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From Creation to Industrialization: How Sewing Machines
Influenced Women in America

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Abstract

This article discusses the way sewing machines impacted women in America, from their invention in the mid-1800s through cultural industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century. Primary sources, especially newspapers, are utilized to grasp how American culture shaped the way women were expected to interact with sewing machines, both inside the home and out. An internalist history of the sewing machine lays the groundwork for how the machines developed, and a more contextualist view shows how the introduction of sewing machines affected women in American culture, from domestic homemakers to public factory workers.

Introduction

Her hair was wild; she perspired; there were pins between her teeth. You might have thought her machine was a sort of weapon when she put her arms around it and turned it on. That vertical needle was a dangerous, powerful thing, and she had an arsenal of needles in a box—in all sizes, with replacements ready for those that broke.

Dyer, Cognard-Black & Walls 2016

Author Joyce Dyer wrote these sentences about her mother Annabelle who sewed her own clothes as well as her family's, just like thousands of other middle-class American women in the mid-twentieth century. Dyer writes of the hours that turned into days spent watching her mother sew; Annabelle made everything from warm winter coats to elegant evening dresses, and she was often pictured wearing a homemade hat with feathers attached to the side (Dyer, Cognard-Black & Walls, 2016). Dyer notes that reflecting on memories of her mother at her sewing machine brings more to mind than visions of perfect domesticity. While she does remember the smell of the sewing machine oil and the feeling of consistency that her mother provided throughout her childhood, Dyer further considers what her mother's life would have been like had she been born just a generation before. What if she hadn't owned a sewing machine as a way to clothe and provide for her family? What would her mother have been without her Singer? What would history have looked like without sewing machines? Annabelle's story is similar to that of many middle-class women in the mid-twentieth century, and it builds on the legacy woven together over the century prior as sewing machines were patented and marketed across America. Yes, sewing machines allowed women to clothe and provide for their families, but what other parts of the American female identity were shaped through the development of this new technology? Sewing machines became a normal part of life throughout the early twentieth century, and while a domestic approach to life was maintained by much of society, technological advances also provided women with new paths into the working world. The adoption of the sewing machine brought a bittersweet mix of opportunity, loss, and freedom for many middle-class American women, dramatically changing both domestic and public workloads and expectations from invention and patent in the early nineteenth century to widespread commercial marketing and use in the twentieth.

Dyer's mother sewed on a Singer AH369694, built in the late 1940s—probably the same year her daughter was born (Dyer, Cognard-Black & Walls, 2016). The first American patent for the sewing machine had been granted to Elias Howe one century earlier on September 10, 1846, as noted in *Scientific American* in July 1896 in an issue marking the “semi-centennial anniversary of one of the greatest labor-saving devices of modern times” (“The Sewing Machine”, 1896). As with most inventions during the mid-nineteenth century patent boom, many people contributed to the creation of the sewing machine, but lack the credit for it. Elias Howe's name is most commonly attributed to the invention of the sewing machine throughout historical records simply because his machine was the most efficient and well-working. However, *Scientific American* is unique in crediting both Thomas Saint and Walter Hunt with creating versions of the sewing machine prior to Howe's patent and subsequent commercial success with his machine (“The Sewing Machine”, 1896). Writer Karen Ballard discusses the story surrounding the first French sewing machine, created by Barthélemy Thimonnier and patented in 1830. Following his patent, Thimonnier got a contract that allowed him to manufacture French army uniforms in his shop, resulting in a mob destroying his shop and machines out of fear that the new invention would put tailors out of work (Ballard, 2019). The sewing machine exemplifies one of the many inventions that caused tensions regarding patents, inventorship, commercial rights, and cultural consequences.

The Sewing Machine in America

The arrival of the sewing machine in America prompted plenty of commentary throughout the country, both positive and negative. Edwin P. Alexander wrote an article in the *Journal for the Society of Arts* published in April 1863 with the following aims:

Firstly, to trace the origin of the sewing machine; secondly, to explain the leading features of those varieties most generally adopted; and, thirdly, to lay before [the society] a few statistical returns showing the rapid development of the art of machine sewing, and its important bearing upon the social well-being of a large portion of the community (Alexander, 1863).

Alexander finds it surprising that it has taken so long for society to create a machine aiding in sewing and embroidery, and he acknowledges some of the attempts previously made in vain to create a working and efficient sewing machine. He writes about Walter Hunt, the first person to “employ two continuous threads” in his 1835 machine, as well as the different types of stitches utilized in the development of the sewing machine: the shoemaker's

stitch, the running stitch, and the lock stitch, among others (Alexander, 1863). Speaking on Elias Howe, the inventor of the machine that was ultimately patented and whose design is still used today, Alexander writes that he “know[s] of no higher example of patient industry and perseverance... of devotedness to science, than that displayed by Howe in his early career” (Alexander, 1863). Howe pieced together several prior attempts at creating a practical sewing machine to make his own, resulting in a machine that had a curved needle, a baster plate, a shuttle, and the ability to change thread tension depending on the material being sewn. Alexander goes on to divide all sewing machines into two classes, those that use one single thread and those that use two, opining that double-threaded machines are by far superior to single. He notes that the Singer sewing machine was first introduced in America in 1852, and was assumed to be the first machine to use a straight needle in place of a curved one (Alexander, 1863).

Regardless of Edwin Alexander’s rave reviews, the sewing machine itself received its fair share of public criticism before rising to popularity. Machines were originally considered to be large and bulky, hard to understand and use, and inferior to hand-sewing with regard to quality of the seams sewn. The editor of *The North-Carolinian* is quoted in a June 1851 issue stating that “every stitch, instead of taking hold of the cloth, is entirely dependent upon a single thread...this thread may be cut at any point and drawn out...just as if there had been no sewing there! Therefore for durability, I consider the machine sewing not at all comparable to hand sewing.” However, the author of the article goes on to say that “it is so customary to cry ‘humbug’ in regard to anything new,” urging readers to give sewing machines a try for themselves before casting judgment (“The Sewing Machine”, 1851).

As the sewing machine began making its mark in American culture, inventors set off on the race to make and market the most efficient and cheapest version. *The Alexandria Gazette* from February 1853 holds an advertisement for “Avery’s Sewing Machines—price only \$25!! Patented October 19, 1852.” The machine was said to be able to “do the work of more than 20 seamstresses much better in every respect than it can be done by hand,” and the article states that the stitches were “independent of each other,” allowing most of the seams to stay sewn even if one stitch got cut and therefore alleviating one major public complaint of earlier machines (“Avery’s Sewing”, 1853). Singer, the largest machine manufacturer at the time, continued to promote their sewing machines, putting an ad in *The New York Herald* in May 1852 to say that in addition to the eight hundred machines sold in the United States, Singer machines were also being sent to France and London, showing “positive proof of their utility.” The Singer advertisement

states that “it is long past a doubt in the minds of the people that sewing is to be done by machinery,” and that “Singer’s sewing machine stands alone in the perfection of sewing” (Singer’s Sewing, 1852). This competition to create and to sell not only the best, but also the cheapest, sewing machines exemplifies rush by inventors of a new technology to market their products and promote commercial success. This resulted in a concept called “learning by selling” (Thompson, 1987). In his study of the sewing machine, historian Ross Thomson explains how the idea of learning by selling “structures the process of secondary invention”; as an invention becomes more widely known, demonstrated, and utilized, knowledge is deepened about the product, and inventors are pushed to tweak and tinker with their own machines to make them even better (Thompson, 1987). This process was the motor behind the system of American commercial industry throughout the nineteenth century, and the sewing machine was not immune to it.

The Rise of Domesticity

Alongside the technological and commercial revolutions that accompanied the invention of the sewing machine, the nineteenth century also saw the rise of the middle class in America, and with it came a surge of the concept called the “cult of domesticity.” While many women chose to enter the workforce in the larger context of the World War II labor shortages, many others still chose to stay at home and use the sewing machine in a domestic fashion. The sewing machine went from being a luxury in the mid-nineteenth century to “a symbol of a family’s middle-class respectability” in the early twentieth century. One major marketing technique heralded the idea that “the sewing machine was a labor-saving device that would free women from the drudgery of hand sewing and allow them to devote more time to their families and to themselves (Barm and Klepp, 2020).” The invention of the sewing machine cabinet allowed yet another marketing ploy to enter into the domestic world, as companies boasted about their “elaborate and fashionable pieces” that “encas[ed] the sewing machine in a respectable exterior...suitable to the home environment (Connolly, 1999).” The cult of domesticity encompassed the idea that a woman’s place was in the home, and her job was to use a combination of domestic talents and newfound technology to make the home into “a refuge from the world where her husband could escape from the highly competitive, unstable, immoral world of business and industry (Lavender, n.d.)”

While ideas like the cult of domesticity became more common in society, the idea of separate spheres emerged simultaneously in the scientific world, dividing society into male and female domains on the basis of biology. Women were considered to be genetically prone to be more domestic, passive,

and delicate, and therefore confined to the home, while men were aggressive, independent, and tough, so they provided for the family by working. The cult of domesticity was made to thrive even further on concepts like this, as the idea became ingrained into both American society and science that women were intended to remain in the home.

It was in this context that the sewing machine created a sort of cultural and ideological paradox, with middle-class women being considered for the first time able to master technology by working the sewing machine, but at the same time still socially expected to remain confined to the home (Eves et al., n.d.). In the Grover and Baker sewing machine manual published in the late 1850s, the “voice of authority is that of the male machinist or inventor,” and women are taught to use the machine so that their “expertise does not challenge the socially sanctioned view of greater mechanical skill in men” (Durack, 1998). Author and historian Katherine Durack posits that the Grover and Baker manual “clearly reinforces social hierarchies pertaining to masculine and feminine behavior and technological expertise.” This is exemplified specifically in the storyline used throughout the manual in which the wife must solve problems with her sewing machine to prove to her husband that she is capable of using it (Durack, 1998). The husband gives the wife a series of tests she must complete under the guise that he does not understand the technology, and only when she has finished the tasks to his satisfaction does he admit to the circumstances. Durack writes that the statements made by the husband in the manual put emphasis on the “machine’s value in economic terms...and its rewards as enjoyed by the master of the house,” as opposed to focusing on the skills and characteristics of the female operator (Durack, 1998).

The Arizona Republican July 1911 issue included a full article about why women should continue making clothes for their families at home, citing cost of dress-making as a main reason. The article also notes that sewing domestically “prepares the young girls of the house to make...their own clothes,” clearly something that women were still expected to do, even after the factory industry boomed and making clothes at home was no longer a requirement (*Arizona Republican*, 1911). Sewing was certainly a skill that women were expected to know and utilize at the turn of the twentieth century for economic benefit, but the problem emerged when society could not decide whether this skill should be used primarily inside or outside of the home.

The Sewing Machine in the Workplace

Regardless of the spread of domestically-centered beliefs in America, the widespread use of the sewing machine still opened doors for women to

enter the workforce and hold jobs outside the home. Overall, there was an increase of women in the workforce in the late nineteenth century, with just under fifteen percent of the American workforce being female in 1870 and twenty-two percent in 1930, according to the United States Census (Eves et al., n.d.). At the turn of the twentieth century, “textile, garment, and shoe factories were the primary industrial employers of women,” with most of these workers being employed in the New England area (Blackwelder, 1997). Immigration played an important role in shaping the US workforce and economy at this time; many working women were the descendants of immigrants or were immigrants themselves, migrating from all over the world to work in American factory towns like Lowell, Massachusetts, or larger cities like Washington, D.C., and New York City. The workplace therefore became a primary teacher of culture and life lessons to young women as the labor force expanded. “Employment removed young women from the limited horizons of home, church, and school and educated women on a variety of levels,” exposing them to new ideas that they did not get under the watchful eyes of their parents in a domestic setting (Blackwelder, 1997). Women were able to “exchange ideas and news with sister workers who helped shape their attitudes and expectations, perhaps leading them away from the prescriptions inculcated by family” (Blackwelder, 1997). Instead of having their identities fully shaped by their families, local schools, and conservative churches, women gained new ideas and socialized with people from all around the world, and the workplace dramatically shaped the American female identity in the early 1900s.

As industrialization boomed, demand increased for cookie-cutter, mass-manufactured clothes instead of homemade dresses and shirts. The women’s garment industry became more mechanized and systematic, and there was a huge market for “young, unskilled women who did not have their own workplaces” to join the sewing industry (Barm and Klepp, 1984). Few women could afford their own machines to move their work to home, but they also could not afford to revert back to hand-sewing; preference was given to machine operators, and machines were much more time-efficient than hand-sewing at this point (Barm and Klepp, 1984). This increased demand for a large number of garments “created a widespread system of worker oppression,” and many women were forced to work overtime hours for very little pay in less than ideal working conditions (Skinner, 2015). Women were often paid twenty to thirty percent of what male factory workers were paid, and some women were even required to “absorb some of the costs of production overhead by purchasing their own thread, paying ‘rent’ for the use of the machine, or supplying their own heat and light (Barm and Klepp, 1984).”

Miss Ida M. Van Etten, a well-known women's union organizer in the late nineteenth century, discusses at length the issues faced by women in the workforce in an 1890 pamphlet ("Women's Union," 1891). Her publication gives insight into how women themselves felt about the ways sewing machines changed their daily lives and domestic work as well as how women were treated in the working world. Van Etten discusses the terrible conditions that women were subject to when working in "the various trades dependent upon the needle," citing long hours, factory laws, the sweating system, and government workshops as just a few of the problems that needed to be fixed (Van Etten, 1891). This pamphlet was written not even fifty years after Elias Howe received his patent for the sewing machine in the United States, and problems were already very present concerning women and their labor conditions. Union organization became a key facet in bettering these circumstances, but it was not a simple task. Immigrants were coming to the United States from around the world, and it was difficult for them to organize because of "the many nationalities, the large number of workers...and the great numbers of small garment shops." This left many women to buckle down and push through the hard conditions to provide for themselves and their families (Chin, 2015).

Womens Liberation and the Sewing Machine

It came to seem that there was no good place for women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America; factory work meant harsh working conditions and less-than-desirable pay, while domestic life meant being confined to oppressive ideas about what women could and could not do. A few brave women came forth to fight these ideals in the early stages, and one of the most historically well-known is Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Fifty years prior to the turn of the century, Cady Stanton had a goal to "destroy the deeply embedded ascriptive belief in sexual differences and to replace it with the liberal principle of natural rights and equality" (Davis, 2008). She believed that it was male tyranny over women that perpetuated the ideas that women were meant to be in the home and created the image of the homemaker as the perfect wife, and she sought to change that. Although Cady Stanton passed away before women in the workplace became the norm. The ideals she held were revolutionary for her time, and she helped pave the way for more feminist political movements in the twentieth century. The early 1900s saw several court cases arguing that women were physically inferior to men, that work "upset the menstrual cycle," and that women could not work the same number of hours as men. The principle was, and still is, that the government could "interfere with women's lives, because it is public policy to ensure the future of the race" (McElroy and Perry, 2017).

These ideas saw major pushback from women at the turn of the twentieth century, and the efforts to pass the Equal Rights Amendment commenced. The inclusion of the sewing machine as a part of both domestic and industrial life occurred simultaneously with the first wave of the women's liberation and feminist movements, and women were encouraged by their newfound freedoms and identities to fight for more rights; this marked the beginning of a years-long, continuing struggle for equality in both the home and the workplace.

Conclusion

Author Joan Perkin sums it up best in her 2002 article, writing,

For women who made clothes for themselves and their families, the machines liberated them from hours of tedious hand sewing. For the middle class it was possible to have elaborate clothes made by a seamstress in a shorter time, on machines in their homes, and they expected the work to be done more quickly, for less money. For the rich, dressmakers produced the most fashionable garments, a process that often required both machine and hand sewing. (Perkin, 2002)

This information alone sounds like sewing machines were only helpful and not hurtful to women, but Perkin continues her argument, making this key statement: "Sewing machines were not liberating for women who tried to make a living by sewing" (Perkin, 2002). All women faced an identity crisis with the rise of the sewing machine—were they to take the opportunity to enter the workforce and fight through awful conditions and low pay to make a living for themselves, or were they to remain confined to the home and perpetuate the cult of domesticity, often still living in poverty? Women like Joyce's mother show that while it was difficult to do both, it was not impossible for women to retain their fiery spirits while staying at home, with wild hair and perspiring skin, dangerous needles sewing away to provide for their families. However, for women who depended on the sewing machine for their sole livelihood, the machine provided only a sliver of hope that often faded into long hours in garment sweatshops. As with so many technologies throughout American history, the sewing machine was most beneficial those who were already well-off, leaving those who were trying their best to make ends meet hanging on by a thread. Sewing machines and their consequences are irreversibly woven into the female identity throughout history, for better or for worse, and they, along with the quilts and clothes they sew, will continue to be a part of the narrative for generations to come.

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