

Knitting - It's Fun

I was probably about three years old when I became fascinated watching my grandmother work with her hands making all sorts of wonderful objects that I admired immensely. The tatting she did, probably for my about-to-be baby brother, interested me, but something about the smallness of the shuttle made tatting less than fascinating. The speed with which her hands moved and the sharpness of the shuttle's points kept the operation from being attractive to me. When she picked up a crochet hook or knitting needles, I immediately got really interested, not only in the implement but also in the soft product which grew from the ends of those magic needles. The nail on the end of her right-hand index finger was missing, a fact which initially attracted me to the motions her fingers made in holding the needles. I loved to watch her agile fingers manipulate the thread. I must have spent hours watching her and getting her to talk about the things she was making.

Once I remember getting some toothpicks and string and trying to imitate her motions. The thread wouldn't stick to the needles or cooperate the way it should. When I asked questions about what she was doing, she would patiently explain some of the mechanics involved and would try to help my stubby fingers make some of the correct movements. Patient as she was, I wasn't, and we both decided that the time was not yet right for me to learn to knit. She assured me that that would come some day soon. And I impatiently believed her.

Once when she was away for a time, visiting with other relatives, I found a piece of her discarded work and tried to duplicate the motions I had watched so carefully. Much to my delight I was able to make a few stitches that were almost right, even though I thoroughly messed up the work she was doing. Here is where I turned patient, probably for the first time in my life. I kept on poking the needles into the loops of thread and frequently had a bit of success. Again, my surprising latent patience took over and I continued to stick needles into holes and wrap thread around the needle end, achieving something like what I strived for. One day at a store, I found a magazine article with graphic illustrations of how to get the yarn onto the needle in the accepted casting on process. It was a signal day in my life, for now I could start my own knitting and practice until it looked like real knitting, with only an occasional gaping hole. Before long I could knit straight pieces without too many conspicuous mistakes.

Those were the good old days when, with permission, I could take my school street-car card and travel alone to Sanger Brothers Department Store at the far end of Elm Street downtown. At Sangers on the fourth floor in the knitting department, I could look at the knitting pattern books and watch the instructors working with women who were struggling to produce the hand knitting which had become popular about that time. I saved enough of my allowance to purchase enough yarn to make a sweater. With encouragement from the instructors and from Mother at home, I was able to make my first sweater. It fit; it was beautiful. And I was off and running. When a friend of Mother saw a skirt and sweater I had made, she asked me if I would knit her a suit if she bought the yarn. I was ecstatic, for my allowance was woefully inadequate to keep me in the amount of yarn my fingers yearned for. That, my first real job, was successful, and other of Mother's friends asked me to knit for them; they began purchasing the yarn AND paying me as much as ten or fifteen dollars to do the knitting. I was sadly underpaid for the amount of time I spent on it, but I enjoyed what I was doing and soon had enough money to buy the yarn to make MY first knitted suit, which I

proudly wore for a special occasion at school. It was made of a plain blue cotton yarn, but, in my eyes, it was the most beautiful dress I'd ever had.

My days hardly had enough hours for me to do all the knitting I wanted to do. I still had school to attend and homework to do, but I learned I could get a great deal of knitting done on the long street-car/bus commute to and from school. For years I didn't have to worry about what to give family and close friends for birthday and Christmas gifts -- something knitted, of course. When WWII came along, I knitted dozens of socks for GIs and sailors. Along the way I discovered the interesting demands of knitting Argyle socks. Those, too, I was able to knit on the street car or even in the movie. When I found a date who didn't object to my knitting in the movie with him, I knew I had found someone even better than my knitting. And he's still putting up with my knitting wherever we happen to be.

Arthritis sadly came along and made knitting no fun, but I was able to substitute knitting by machine, producing some quite satisfactory clothes. But the machine is not nearly so satisfying as the hands. Now I'm cautiously beginning hand knitting again with the hope that the arthritis will allow it. It can be such fun!



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Knitting

I had a special relationship with my grandmother. To begin with, I was the first-born of her youngest child, her only daughter. Then, when I was trying to learn to call her “Grandmother” my first attempts produced “Mamie,” a name she liked. However, except for my siblings, she would not let any other grandchild call her that. She came to us for long visits, and I spent a lot of time with her.



Mamie with Mary Frances

Just one of the many aspects of our relationship was my fascination with watching her knit. She did other handwork such as crocheting and tatting, but I really preferred watching her blunt, strong fingers flashing back and forth as she manipulated the knitting needles and yarn, turning it into lengths of flat pieces that could become various edgings for table cloths, dressing table doilies and various other trims. She frequently fashioned number fifty gauge sewing thread into yards of edging for pillowcases, using sharpened bicycle spokes because she couldn't find regular knitting needles fine enough for the thread. Sometimes she would use five shortened bicycle spokes, sharpened on each end, to knit from the same cotton thread the gardening gloves she always wore to protect her hands. Despite a lifetime of gardening and housework, she had lovely, smooth, soft hands. The thread she used was so fine, the needles so slender, and her hands so fast that I didn't dare blink my eyes or turn away for a second because I'd lose some of the continuity of her knitting. She knitted other things using standard knitting needles, usually white bone which became slightly bowed to conform to her rapidly moving hands, but I don't remember her ever knitting a sweater.

I was about three, an age I can verify by the room in which we were working, when I began begging her to teach me to knit. My short fingers were woefully uncoordinated for that task, but my ambition persisted. She had infinite patience in teaching me to read but found trying to guide my stubby fingers irksome. If she put the first stitches on the needles, I was able to manipulate the thread and the needles by the time I was six or seven. But I wasn't satisfied that I really knew how to knit.



When Mamie was not staying with us, I used to work with odds and ends of thread to try to knit, but I couldn't really get started. Once I found a book which described how to "cast on," that is, put the initial stitches on the needles. Then I was able to laboriously work out my own method of wielding the needles, combining Mamie's hands-on-top-of-the-needles style with the European style of hands-beneath-the-needles I'd seen a neighbor use. In such a way, I developed my own style, ending up with my left hand on top of the needle and my right hand below the needle, my forefinger guiding the yarn back and forth over the left-hand needle. It's the style I still use.

With a couple of knitting magazines, I was able to learn how to knit and put together the back, front and sleeves of a sweater. When I was twelve, one of Mother's friends asked me to knit her a suit in the boucle yarn which was then very popular. I was ecstatic about such commission, even though she only bought the yarn and paid me nothing for my work. Boucle is a hard, twisted yarn with slubbed irregularities and a lustrous sheen. I quickly discovered that my method of feeding the yarn over my right forefinger abraded the cuticle, which messed up the yarn by bleeding onto it. I was so intent on my wonderful task that I taped the sore spots and continued knitting. In a few days, my finger had toughened so that I no longer stained the yarn. Thanks to the help I had from a knitting instructor at Sanger Brothers knitting department, the suit, a lovely royal blue, fit Mrs. Mathews perfectly. She was almost as happy with the finished garment as I was.

During my high school years, I knitted mostly sweaters, supplying my family with warm cardigans and pullovers. For my special Senior Day outfit, I found some Delft blue cotton yarn and knitted a skirt and blouse. I was sure that I was the most stylishly clad senior girl at Woodrow Wilson High School on "our" day.



By the time I started to college, I had knitted so much that I was able to knit most patterns without constantly looking at my work; uncomplicated patterns I only had to glance at occasionally. I frequently used my hour-long commute to S.M.U. by knitting on the streetcar or bus. Knitting left me free to talk to friends or review my lessons for the day. Occasionally, I would walk home from S.M.U. with Paul, knitting and talking the whole five miles, although usually it was more fun to hold hands.

After the country became involved in war preparations, I did knitting for the Red Cross, making helmets and sweaters, but mostly socks. Turning the heels in socks was a challenge for a time, but soon I became adept enough that the knitting lady at the Red Cross would ask me to rip out and re-knit some of the botched socks they got from earnest but inept volunteer knitters. Paul occasionally mentions today the shock he received when I knitted socks at the movies or while watching the service station attendant work on the car, back in the days before self-service. I guess I let the constant motion of knitting dominate my life for a while. But, thanks to my Red Cross experience, I was able to move easily to civilian sock-knitting and turned out many Argyle socks for Paul and relatives.

After the war, I continued my knitting, enjoying the many specialty yarns which became available, such as gorgeous washable wools and acrylics. I enjoyed the finished products of tweedy or slubbed yarns because they lent such varied textures to the knitted cloth. I was attracted to the more complicated patterns which became available as hand-knitted garments became more stylish. I tried but found that I was not patient enough to make up my own fancy patterns. In fact, I still delight more in a uniformly knitted plain sweater than in some of the more elaborate patterns. The exception is that I do enjoy the many variations one can achieve with cable knitting, from a simple twisted rope to all-over apparently woven cables.

Unfortunately, arthritis has made hand knitting less than a pleasure. But Paul encouraged me to investigate knitting machines. They are wonderful, ingenious inventions which can produce in a short time knitted garments which look hand knitted. However, there is still a vast amount of hand

work that goes into machine knitting – manipulating the needles to achieve the shapes needed in a fitted garment as well as to obtain various textures and patterns. In addition, it's necessary to sew all the seams by hand and laboriously tuck in all the loose thread ends. As a matter of fact, I have a tempestuous relationship with my knitting machine that can result in pride in my products but that does sometimes frustrate me into giving up for a time. Like a computer, a knitting machine is perfectly literal in the way it interprets instruction. Frequently, I'd like the machine to read my mind instead of doing precisely what I say to do, instructions which lead to a mess of unraveling stitches on the floor or to a tangled knot on the machine.

The red two-piece suit that I have written about is a good example. I learned a great deal about the machine in the process of having to start over several times. I solved the intricacies of making the blouse with saddle shoulders, a matter of considerable satisfaction. But I'm not entirely happy with the suit. It was the first major knitting I did on the machine, but I do not find wearing it an unmixed joy. The red color has something to do with my ambivalence about that dress, so it's not entirely the fault of the machine. The yarn is tightly twisted like boucle yarn; I'd certainly hate to think of the wear on my index finger if I'd hand knitted it; in fact, I would not consider knitting it by hand today. But the sleeves are too long, as is the skirt by now. Those are both easily corrected: a few minutes of ripping and a slightly longer time devoted to restoring the stitches to the many needles on the machine is all I really need to do on the machine. There would still remain the hand-stitching of the seams and the tucking away of all the loose threads, and the skirt and blouse would be ready to wear without obvious flaw. Maybe someday I'll try to redeem the dress. At least the style won't date it.

In the meantime, I have taught my granddaughters to knit, more or less successfully. Actually, they're not ready to spend the time to complete a whole sweater, so the lure of knitting hasn't affected them yet. I suspect that I can probably beguile them into using the knitting machine to make their first sweaters, but neither girl seems to have the patience to finish a hand-knitted sweater. I guess it was different when there was no television, soccer, ballet, Girl Scouts or other distractions when I was their age.