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Socks

When I was a child, I used to look forward to springtime so that I could change from long, ankle-length underwear and long white cotton stockings to knee socks. I don't remember exactly when ankle socks entered my life, but I suspect they came along soon after long underwear was no longer a fixed winter routine. I do remember that stockings and socks had sizes which were roughly coordinated with, but not the same as, the size of our shoes. The convenience of one-size-fits-almost-all did not arrive until the forties.

Actually, once I was freed from the tyranny of trying to make long underwear stay smooth under the long stockings, I was not much concerned with socks until Paul and I were married and I launched myself into a long career as sock washer. Men's socks in the early forties were not color fast. As a bride I had to learn how to operate a clothes-washing machine in the sooty basement of our apartment house. There were two deep, square-ish washtubs next to the washer, which had no wringer. I remember a few times when Paul was free to help with the chore of wringing heavy sheets. But most of the time, he was working and I would wring the wet clothes by hand from the washing machine tub and dump them into a tub with the first rinse water, repeat the wringing process to transfer the clothes to the second rinse water, finally wringing them to hang on the basement clothes lines. Our apartment did not have any provision for drying the clothes outside. I found the hanging up process easy except for the bed sheets which I had to learn how to fold without letting them touch the always sooty basement floor: one brush against the floor made it necessary to wash that sheet again.

What with my concern about the sheets, I sometimes failed to be sure that the first wash load contained only white clothes. Not only was that the prescribed way of doing laundry, but I quickly discovered that any socks washed with the whites would turn the whole load some shade of whatever color the socks were. I seem to remember that most of Paul's socks were blue. He wore a clean white shirt every day; a blue shirt did not fit the uniform! Not only that, intensive scrubbing had to take place in order to remove the blue tint of the sheets and shirts. I was a slow learner about the necessity of scrupulous separation of whites and colors. But learn I did, so well that today, I can't help being horrified when a blue or black sock turns up with the white wash as I move it from the washer into the drier, even though today all those dye lots are quite safe in any wash water.

When we lived in Chapel Hill where I taught full time, we patronized the University laundry, which had the reputation of pulling buttons off shirts and firing them through the toes of socks. Actually, even when I did the laundry, washing socks was a comparatively minor matter. The big job was darning the socks during those days of war time shortages, skimpy paydays, and cotton and woolen heels and toes that wore through with alarming frequency. I slowly perfected my darning techniques so that the darns were comfortable and did not produce blisters on tender feet. I became quite proud of my darning which almost, but not quite, defied detection. After selecting a darning cotton as close as possible to the color of the sock, I would take tiny stitches close to the edge of the perimeter of the hole, using a darning egg to expose the hole without distorting its shape. Then

came the part of darning that I learned to enjoy: running closely parallel threads in lines from side to side of the hole, followed by weaving back and forth in a perpendicular fashion through the parallel threads until the hole disappeared into a neat hand-woven area, the exact shape of the original hole. Because the weave was different from the fabric of the knitted sock, it could be seen, but, if properly done, could not be *felt* by the sock wearer.

I was proud of my darns, most of the time, but they became routine and ultimately boring as I found housekeeping activities more and more time consuming in a busy life. The advent of nylon and other synthetic yarns not only made stretchable socks which would accommodate a variety of foot sizes, but the new fibers had several other advantages. The colors were fast and would not bleed into lighter colored clothes when they were washed together. The synthetic yarns wore well and seldom presented holes. No more darning. Not only that, automatic washing machines and automatic driers make laundry day a dream in comparison to earlier days. I'm surprised to admit that today doing laundry is one of my favorite chores.

I take pleasure in remembering the "good old days," but I find even greater pleasure in *remembering* rather than doing the time-consuming activities of keeping a spouse clad in comfortable, clean socks. *These* are the good old days!