

Our Heritage—Needle and Thread

These days, face masks hang at the back door beside the car keys, and sewing is suddenly a thing again. Shrieks of joy announce the discovery of packs of quarter-inch elastic in a forgotten closet corner. Quilters share their stashes of bright cotton fabric for the cause. Sewing machines that hadn't been oiled in years have come out of retirement (albeit grumpily in the case of the one I am using.)

Those who still own a working sewing machine, have a stash of supplies, and most importantly, still remember how to sew are suddenly the new "helpers" Mr. Rogers told us to be looking for in our society. Well, I haven't helped hugely so far—I've created two masks, both quite pretty, but with four layers, just marginally breathable. I spend a lot of time watching videos on better ways to make them, and I totally plan to try one of them now that I've persuaded my sewing machine to stop eating up all the thread.

People who have made their peace with a chosen pattern seem to be making them by the hundreds, for themselves, for families, for senior centers and hospitals. It's a wonderful thing, and adds so much variety to people's faces rendered somewhat sterile by the standard surgical mask. (Not that sterile isn't a good thing these days!)

The coronavirus pandemic emerged just in time to preserve the ancient survival skill of sewing. It happened just before the last fabric stash got tossed in the dumpster, the last sewing machine set out at the curb for trash pickup.

And so we are sewing again.

When I was growing up in the white farmhouse on Lucas Creek Road, sewing was just one of the things you learned. It was like sweeping the front porch or snapping green beans or polishing your shoes. There were six girls in our family, and both our mother and our grandmother were often at the sewing machine to keep us in dresses. They sat on the front porch on August afternoons doing the hems and buttonholes by hand.

I begged to try to make a dress myself when I noticed what pretty clothes my big sisters were creating. I started from there and went on to sew for many decades to come. A knitter from little up, I found it a lot of fun also to design and create little dresses for Anje, Ilse, and their dolls. I made skirts for myself, shorts for my son, and even ventured with varying success into banquet and prom dresses for the girls. It was another way to enjoy creativity, sometimes with the added adrenalin of a deadline and the fear your child would think the final product looked homemade!

Knowing how to sew served Mennonite families well because it was hard to find ready-made dresses with the required three-quarter sleeves and lack of undue adornment. There was also the frugal aspect of sewing. Making clothes yourself was always a money-saver, unlike today when you can buy a perfect outfit at a consignment store for less than the price of a paper pattern for the same at JoAnn's.

With a thread and needle, you got another six months wear out of a ripped shirt. If you knew how to darn socks, you didn't throw away a perfectly lovely pair of wool socks because your shoe had rubbed a hole in the heel. Instead of ordering curtains out of the Sears catalog, you got an armload of beautiful material at So-Fro on sale for two yards for a dollar. And that little sun dress for your baby? You could make it out of the scraps from your Sunday dress. For pennies, matching outfits.

The art of sewing was part of the very air we breathed. Even our church had a Sewing Room, ranked along with Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall. The cherry pies and brownies were always laid out in the very room where the décor was dominated by quilting frame, thread, needles, and fabric.

Quietly bearing out the obvious mission of the church, Elaine Smith and many, many others in Homemaker's Fellowship gathered to sew, because their needles and thread could make a difference. (And also because their shared potluck lunch was always scrumptious!) Whether sleeping bags for the homeless, bandage pads for the sick, school bags for the children, or fluffy new baby comforters for beloved newborns, these women understood the power of their skills. They came, they sewed, and they shared.

And so, I will gather up the force of my heritage, and try again to make a few face masks. Because, like Queen Esther, I have been equipped “for such a time as this.”



Sewing Circle members working in 1947, Anna Hertzler, Alta Yoder, Phebe Kraus and Amanda Shenk.

