The Sewing Room in Domestic Economy of Fifty Years Ago.

The sewing room was second to importance to the kitchen in economy of the average American family of the '70's and '80's. This was true in the homes of the self-respecting poor who prided themselves on their balanced budget and even more so in the great mass of the comfortably well off who recognized the source of their comfort, and that would probably last only as long as they looked after the out go as carefully as they did the income.

My family belonged in this latter class. Through all the years that I was growing up to young womanhood the sewing room played a regular part in my activities and my interest, for there we women folks - my Mother, my Sister and myself, were clothed from the skin up. We bought nothing read-made except out hopp skirts, our corsets, and our stockings and shoes, and ocaasionally a ready-made coat.

The sewing room had nothing to do with the men of the family save to keep their garments in repair. They had arrived at the stage where they bought store or ready-made clothes.

The sewing room activities went on the year about. There were always baskets of garments, particularly baskets with willowy white underwear in the sewing room. There were baskets of trimmings, knitted lace, rick rack, fine hemming and tucking underway. These things, the making of our underclothes - long sleeved panties or drawers, long chemise, the two petticoats you always wore, the under skirt, the full long waisted skirt - these were always in preparation for your bureau drawer where these

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things were carefully laid away. They must be kept full. They were graded according to quality and use and time of service. There were the Sunday things and the school things and the worn things to be looked after, the buttons kept on, tears to be looked after, worn places patched. Just so long as they would hold together you were supposed to keep them in service.

Two months after Christmas was particularly devoted to the white goods industry. The prepartion of materials, the renovation and the occasional adding of a new garment went on continuously through the year.

My Mother's sewing basket was devoted to one or another of these products. It seemed to be always beside her, every day except Sunday. Always when she sat down in the evening with the rest of us she picked up her work.

The great moments were when Spring and Fall a dressmaker came and took possession of the sewing room to make the best or Sunday dress which theortically each of us must have, to turn into a second best dress the one which had had a year's service, as well as to make suggestions about repairing and making over old things. She knew our resources as well as we did and was a vital source of suggestion, like when I have heard my Mother say, "Well, I never had thought of that." Then she showed how something was shabby, was about to be discarded, could be made to live longer.

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2-1

The Care, the Careful Administration and Execution of a Well-pointed Factory Department:

There were three of us in our family to be dressed - my Mother, my little sister and myself. We were outfitted twice a year - Spring and Fall according to a schedule which was as fixed as that for the menus of the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner and the Sunday School picnics, the birthday suppers. The most important and the most exciting item of each wardrobe was the best or Sunday dress - one for winter, possibly two for summer - thin and washable. After the best dress was the second best left over from the previous season. Then there was an everyday dress and fourthly an old dress. The everyday dress was often new and of more sturdy material than the best dress. The old dress was the leavings from these predecessors. These gowns were all produced at home according to an established process. Every Spring and Fall by an arrangement of at least six months before there came to the house a so-called dressmaker, her first job being to produce these best dresses. Preparations were made for her like the visit of royalty. For weeks we had each been planning what we were to have for this best dress, looking at the styles in Demerest's Monthly which was our chief text book, choosing our patterns. But most important was the choosing the material. Not from samples - Oh, no. Our favorite dry goods store carried on its shelves a large assortment of wools and silks and poplins and alpacas for winter - of muslins and organdies and lawns and percales and calicos for summer. Again and again we looked them over, discussed them with the clerks, considered their price, and Above all we considered quality for quality in my Mother's moral

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- deceased -

There were three of us in our family to be dressed
before going to church. We were unusually
busy Monday, My little sister and
I were as well occupied as a squirrel with a
nut - Spring and Early Summer was the time
to
for the Sunday School picnics, the biggest event of the year.
Tuesday and the most
exciting time in the week was Wednesday when
the
we first saw the Transient Circus and Carnival
as they
entered the city. Thursday was
for washing, Dorothy two
feat these were the second most
The
Then there was an evening
the
every Friday
Those
deep dress. The
Spring
mouth
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at
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code - I do not say economic. It was more fundamental - it was moral. Quality was the first consideration in buying. If it werewool it must be all wool; if it were silk it must be pure silk; if it were cotton it must be fine, closely woven, the best makes. And so when it came to buying quality was the first consideration. She had a moral objection to imitations or shoddy or slimsy. She was also thoroughly convinced of the sound economy in quality. So that was the basis of this all-important matter of choosing the materials for the coming season's best gowns. The goods must be in the house before the dressmaker arrived. Also there must be all the extraordinary collection of linings, whale bones, stiffening for the bottom of the skirts, variety of threads and silk. And you knew the dressmaker's preference on these important matters and you took care to see they were provided. There were hooks and eyes of two or three sizes; there were packages of pins; there were trimmings. These trimmings took, curiously enough, a large part in the consideration of my new dress. I had what my Mother thought was a rather vulgar taste for bugles, jet trimmings, fancy gimps and braids. All these makings for the new gowns must be in the house when the dressmaker arrived.

As I said she came by an appointment and everybody liked to have her come Monday mornings because she had had a Sunday to sleep or recover from her last place. Her clients were as fixed as the stars and were pretty well classified in our minds. There were some who were called trying, then there were others who were generous and lavish. We aimed never to be trying. There was a limit to our ability to be generous, but we did our best.

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As a matter of fact the fortnight that the dressmaker was in the house, she was the center of the entire establishment. She breakfasted at home, but it was the habit to take her up a hot cup of coffee when she arrived, and prepared for the campaign. She lunched with us and the favorite dishes best she liked/we were very careful to provide. A room of course a sewing room was provided before its head mistress arrived. The sewing machine had been overhauled and well oiled, the proper threads were in the side drawer, innumerable bobbins had been wound for it was a double thread in the right height for the machine our old Wheeler and Wilson. The chair was there, also the sewing chair we knew she liked, and carefully arranged were the makings of the gowns we knew she was to tackle, patterns beside them - everything complete. It was a large back room that we used for there the litter could be kept out of the rest of the house. There were sewing tables; a folding On one side I remember there were frequently two saw horses with large wide boards laid across them and arranged properly to lay out the patterns and cut out the goods. Then came the process of cutting out, basting, fitting. Then the trying on which process was one of excitement and anxiety. I shared a part in all this as I remember. It was I who before school and at noon and after school ran to the store for an extra yard or a spool of number sixty or different size hooks and needles. When it came to the decorations

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(1) Quite as important as ~~being the~~ supplies on hand was being the sewing & dis-machinery ready. The sewing machine

Ans B.

(2) Sewing tables, lap boards, scrap tablets on hand & the chair to know the coming contract ~~[illegible]~~ preferred & come in the place she preferred

and then the momentous day. I liked it to be already

See 2 B

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of these gowns it was varied and laborious. On the summer gowns ruffles and tucking; on the winter gowns tight bands of the same material running round and round the skirt, round and round the jacket if there was one, up and down the skirts of the peplums which we greatly favored in those days. I was not allowed the bugles that I envied often, but I was allowed buttons and buttons took an enormous part in all this sewing fete. They were an endless in variety and of all sorts of materials. They not only contributed to our adornment but they contributed to one of the favorite collecting items for the young of that period. That was the button string. You had buttons from all the family past, from your friends past and present. They grew to enormous length. And one of their charms was to be able to tell where every button came from, what the dress was like, and always my mother had stories to tell of this or that experience in getting out the garments or her friend's experience.

My buttons ran clear back to my grandmother's wardrobe, but at last they disappeared. I would give a great deal for my old button string today.

We not only saved buttons as souvenirs of these exciting Spring and Fall fortnights but we saved pieces, little scraps. After the dressmaker was gone at five o'clock in the afternoon we saw to it she had a cup of tea at four to help her through that last terrible hour when her cheeks generally were flushed and her temper a little bit ragged, after she was gone then

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there came the cleaning up to get ready for the next day. And here I came in stronger than at any other point of the operation. First, the patterns must be very carefully picked up and put aside safely. I was never trusted to fold them up because I was never able to fold them up properly. That was Mother's job unless the dressmaker preferred to do it herself. But I could pick up the pieces and sort them. That was serious business for everything must be saved that could possibly be used. The big pieces left over were carefully rolled up for future re-making of the gown and went into a box called in the "piece box." The scraps even very small down to one by two or something like it were put into Mother's piece bag. These were to be used at her pleasure and according to her choice in carrying on the crazy quilt. She always had one under way and as she was a remarkable needle woman, having been put at it by her firm New England grandmother at three and taught interminable number of stitches, she put these together with an infinite variety of colors and stitches. Every one of these pieces meant something to her - a story - just as every one of my buttons meant something to me. I have now a treasured crazy quilt on my favorite cot in the country a padded crazy quilt that looking over brings back into my very often as the little scraps raise a picture of one of Mother's favorite gowns, or one of my own or my little sisters.

When all the pieces that might be useful for a future renovation of the gown or for the crazy quilt had been carefully put aside - I might say that these pieces were often exhhanged with friends who also carried on this same sort of quilt manufacturing. - so it was not only the family but the neighbors

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and friends that were represented in the crazy quilt just as they were on my button string. - then we got down to the most trying and most uninteresting part of the litter and that was the bastings and the lint - the tiny bits of everything connected - all of these had to picked up carefully. No vaccum cleaners remember. And they were put into what was called the trash barrel which stood in the woodshed. Then we swept up the dust and put it in the stove, arranged the chairs and tables properly and were already for the next morning.

Afterall of this carefully planned and admirably executed scheme for producing the best gowns by the best dressmaker we could afford there was both an ethical and economic side. All of this careful arrangement and study of quality and durability were in my Mother's mind moral. She had the same objection to half wool, thin silks, that she had to lying. She didn't call it wicked, she called it vulgar. My father had a stern economic attitude ~~towards~~ in the matter. Nothing must be wasted. "It was throwing away money," he said, "robbing somebody. Money badly spent took bread out of somebody's mouth."

So the piece box and the crazy quilt and the trash barrel. After the best gowns were done then the dressmaker ~~carefully~~ called for what was called the second best. If she had the time she would put them into shape herself according to her ideas, if not she would give careful directions to Mother/how as to the sewing woman might reburish so it would look as she said "as good as new." I always loved my second best dress. A new dress bothered me and does to this day. But the second dress -

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you didn't have to be so careful of it. You were acquainted with it, you knew just how to get it on and off and felt at home in it. So I took a great interest in the refurbishing of my second dress. Mother, too, made suggestions about the dress. She might cut it out if there was to be new one. The sewing woman came not for a regular campaign but for a day now and then. Possibly if we were in a tight place for two weeks, but she of course had none of the importance of the dressmaker. When all these gowns were done there was the question of taking care of them. I do not remember that in those days we had such a thing as a coat hanger. A coat hanger even now is a kind of luxury to me, like the electric light. I never can get over having an abundance of them hanging on poles, for we had no poles in our day - we had hooks, three pronged hooks. And on the seams under the arms were loops and you were supposed to hang your gown carefully on two adjoining hooks so that it hung properly. And woe be the day if the best dress was found hanging by one loop or the second best for that matter. I always thought of the second best because I treasured it so. I might as well confess that I did not mind if the old dress was lying on the floor.

Now beside this important Spring and Fall campaign there went on in the household the steady making of all the garments beneath the gowns carried on largely by my Mother, helped out by the sewing woman occasionally. For the winter by the '70's I was wearing high necks, long sleeves, long legged, pure wool home-made combination suits. They had to be well fitted, and Mother didn't think those that were beginning to come into our market, (for the outside factory world was beginning its invasion of the home) she

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didn't think they fitted properly. So these were made with the help of the seamstress. Over them were worn cotton drawers, pantie we called them, which came down below the knees, sometimes open, sometimes and more often banded in below the knees. They were buttoned around the waist. Over this what would seem today like a very high necked chemise. There was the same care taken about the quality of your best undies as there was about the quality of your best gown and according to Mother there must never be any imitation lace or adornment on these things. She hated imitation lace as she hated a lie and she made herself beautiful lace, made Tonson, hemmed and tucked ruffles for the botton of drawers and chemises - fine little ruffles, miles of them. But the factory got the best of her finally, and she began in the multitude of duties that the complication of life was bringing to buy ready-made ruffling and machine tucking. I am not sure but that she prayed God to forgive her for this concession to the new world. At any rate she would always sigh, and until the day of her death would talk of the difference of the hand-made and the machine-made things.

I never achieved lace knitting or knitting of any kind for that matter, but I could make rick-rack and I made it for my undergarments - yards of it - which was set in. I liked the set in effect and did not ask that there should be an edging of lace. Over these underthings we wore petticoats and skirts. For every day I had a red flannel petticoat, for Sunday a white flannel embroidered petticoat, that is in the winter. And over that in winter some kind of warm colored petticoat. In the Summer tucked and frilled white petticoats. All these things were laundered at home carefully and xxxxxxx you must keep them folded properly

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in the drawer, take care of them. Every week ~~this mending was done~~ when these garments came off the ironing board they were looked over for lost buttons ~~and the button must be put on at once.~~ if ~~there were~~ tears ~~they must be darned~~, stockings were mended, - heavy woolen stockings for winter sometimes of Mother's beautiful knitting - cotton stockings for summer, black or white according to the occasion.

I had never heard of the silk stocking in those days, but we did have a fine lyle thread, a really beautiful thing, that you kept for Sunday in summer. Our boots buttoned up. The Congress gaiter belonged to my childhood - I hated it - but a button boot was a thing of pride, and I ~~was~~ was wearing them when I went to college. Frequently they had clothtops but the fine calf's leather was if I make no mistake my favorite.

So we were outfitted with ~~this~~ pain and thought and care. And what did we do with our wardrobe? ~~How did we use it?~~ The common name for that best dress suggests the most important function for which we dressed and that was going to Church. Going and coming to Church up the main street in our town of Titusville, Pa. where I lived had all the features of the Fifth Avenue Parade in New York City today. Essentially it was the same thing and if there was nobody to take pictures of our regalia as they do in these days you were sure there were plenty of people in that parade who ~~came~~ ~~were after you dressed the church~~ and surreptitiously out of the corner of your eye looked to see how Jennie's new basque was made or the trimmings on her hat. The hat was important. You did not choose from a multitude of them as you do now. There were models in the milliner shop and you chose your shape and chose your trimmings so that you really

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had a part in the making of your hat. The tragedy of these Spring and Sunday dress parades was when you met on the street somebody who had a gown made like yours ~~or made~~ out of the same material or a hat that looked ~~like~~ was a duplicate - that was tragedy.

As soon as you got home you took off your Sunday dress ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~, hung it up properly, perhaps put a cover over it, put on your second best dress which you were to wear all Sunday afternoon - generally a quiet afternoon. We were not supposed to run about on Sunday, the horse never came out of the stable. We might perhaps go out for a little walk and make a proper call on a sick/or troubled neighbor but we came home decorously and went to Church in the evening in the second best gown and very probably dreamed about our next season's wardrobe.

I do not suppose the preachers of that day ever knew what a rival to their sermons the fashion magazines and the dressmakers were. There were occasional parties of course and there were ways of dressing up the best dress for the party. One of my favorites was the fichu - a soft material put around my shoulders, ruffled, the high neck of my dress turned in just a little - very discreet.- coming down to the waist line, put around the waist and tied in a big flat bow behind. I loved them long and very, very soft and I never wanted anything but the tiny ruffles on them. The fichu was one of the garments of this period that I remember wearing with the most pleasure. It was with a wardrobe/something of this gathered and made in fashion that I went to college in 1876. It was very bold to go to a man's college in 1876, not entirely respectable as some stern people said, but my Mother and Father

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backed me up. I know my wardrobe was prepared in about the way I have told and its items were of this sort. The only thing I remember of that wardrobe was my every day dress, the one that I wore to college. It was long, down to my instep in front, with a tiny train. It was made of black alpaca. It had a tightly fitted redin-gote and on the redin-gote at the dressmaker had been allowed to put buttons. They were large white pearl buttons, not with eyelets but with hooks. They began at the neck, ran down to the shoulder, ran down the sides for the peplum was fitted in and hooked at the side, down the side to the bottom of the skirt. There were forty eight of them and about the size of a twenty five cent piece. I loved that garment. Of course it fitted tight; it had stiffening around the bottom of the skirt for by this time I had laid aside hoop skirts. I came in the full round hoop skirt period, saw it gradually become a half hoop, the straps across the front, saw the hoop grow shorter and shorter until finally it became a bustle. By the time I went to college I was wearing a bustle and also I am ashamed to say a pad to help out the fullness in the corset. I was still wearing a boned corset, but I began very early to lay those aside for the Jenni waist. This was a part of the woman's rights movement, the putting away of the corset for the waist.

The first bit of provocative coquettishness in the matter of dress that I remember was connected with this black alpaca with the pearl buttons. I wore it over a scarlet felt skirt, scalloped in black silk with a black embroidery above.

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am not sure whether this was real embroidery ~~xxxxxxx~~ or whether it was pressed. I have a vague notion that it was pressed, although I cannot quite see how ~~it~~ that was reconciled with my Motheris conscience. But at any rate it was a fetching petticoat almost down to my heels. Of course with a little training on sidewalks and streets of the campus not too well cared for the ~~skirt~~ with the little train had to be lifted and ~~it was~~ lifted with great care by me so as to show the scarlet petticoat. ~~It was my first sense of the provocative in dress.~~ Another item I remember about this college wardrobe was my favorite hat. ~~There were only two or three hats in my career that I remember.~~ This walking hat - always a favorite of mine - was a plain velvet and ~~felt combined,~~ and around it crossing in the back and brought down around my neck and tied in a big flat bow under my chin I wore a long narrow black lace veil ~~etched~~ with real ~~Torcon black~~ lace. It was a sturdy scarf bought for quality -a long-lived one and I never felt grander than when I had it properly fixed and that bow properly tied under my chin. I ~~don't~~ remember coats, except one black velvet which I had a little earlier. I had no idea what I wore for coats in college, but I do remember my shawl. It went along with the black redingote and the red skirt - a large plaid, black and red of the finest wool. How I loved it. It lasted for years until it got thinner and thinner, and more and more faded. I suspect that some scoffing member of my household finally used it for a dusting rag, but I know if I had had my way it would still be ~~laid away~~ among my treasures.

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12-A

Article:

Perhaps the most picturesque, comical fashion episode in the 19th Century, one worthy of development, is the rise and fall of the hoop skirt. When I was a little girl I wore the round hoop down to the bottom of my skirt which stopped at the shoe top. All the women about save when in the kitchen wore a hoop which must have been always as much as six feet in diameter. In the case of grand ladies this great bell-shaped arrangement had begun to give away to the restless passion of fashion for change. But also dress reforms played a big part. The growing body of women seeking rights were realizing more and more that a woman who squeezed their waist and carried a huge bell below should be taken seriously. Dress reforms attacked the tight corset, the hopp skirt and the hoop skirt yielded. It became a half of its old self. You looked exactly like a pear that had been cut horizontally down the middle, flat in front, bulging the bottom of the skirt behind. But gradually this gave away. The bell became shorter and shorter and finally by the time I was ready to go to college in 1876 it had dwindled to what we called a bustle, and arrangement for making a little shelf at the waist line behind. The skirt was kept out not only by its lining which every skirt had to have, but by a stiff twelve or fourteen inch support of crinoline around the bottom. This was the construction on which my gowns were built when in my nineteenth year I went to college.

With the passing of the hoop went the passing of the tight waist. It embodied the natural line. The corset gave away to me at least to what was known as a Ferris waist - no bones, a steel support down the front which gradually was discarded.

See 12 B

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What impresses me as I think of the way we dressed is that we got so much more fun out of it than I see anybody getting now out of their wardrobe, certainly much more than I do. It was work - yes, of course, but the beauty of it was at least in our household it was considered so worthwhile and it was carried out according to plan and according to principle. All of this was done with a high sense of quality, the virtue in quality and our rigorous sense of the virue of economy, the sin of waste. "Waste," my mother said, "was vulgar." "Waste," my Father said, "was wrong." "You are robbing the poor."

And so all of this care in making, in carrying on the garments from one generation to another, and when finally the old dress is to be discarded because you did not need it then you remembered somebody who didn't have as good a dress as that, and you put it into order and pressed it out and gave it to the person and then you watched them to see how they used it and if you saw that they didn't take care of it you were very liable to say, "Well, I'll never give her another." It was a lack of respect for the thing which you had so long respected.

I haven't mentioned the rag bag which always year in and year out played an important part in our garment industry. Into the rag bag went lining, too much worn to be longer useful, old cotton garments that couldn't be used any longer, pieces of woolen material, pieces of warn out heavy garments including the suits of my brother and father. This rag bag quarterly was cleaned out

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and its contents properly appropriated. The cotton if good enough was cut up and made into dusting rags. The important thing were the wool pieces. As I think back of this incessant sewing activity of my mothers I see how intelligently she arranged the different kinds of work to relieve her. When she didn't want to knit lace she could hem; if she didn't want to hem she could embroider, if she didn't want to embroider she could sew rags. I do not remember ever having seen her braid them and make rugs. They were sent away to make strips of rag carpet. The leavings in the rag bag were put into the trash barrel and when the trash barrel was full it was taken out and put on a pile in the middle of the garden, a pile which corresponded to a heap but at least everything went into that. Father worked a great deal in his garden, morning and night, and when he was ready to burn up the trash it was always an event. It was always something to watch. I sat on the back steps and watched all this trash which had been playing so much a part in my life for a season burning along with other rubbish. It went up bluish white with sparks running up through it, went on up and up growing thinner and thinner and finally disappearing. And then the remnants of that trash were carefully raked into the soil - nothing lost. "Nothing lost", I said to myself, "but the smoke. But what became of the smoke? I always wondered. And perhaps that wondering after all was one of the valuable elements in this closely knit scheme of economy, at least there is nothing I remember better than watching my father burning trash and the last remnant of the smoke from the pile disappearing into the blue.

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