing as the exception rather than the rule—the magazine devoted little attention to sewing machines themselves. The sewing machine seems to have been as invisible within the pages of the magazine as it was within the pages of many women's diaries of this period. The magazine offered no advice on selecting a sewing machine and almost none on how to operate or repair one.²⁴

Perhaps most significant, the magazine's illustrations of women sewing rarely include a sewing machine. Women are shown sewing by hand or performing other aspects of dressmaking, such as cutting out and fitting garments (fig. 6). Even in illustrations in which a sewing machine does appear, it is frequently accompanied by another image of a woman hand sewing, and the machine is usually not in use.²⁵

Other images completely ignore or downplay the sewing machine even when the accompanying text specifically mentions one. In her prize-winning essay "How I Dressed on \$100 a Year," which appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*, Mary Haniman revealed that she saved a considerable sum of money by making many of her clothes. A working woman living on her own in New York City, Haniman sewed her clothing during her vacations, which she spent "at home, where there is a sewing machine." In order to make optimum use of her time at her mother's sewing machine, Haniman usually cut out her garments *before* she went home. The illustration accompanying the essay, however, shows no machine; rather, the young woman, apparently at home with her mother, is cutting fabric (fig. 7).²⁶

Another illustration that belies reality appeared in the magazine's February 1912 issue. The accompanying article described how various women earned money. One was a widow who sewed canvas gloves for local mine workers. The

²⁴ The only exceptions were fairly frequent directions for cleaning clogged machines.

²⁵ Emma M. Hooper, "Hints on Home Dress-Making," *Ladies' Home Journal* (hereafter *LHJ*) 7, no. 7 (June 1890): 15; "Mrs. Ralston Tells How to Get Along with What We Have," *LHJ* 25, no. 3 (February 1908): 59; "Sewing in Other Women's Homes: What It Means to Be a Seamstress at \$1.50 a Day: A Life Story As Told to Margarett Tuttle," *LHJ* 34, no. 1 (January 1917): 20; "Dress More Attractively at Half Cost," *LHJ* 36, no. 10 (October 1919): 187; and Gertrude Sheppard, "One Girl's Ideas on the Clothes Problem," *LHJ* 37, no. 5 (May 1920): 145; see *LHJ* 38, no. 10 (October 1921): front cover, for an image of a woman measuring (but not sewing) curtains.

²⁶ Mary Haniman, "How I Dressed on \$100 a Year," *LHJ* 28, no. 15 (October 1911): 102.



Fig. 6. Women cutting, fitting, and sewing garments by hand. From *Ladies' Home Journal* 25, no. 3 (February 1908): 59. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

gloves were reportedly easy to make: "It was merely a matter of sewing seams on the machine." Yet the illustration shows the sewing machine standing unused in the background, while the woman sews a glove—by hand.²⁷ There was, then, a pervasive image of women sewing by hand—an image that the sewing machine had never managed to dislodge from the minds of Americans.

It is also significant that illustrations of so-called beautiful and desirable homes in *Ladies' Home Journal* did not include sewing machines. Throughout the period studied, the magazine regularly featured the interiors of homes deemed by the editors to be tasteful and attractive enough to inspire decorating ideas for readers of both affluent and modest means. Although the magazine included photographs of various rooms, sewing machines received scant attention. In fact, between 1890 and 1920, they appear only twice in such articles; in both instances they were in

designated sewing rooms.²⁸ The magazine also frequently published lists of suggested household furnishings for various rooms in the home. None of these included a sewing machine.

Ready-to-Wear Clothing: The New Cultural Norm

The major factor behind the sewing machine's loss of status after 1890 was the rise of the ready-to-wear clothing industry, which profoundly altered the nature and purpose of home sewing. It was the growth of this industry that irrevocably changed the image of the sewing machine. Before the availability of ready-made clothing, the alternative to sewing at home by machine had been sewing at home by hand. Even the very wealthy supplemented the work of paid seamstresses with the work of their own hands. After the development of the ready-made industries, however, the alternative to sewing clothing at

²⁷ How Can I Make Money? The Ways in Which Thirteen Girls and Women Solved the Problem," *LHJ* 29, no. 2 (February 1912): 33.

²⁸ See Jane Porter, "Rooms I Like in Neighbor's Houses," *LHJ* 34, no. 2 (February 1917): 32; and Mary E. Hopkins, "What the Handy Man Did for My Sewing Room," *LHJ* 34, no. 10 (October 1917): 54.



Fig. 7. Silhouette of young woman cutting out a garment. From *Ladies' Home Journal* 28, no. 10 (October 1911): 102. (Wilmington Institute Free Library, Wilmington, Del.)

home by machine was the purchase of clothing ready-made. Since such items were generally more expensive, the sewing machine became a means by which women could save money rather than labor. It is significant that by the late nineteenth century, sewing machines were no longer advertised as labor savers.

Exactly when, and how, did the *maker* of the family's clothes turn into the *buyer*? As with other activities previously centered in the home, the production of clothing gradually moved outside, joining the ranks of America's industries. Scholars agree that the ready-to-wear clothing industry developed gradually over the span of several decades—during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and that by 1920, the ready-to-wear business was providing most of America's clothing.²⁹ Women could give up sew-

ing at the same time that they abandoned canning, tending tricky wood or coal stoves, and lugging water from wells.

For a variety of reasons, although a full range of men's ready-to-wear garments was available by 1850, the women's ready-to-wear industry did not truly get off the ground until the last decade of the nineteenth century and was not fully developed until around 1920. According to historians Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, these reasons include the fact that dressmakers were readily available throughout the nineteenth century at little cost and the precise fit demanded of women's garments rendered their manufacture difficult. Historian Nancy Page Fernandez, moreover, has pointed to differing traditional production processes for men's and women's garments as well as differing uses of technology to mechanize these processes as reasons for the slower development of the women's ready-to-wear industry.³⁰

In the last four decades of the nineteenth century, various items of women's clothing gradually became available through department stores and mail-order houses: first cloaks, then undergarments, followed by some outerwear such as suits as well as tea gowns and wrappers. It was in the 1890s, though, that the industry began to gain momentum with the advent and enormous popularity of the simply constructed (and hence easily manufactured) shirtwaist and skirt. Yet Fernandez points out that at least until 1910, many women, both urban and rural, continued to sew the bulk of their clothes.³¹ By that year, however, ready-made women's garments of good quality were available for virtually every occasion.

Between about 1910 and 1920, the transformation from producer to consumer was complete. Within a few years after 1910, "shopping for clothing off the rack became customary for women of all incomes and classes."³² This decade also witnessed the biggest drop between 1860 and 1930 in the number of dressmakers and seamstresses in the United States, both in absolute numbers and in ratio to the female population (table 1). Clearly, by 1920 ready-made garments

tion of Clothing in America (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974); Fernandez, "If a Woman Had Taste . . .," chap. 1.

³⁰ Kidwell and Christman, *Suiting Everyone*, pp. 63, 108. Fernandez, "If a Woman Had Taste . . .," pp. 1–20, 301–2.

³¹ Fernandez, "If a Woman Had Taste . . .," p. 22.

³² Kidwell and Christman, *Suiting Everyone*, p. 137.

²⁹ On the ready-made clothing industry, see Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratiza-*

Table 1. Number of Dressmakers and Seamstresses and Ratio to U.S. Female Population, 1860–1930^a

Year	Dressmakers and seamstresses, male and female (excluding apprentices)	U.S. female population	Ratio of dressmakers and seamstresses to U.S. female population (per thousand)
1860	125,363	15,358,117	8.2
1870	253,904 ^b	19,064,806	13.0
1880	285,401 ^c	24,636,963	12.0
1890	439,208	30,710,613	14.0
1900	496,198	37,178,127	13.0
1910	449,342	44,639,989	10.0
1920	235,855	51,810,189	4.6
1930	158,380	60,637,966	2.6

Source: United States Census Reports, 1860–1930. No figures on female occupations were available in the 1850 Census.

^a Numbers of dressmakers and seamstresses for 1910, 1920, and 1930 are limited to those not working in factories; earlier censuses do not indicate such an exclusion probably because far fewer dressmakers were working in factories during the nineteenth century.

^b Figure includes milliners, tailors, and tailoresses.

^c Figure includes milliners and, probably, apprentices (the number encompasses those ages 10 and up).

had become the norm for most women, their husbands, and their children.

Ready-made clothing gradually replaced dressmaking as the alternative to home sewing. In a 1907 *Ladies' Home Journal* fashion column, the writer identified her different audiences: the wealthy, who went to dressmakers; women of moderate means, who made their clothes with the assistance of less expensive dressmakers and hired needlewomen; and those women who had to make their own clothes unaided. By 1918, however, ready-to-wear clothing had become the primary alternative to home sewing; a fashion writer at that time identified her audiences as those who made their garments at home and those who bought them ready-made.³³ It was in the decade before 1920, too, that advertisements for ready-made garments began to appear in *Ladies' Home Journal* in large numbers (fig. 8).

With the advent of ready-made clothing, then, homemade items—and the sewing machine—shared a profound loss of status. Representing neither the latest technology nor its owner's af-

³³ "Shop in New York without Leaving Your Home," *LHJ* 24, no. 12 (November 1907): 91; "The World of Lovely Things Is Here," *LHJ* 35, no. 1 (January 1918): 68.



Fig. 8. Advertisement for ready-to-wear dresses. From *Ladies' Home Journal* 35, no. 2 (February 1918): 65. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

fluence, the sewing machine now signaled only the need to save money.

Under the Table and in the Closet: Hiding the Sewing Machine

It is no coincidence that just when Americans rendered the sewing machine culturally invisible, they were able to render it physically invisible as well, with the drophead model—where the machine head dropped out of sight into a table or cabinet when a hinged leaf was closed (fig. 9). The technology for the drophead had existed as early as 1858, but such machines did not become widely available until the late 1880s; people apparently were not interested in hiding their machines until then. The new dropheads were sold



Fig. 9. Drophead sewing machine (opened and closed). From New Home Sewing Machine Co. trade catalogue, ca. 1900. (Hagley Museum and Library.)

with the older, less expensive box cover styles, which were discontinued in the early twentieth century.³⁴

The possibility that a sewing machine could lose its identity as a machine began to appear as a selling point around 1890. Manufacturers seized the opportunity to use the drophead feature to market their machines—both the more expensive cabinet models as well as the table models—as fine furniture, when the machine head was hidden from sight. Not surprisingly, catalogues never referred to box cover models as fine furniture.

Catalogue copy was explicit in its classifica-

tion. The 1897 Sears catalogue noted: "The head of the machine is closed from view, as it sinks into the stand and is covered by the hinge table, and as shown in the cut, affords a very nice piece of furniture when not in use for sewing, and can be used as a center table, library stand or writing desk." Another table model, when "closed . . . would be an ornament to any room in the house."³⁵

A catalogue for the Household sewing machine dating from around 1890 featured a "Desk Cabinet" model and included illustrations of the model both open and closed. As the manufacturer explained, "The illustration of 'Desk Cabinet Closed,' shows its appearance when not in

³⁴ In Grace Rogers Cooper, *The Sewing Machine: Its Invention and Development* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), p. 109, the author cites a "Quaker City" sewing machine with a drophead dating from 1858; she notes that this model was "ahead of its time."

³⁵ Fred L. Israel, ed., *1897 Sears Roebuck Catalogue* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1968), p. 702.

use, thus enclosing the machine 'head' entirely from view, and forming a compact and elegant piece of furniture." A Singer/Wheeler and Wilson catalogue from 1908 repeated Wheeler and Wilson's earlier claim for drophead cabinet models: "These Cabinets, handsomely finished in antique oak, are beautiful articles of furniture, presenting, when closed, no suggestion of a machine."³⁶ The implication was clear: machines in the home were to be hidden.

It is true that flexibility may have been a factor in these advertising tactics as well. Sewing, after all, was a household task that could be put off, and it was frequently done between other chores. Since many sewing machines therefore stood idle between periods of sewing, the ability to transform them into pieces of furniture when not in use was highly desirable. Yet these advertising ploys go beyond a mere desire to have sewing machines double as furniture. There is a clear implication that the machines are unattractive and also need to have their identity disguised. Advertising materials from earlier decades reveal neither of these impulses.

Manufacturers of the first electric sewing machines took the desire to conceal the machine to its logical extreme: such machines, which appeared on the market around 1917, could be hidden completely because they were portable. With the advent of electrical wiring in American homes in the late nineteenth century, the use of electric motors became feasible. In the 1910s, affordable, electric sewing machine motors became widely available. Marketed under such attention-getting phrases as "Sewing Machine Treadmill Abolished!" these small motors attached to existing treadle machines. The first all-of-a-piece electric sewing machines became available during World War I; even Sears began offering them in the spring 1920 catalogue.³⁷

A major selling point of these portable machines was the fact that they could disappear completely. As cited in a 1917 Western Electric ad: "It is never in the way, for it can be put on the closet-shelf when not in use." In an advertisement from

later that year, a woman is doing just that while the caption cheerfully advises, "Keep it on the closet shelf" (fig. 10). Sears also capitalized on the idea. Its catalogue copy assured that "when not in use the machine may be put in [a] closet or other convenient place." This boast was accompanied by an illustration of a woman tucking the machine away in a closet, next to the family luggage.³⁸ The "Queen of Inventions" of an earlier generation was now relegated to obscurity.

After 1920: The Stigmatized Sewing Machine

By the 1920s, America was characterized by a fully developed consumer economy; the decade was also a watershed in the history of advertising, as the industry reached new heights of creativity and power. The middle-class housewife's job, which previously had been that of producer for her family, had been transformed into that of consumer: a successful homemaker was the woman who bought the right products. These products—including ready-made garments—were made and endorsed by "experts."³⁹

As the new cultural norm in the 1920s, ready-to-wear clothing held an attraction all its own. For example, even though her mother was such an accomplished seamstress that she could copy a dress on sight, young Tennessee millworker Flossie Cole nevertheless wanted "store-bought clothes." Years later, Cole told an interviewer, "I think I bought me some new clothes with the first [pay]check I got. . . . I had a blue dress and black shoes—patent leather, honey, with real high heels—and a blue hat."⁴⁰ Although she could easily have obtained skillfully made home-sewn dresses, Cole wanted a ready-made dress so badly

³⁶ For Western Electric advertisements, see: *LHJ* 34, no. 4 (April 1917): 96; and *LHJ* 34, no. 10 (October 1917): 119. *Sears, Roebuck and Co., Chicago* (Spring 1920), p. 453. Wilmington Institute Free Library, Wilmington, Del.

³⁷ Some histories of housework and household technology are: Strasser, *Never Done*; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Heidi Irmgard Hartmann, "Capitalism and Women's Work in the Home, 1900–1930" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1974); and Joann Vanek, "Time Spent in Housework," *Scientific American* 231, no. 5 (November 1974): 116–20.

⁴⁰ Cole quoted in Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September 1986): 379.

³⁶ The Household Sewing Machine Co., *The "Household" Sewing Machine* [ca. 1890–91], Special Collections, Morris Library, University of Delaware. Singer Sewing Machine Co., *Catalogue of Machines for Family Use* (1908), p. 27, Hagley Museum and Library.

³⁷ On sewing machine motors, see Bissell Motor Co. advertisement, *LHJ* 27, no. 3 (February 1910): 65. The earliest advertisements in *Ladies' Home Journal* for electric sewing machines appeared in 1917. *Sears, Roebuck, and Co., Chicago* (Spring 1920), p. 453. Wilmington Institute Free Library, Wilmington, Del.

The Inspiration of a Woman's Needs Produced this New Kind of a Sewing Machine





Keep it on the closet shelf.



Carry it upstairs or down.



Put it on any kind of a table.



Connect to any light socket.



Take it with you when you travel.

The ordinary foot-power sewing machine is a clumsy affair. You cannot easily move it around, so you must bring your work to it. It is no ornament and takes up a lot of room. The woman who uses it pays dearly in a tired body and tired nerves.

Western Electric Portable Sewing Machine

The heavy unnecessary parts of the old-fashioned machine are eliminated. With motor complete is no larger than a typewriter, yet it has all the attachments and will do the work of any sewing machine.

The speed is controlled by a touch of your foot and you can run the machine for five hours on one and a half cents' worth of electricity. With a Western Electric 2-way Plug you can operate both the machine and a lamp from a single socket at the same time.

If your lighting company or electrical dealer cannot show you this new kind of sewing machine, write to the nearest office for Booklet No. 516-A.P.

Costs Only \$35
(\$37 West of the Rockies)

WESTERN ELECTRIC COMPANY Inc.

Gentlemen:
Please send me Booklet No. 516-A.P., describing your portable electric sewing machine.

WESTERN ELECTRIC COMPANY INCORPORATED

New York Chicago
Kansas City San Francisco

Houses in all Principal Cities

Name _____

Address _____

Fig. 10. Advertisement for Western Electric Portable Sewing Machine. From *Ladies' Home Journal* 34, no. 10 (October 1917): 119. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

that she spent her first paycheck on one and, decades later, even remembered the color of the dress. The dresses Cole's mother made, no matter how attractive, were simply not good enough anymore.

In the emerging consumer society, items made at home began to acquire a stigma. Before ready-made clothing became widely available, most women, whether they were good seamstresses or not, had to sew at least some of their family's garments. Homemade clothing was therefore a common sight, although it may not have been made well. By 1920, however, when ready-made clothing became widely available, home-sewn garments became less common. Unlike home-sewn clothing, ready-made garments were constructed by professionally trained, highly specialized workers; their quality rose as the industry grew. By the early 1920s, the quality of ready-to-wear had improved so much that it became the new standard by which to judge clothing. A *Ladies' Home Journal* fashion writer stated in 1923 that good sewers, with the help of good patterns, could even "equal ready-made . . . frocks."⁴¹ With professionally made clothing as both the standard and the norm by the early 1920s, bad workmanship showed.

The stigma of the homemade garment is referred to often, both directly and indirectly, in *Ladies' Home Journal* fashion columns. In an article on making skirts, columnist Ruth Sill cautioned that the pockets must be sewn on carefully, or else they would have "that everlasting homemade effect." In an article on making coats, Sill encouraged her readers by reminding them that "home tailoring need not look homemade." Perhaps most subtle was the title of a 1923 dressmaking article: "A Dress You'll Wear If You Make It."⁴²

In addition, articles devoted to home dressmaking and pattern descriptions in women's magazines abound with the implication that home dressmakers were not as good as professionals; many emphasized that the featured garments were easy enough for "amateurs" to make at home. Sill described a dress that was "so simple that no problems will confront the home dressmaker." The titles of some of these articles reveal such an attitude: "Here Soft and Graceful Lines

Assure Success to the Home Dressmaker"; "Few Seams Make Easy Sewing"; and "A New Fall Coat and Two Suits That Can Be Made at Home" (fig. 11). *Good Housekeeping* dressmaking columnist Laura I. Baldt featured "gowns which will enrich the wardrobe, and yet are well within the scope of the home sewer's ability to plan and make."⁴³

Even those in the home-sewing industry occasionally referred to the stigma of the homemade garment. In an advertisement for Greist sewing machine attachments that appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1920, the company boasted that with the help of Greist attachments, the items sewn at home "have a 'finished' look instead of a 'home-made' look." The Butterick Publishing Company claimed in a 1923 advertisement that their patterns made the "difference between a costume that is frankly home-made and one that delights you."⁴⁴

The fact that homemade clothing was much less expensive than ready-to-wear added to its stigma. *Ladies' Home Journal* readers were constantly reminded of this fact when they saw dressmaking article titles that proclaimed, "Make These Yourself and Halve the Expense"; "They're Expensive Looking but Cost Little When Made at Home"; and "Make Them and Save Money."⁴⁵ Homemade garments increasingly became a badge of economy: an indication that the wearer needed to save money.

It is clear, then, that once ready-to-wear became America's cultural norm, homemade garments were considered acceptable only if they did not look homemade. Everyone's clothing was expected to look as well designed and well constructed as the ready-made apparel that was now so widely available. As the tool of the amateur seamstress, the sewing machine shared the stigma of the homemade garment in the consumer society of post-World War I America.

⁴³ "Four Popular Frocks That Present No Complications in the Making," *LHJ* 41, no. 6 (June 1924): 69. See "Here Soft and Graceful Lines Assure Success to the Home Dressmaker," *LHJ* 38, no. 4 (April 1921): 72; "Few Seams Make Easy Sewing," *LHJ* 40, no. 4 (April 1923): 65; and "A New Fall Coat and Two Suits That Can Be Made at Home," *LHJ* 38, no. 9 (September 1921): 65. Laura I. Baldt, "The Dressmaking Lesson: Evening Gowns for Formal and Informal Occasions," *Good Housekeeping* 80, no. 1 (January 1925): 62.

⁴⁴ Greist advertisement, *LHJ* 37, no. 10 (October 1920): 125; Butterick Publishing Co. advertisement, *LHJ* 40, no. 5 (May 1923): 88–89.

⁴⁵ "They're Expensive Looking but Cost Little When Made at Home," *LHJ* 39, no. 11 (November 1922): 83; "Make These Yourself and Halve the Expense," *LHJ* 40, no. 8 (August 1923): 50; and "Make Them and Save Money," *LHJ* 42, no. 5 (May 1925): 94.

⁴¹ Ethel Lloyd Patterson, "The Cost of Being Well Dressed," *LHJ* 40, no. 4 (April 1923): 88.

⁴² Ruth Sill, "A Dressmaking Lesson on Sport Skirts," *LHJ* 39, no. 5 (May 1922): 73; Ruth Sill, "How One Makes One's Winter Coat," *LHJ* 40, no. 8 (August 1923): 56; Ruth Sill, "A Dress You'll Wear If You Make It," *LHJ* 40, no. 10 (October 1923): 72.

A New Fall Coat and Two Suits that Can be Made at Home



Exceedingly smart for day-time wear and of a style very much in evidence in Paris at the present time is the coat at the left which, marvelous to relate, is cut in just three pieces. The cape effect is not only a charming touch, but has the practical advantage of also forming the sleeves. Soft gray velours de laine is the material, with flat silk braid in the same shade of gray for trimming. The pattern is No. 3267, and comes in sizes 16, 36, 40 and 44.

*Drawings by
Hanna Klingberg*

3267

(Continued from Page 60)



Another whim of fashion, which is bound to prove inspirational to the woman who is working with patterns, is the chiffon lining in vivid colors. Think a moment how easy this is to attain and how very effective with black, and it's black, black everywhere during daytime hours in fashion's realms, with only here and there a navy blue or brown or dark green by way of breaking the monotony. But all this black must be enlivened, and it's going to be done by the flashes of color, in the pipings, in the braiding, in the facings, in the embroidery, in the buttons and in the chiffon linings.

This chiffon lining you will glimpse as the panels of the skirt fly open at the sides, through the front and back openings of the bodice, for these slashings were never intended to be brought closer together than a ribbon at the neck might hold them. Again the chiffon shows under the arms, when the front and back are formed of squares that are caught together only on each shoulder, and when there's a slashing on the sleeves. In fact there's many a frock made up of these slashings, all outlined in beads or tiny buttons, and such a frock just must have its chiffon lining.

It is oddities like these that count, for it is in the adaptation of the unusual, discreetly applied, that you can win a reputation as an expert in the lore of the modes. All kinds of stitchery, in floss, chenille, ribbonzine, ciré ribbon, appliqués of every color and description; fringe, much of it and long, with chenille as the novelty; braiding, the very fine and the very wide; beading, wooden by day and crystal by night; tiny milliners' folds, and buttons everywhere—here are a few trimming thoughts which you can adopt.

A most attractive suit is the navy bricotine at left, with trimming of narrow rust-colored soutache braid. On the jacket, which is the new finger-tip length, the closely placed braid gives the effect of leather. Coat pattern No. 3269, sizes 16, 36 to 44; skirt 3270, sizes 26 to 34.

3269



3275
3230

Specially designed for home dressmaking, the suit above, while conforming to the latest mode, avoids the severely tailored lines so hard to achieve and has the fewest possible seams. It lends itself to any material, from serge to velvet, with soutache braid or satin bands for trimming. The coat pattern is No. 3275, sizes 16, 36, 40 and 44; skirt 3230, sizes 26 to 32.

For full information concerning pattern sizes and prices, see page 69.

Fig. 11. Column on home dressmaking. From *Ladies' Home Journal* 38, no. 9 (September 1921): 65. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.) It was often implied in such columns that home sewers had limited skills: "Specially designed for home dressmaking," the suit on the right "avoids the severely tailored lines so hard to achieve and has the fewest possible seams."

Table 2. Value of Product, Sewing Machines and Attachments, 1860–1930

Year	Value of product (\$)	Value in constant dollars*
1859	4,255,820	4,255,820
1869	15,847,304	9,662,990
1879	13,863,188	11,552,656
1889	12,823,147	11,552,384
1899	18,309,752	18,309,752
1909	22,510,644	20,651,966
1919	43,694,919	21,108,656
1929	45,094,600	21,997,365

Sources: *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. 8, *Manufactures, General Report and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 418, for 1859 through 1909 figures; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Vol. 8, *Manufactures 1919—General Report and Analytical Tables* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), p. 150, for 1919 figure; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Vol. 2, *Reports by Industries—Manufactures: 1929* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 1175, for 1929 figure.

*Value in constant dollars is equal to the value of sewing machines and attachments produced in each year divided by that year's Composite Consumer Price Index, as calculated by John J. McCusker in "How Much Is That in Real Money? A Historical Price Index for Use As a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 101 (October 1991): 297–373; for the table of McCusker's Composite Consumer Price Index, see pp. 323–32.

Yet, despite the growth of the ready-made clothing industry, women continued to buy sewing machines. According to census figures from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sewing machine industry continued to grow, in value of product, during this period, although growth slowed after 1900 (table 2). Although these figures do include exports, they are nevertheless revealing. Moreover, sales literature of all kinds indicates that domestic sewing machines continued to be widely available during this time period.

Why did many women continue to sew after the advent of ready-to-wear garments? The answer, quite simply, was money: homemade clothing remained the less expensive alternative to ready-made garments. The diarists studied perceived sewing as a cost-saving measure. Although some enjoyed sewing as an outlet for their creativity, the majority tended to buy ready-made garments when they had money but sewed more when money was scarce. As a young woman in New England about to start college and on a tight budget, Gladys Hasty spent the summer of 1921 working all day as a switchboard operator and sewing her school wardrobe at night. The next

summer, however, Hasty's finances were much better, as her aunt had recently passed away and left her some money. Writing in her journal at the end of that summer, Hasty listed several articles that she had just bought ready-made and confessed that she had only "found time to make" one dress. Yet during the previous summer, despite working full-time, Hasty had "found time" to make a good part of her wardrobe.⁴⁶

Ever quick to promote sales despite the stigma of the machine, manufacturers touted thrift as a selling point. In a salesman's pamphlet that offered suggestions on how to sell their electric models, the New Home Sewing Machine Company included a few sample advertisements. One posed the questions, "Can you afford to pay the high prices asked for the simple ready-to-wear garments? Why not make them yourself?"⁴⁷ Manufacturers felt that economy was an effective selling point for potential buyers regardless of class. (Note, by the way, the assumption that home sewers would sew only "simple" garments: even the New Home Sewing Machine Company now saw housewives as amateur seamstresses.) By the 1920s, then, sewing was inextricably linked with the concept of thrift. No longer could the sewing machine function as a status symbol when its use increasingly denoted a need to save money.

During the 1920s, sewing machine manufacturers continued to offer consumers innovative ways to hide their machines. By the middle of the decade, a new electric model appeared on the market. The console table, also known as the library table, hid the machine in a lighter, much more elegant looking case that previously—before electric power had done away with the cumbersome treadle mechanism—had not been possible (figs. 12, 13). Manufacturers portrayed these console table models as fine furniture. As Sears boasted in its 1929–30 catalogue, "Not in the tiniest detail does its duo-purpose cabinet betray the machine within, and visitors need never know it is anything but a smart, fashionable table, unless you tell them differently!"⁴⁸

The new electric sewing machines did not en-

⁴⁶ On creativity, see Penelope Franklin, ed., *Private Pages: Diaries of American Women, 1830s–1970s* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), pp. 424–25. Gladys Hasty Carroll, *To Remember Forever: The Journal of a College Girl, 1922–1923* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 28, 30, 105.

⁴⁷ New Home Sewing Machine Co., *Sales Suggestions: New Home Portable Electric* [1919], n.p., Hagley Museum and Library.

⁴⁸ *Sears Fall and Winter, 1929–30*, p. 785, Wilmington Institute Free Library, Wilmington, Del.



FIG. 73. MACHINE READY FOR USE

Fig. 12. Electric library table model (open). From *A Manual of Family Sewing Machines* (New York: Singer Sewing Machine Co., 1926), p. 47. (Author's collection.)

tirely supplant treadle machines until later in the twentieth century, however. Treadle models (with dropheads) continued to be sold well past the onset of the Great Depression. The audience for electric sewing machines remained rather limited for some time because electricity simply was not available to all Americans at the same time. The high costs of installation initially limited the availability of electricity to wealthy families, and there were geographic restrictions as well. Not until the 1930s, when Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal created the Rural Electrification Administration, did electricity become widely available to rural homes.⁴⁹

The Invisible Machine

Whether treadle or electric, the sewing machine clearly disappeared from American culture, both

⁴⁹ Strasser, *Never Done*, pp. 81–82.



FIG. 74. MACHINE CLOSED

Fig. 13. Electric library table model (closed). From *A Manual of Family Sewing Machines* (New York: Singer Sewing Machine Co., 1926), p. 47. (Author's collection.)

literally and figuratively, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1925 Americans were defining their material environment, and themselves as well, by buying manufactured goods in greater quantities than ever before. Mass-produced, standardized products became the desired norm in this new consumer society, and clothing was no exception. There was no longer a place for the domestic sewing machine—the tool of the home seamstress. Although sewing machines were still a fixture in most homes, Americans felt that they had to hide them beneath drophead cabinets and inside closets. The sewing machine, in a relatively short period of time, had become “invisible” in American culture.