

11-20-96

Sewing

I'm interested in most things which involve the hands: playing a Chopin Etude on the piano, drawing a still life of a vase, an orange, and an apple in charcoal, crafting a ring of silver, knitting a scarf, making a cotton blouse. My earliest memories of hands making something involve my grandmother's crocheting a lace edging for a pillowcase or embroidering the hardanger lace decoration on a tablecloth. I recall watching Mother cut out and sew a cotton dress for me or my sister. I spent endless hours watching her fashioning a three-dimensional garment from a two-dimensional piece of cloth with the help of a paper pattern, a pair of sharp scissors, a host of straight pins, a spool of thread, and an electric sewing machine. I didn't enjoy standing still while she turned up and pinned the hem for the almost-completed dress, but I found fascinating all the rest of the process, even the whipping in of the hem so that the stitches were scarcely visible on the right side of the skirt.

My own first efforts involved scraps of fabric from Mother's sewing. Over a long period of time, I watched her movements and experimented with my own developing small muscles until I was able to make almost-satisfactory dresses for my family of celluloid dolls. The results were far from satisfactory, but my efforts improved so that, when I was about fifteen, I was able to copy most of my three-year-old sister's dresses for her fifteen-inch jointed doll as a Christmas present for her. Those small dresses stand out as one of the most satisfactory, for me, Christmas presents I've ever done.

Mother continued to sew for me and my sisters and I continued to watch without ever doing any active sewing myself. After Paul and I were married and living in Takoma Park, Maryland, I began my first unsupervised attempt at sewing for a real person. Again, it was for my younger sister Ruth that I sewed -- a real dress, this time for her birthday. I bought a Simplicity pattern, the indicated yardage of a light cotton cloth with tiny yellow, pink, and blue stripes, some white pique for the collar and cuffs, thread, needles, and pins. I had not watched Mother in vain; the cutting and assembling of the pieces of the dress seemed to be a natural maneuver to me. Never mind the absence of a sewing machine, I simply sewed all the seams by hand, backstitching all the way for security. I was really pleased with the result. Years later Mother told me that she had had to alter the dress for Ruth to wear and had almost given up the task because of the securely back-stitched seams. But, by that time, I had made enough of my own clothes that I was not daunted.

Soon after the war was over, I got a sewing machine and began to make most of my clothes. In fact, during the early years when the boys were little, I made a good many of their pants and shirts and virtually all of my clothes. Before long I stopped the tedious work of putting short zippers into size four to seven pants and specialized in making my own clothes. I especially enjoyed making my suits and coats. After taking a tailoring course, I took great pride in the professional appearance of my suits and overcoats; the smoothly fitted shoulder, the careful curve of the lapel, and the soft drape of the lining were endlessly rewarding, not to mention the small cost of the clothes. In fact, I found those garments more rewarding to make than blouses and skirts.

For a long time, I found that I was too critical of the inside appearance of ready-made clothes, such things as skimpy seams and poorly finished buttonholes, but decreasing time for sewing led me to moderate my standards. In recent years I've sewed very few things, although every summer I've helped my granddaughters make a garment of their choice while they visit us.

This fall I took a hard look at my winter clothes, especially my everyday skirts. They're so tired looking that I began looking for ready-to-wear skirts. I guess I've let fashion pass me by, for I have not been able to find a single skirt that didn't dissatisfy me as to fabric, color, length, or style. I could have compromised on some of those features, but I reluctantly decided that I must return to being my own tailor. A skirt pattern was easy to find, for I knew I could always lengthen the above-the-knee or to-the-ankle lengths. My favorite fabric stores have closed, but I found several bolts of cloth I liked at one of the few stores that have survived. I chose a paisley knit, a green and white stripe, and a men's wear black and gray wool. So, I'm back in the home sewing business.

Yardgoods is so much more expensive than it used to be that there is no longer a big saving in making your own. I'll sew when I have to and be glad when I find off-the-rack clothes that serve me well.