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Sewing and Dressmaking in Martha McMillan's Day (1891)

Elizabeth Allen

2022

In her 1891 journal, Martha McMillan frequently mentions the sewing and dressmaking activities that she, her daughters Fannie and Clara, the McMillan family's hired help, and other people in her community were involved in. Prior to Fannie's wedding to Mr. McKenzie on May 14, 1891, Martha McMillan frequently mentions in her journal that Fannie and other women are sewing. Following her daughter's wedding, McMillan regularly mentions the sewing that she is doing as well as her family and community members' sewing and dressmaking work. Like many other women living in the mid-1800s to early 1900s, sewing and dressmaking was necessary work for McMillan and the other women in her community. Understanding the historical development of sewing in America and the time and skill that sewing requires provides a more complete idea of what daily life was like for McMillan and other women in 1891. In McMillan's journals, it is clear that McMillan and others faithfully served their families and communities through their sewing.

Sewing at home or employing a dressmaker was a necessity for many women during the 1800s and early 1900s (Gordon, "*Make it Yourself*" par. 5). Sewing at home was the more affordable option for women who were not wealthy, and factory-made clothing for women was not widely available until the 1920s (Gordon, "*Make it Yourself*" par. 7). While some women hired professional dressmakers and seamstresses, the cost of such services encouraged many women to sew at home (Gordon, "*Make it Yourself*" par. 7). Sarah Gordon notes "Until the ready-wear industry grew to the point where desirable clothes were available at low prices, many

middle-class and most working-class women had little choice but to sew the majority of the clothing that they and their families needed” (“*Make it Yourself*” par. 6). A woman of average means might employ a dressmaker for assistance with making a few special dresses, but women generally sewed less special clothing items like aprons and petticoats themselves (Fernandez 23). Women also sewed children’s clothes and men’s shirts in their homes during McMillan’s time (Fernandez 23). McMillan refers to this necessary, commonplace type of sewing in her journals. On the 7th of November, 1891, McMillan writes “Fannie finishing off Pauls red flannel dress that grandmother gave him.” Similarly, McMillan records on June 1st, 1891, that “Clara began sewing ... to day. She is making kitchen aprons.” Throughout the 1891 journal, the practical, necessary nature of sewing at home is clear. While some sewing was relatively easy to do at home, dressmaking was a more involved and complicated undertaking that required some women to seek assistance from professional dressmakers.

In the 1891 journal, McMillan mentions dressmaking specifically several times. Besides noting Fannie’s making and fitting of dresses for baby Paul in October and November, McMillan mentions “Miss R– fitting Aunt Matts dress” on the 1st of September, 1891, and describes being involved in dressmaking herself on another occasion. On November 6th, 1891, McMillan writes “I left Paul with Clayton and took my black[?] goods, calico, to Bazels daughter to cut and fit a dress – this she did.” In this journal entry, it appears that Bazel’s daughter assisted McMillan with making a dress, although it is unclear who the dress was intended for and whether or not this was a commercial transaction. Regardless, making dresses at home or using a dressmaker were options for women in the mid-19th through the early 20th centuries. The process of cutting and fitting dresses so that they looked nice and fit the wearer well was difficult for many amateur sewers so if they could afford it, women would purchase fabric and then pay a dressmaker to

assist them with cutting, fitting, and any difficult sewing (Fernandez 24). During the early 1800s, dressmakers had to measure and cut patterns individually for each client (Fernandez 24). Sewers at home, on the other hand, sometimes used old dresses to measure the patterns for new ones (Fernandez 24). However, between the mid-1800s and the early 1900s, paper patterns, sewing machines, and drafting systems that assisted sewers with measuring, fitting, and cutting dresses were available for both skilled dressmakers and women working in their homes to use (Fernandez 24-25). Wendy Gamber writes that “By the 1890s, inventors who marketed their creations to amateurs and professionals alike probably were in the majority ... by simultaneously recommending their systems ‘to dressmakers’ and ‘to ladies in private life,’ the makers of systems increasingly blurred the boundaries between home and workshop” (473-474). Among the notable sewing related inventions of the 1800s, the sewing machine in particular impacted the lives of women who sewed at home.

The initial popularity of the sewing machine in America in the mid-1800s impacted the lives of women as it reduced the amount of time that they needed to spend sewing. Historian Elizabeth Bacon calls the sewing machine “One of the most important inventions of the nineteenth century, especially for the housewife” (90). The sewing machine became popular in America in the 1850s as it was marketed to women as a way for them to save time on their sewing projects (Connolly 31). Prior to this invention, women had to spend great amounts of time sewing clothing and household items for themselves and their families (Connolly 32). Connolly notes that “One clear pattern revealed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is the enormous amount of sewing expected of women at all economic levels” (32). The large amount of time that many 19th-century women spent sewing is reflected in McMillan’s 1891 journal. From January until Fannie’s wedding in May 1891, McMillan mentions about 26 times

that Fannie or other women were sewing in the McMillan home. In March, McMillan records in her journal: “Fannie and Miss R- at the sewing – all day” (5 March 1891). Sewing machines helped women save time and allowed them to spend more time caring for their children or engaging in other work or leisure activities (Connolly 33). Sewing machines were originally highly expensive and while the cost of a machine became more affordable over time, they were still a sizeable expense (Connolly 32-33). Early sewing machines were owned only by those wealthy enough to afford them and therefore were a “status symbol” (Connolly 33). This early association of sewing machines with wealth likely only increased the general public’s interest in the invention. However, the initial enthusiasm about sewing machines eventually decreased.

Over time, while sewing machines were still useful tools for sewers and had widespread use, the initial excitement surrounding the invention lessened. As Connolly notes, “By 1890 the sewing machine had lost its novelty and become an accepted part of domestic life” (36). By the 1890s, sewing machines were much cheaper and easier to buy and customers could even purchase them by mail-order (Connolly 36). Sewing machines were particularly useful for making seams in certain types of clothing. However, other types of sewing, including much of the delicate needlework used to make fine dresses, still needed to be done by hand (Fernandez 29-30). Overall, the excitement about the invention had waned and sewing machines were rarely mentioned in either women’s magazines or by women in their own diaries (Connolly 37-38). McMillan follows this pattern, as she mentions sewing repeatedly in her 1891 journal but does not mention owning or using a sewing machine in this journal. Sewing machine use had not disappeared at this point, however. In the early 1900s, Singer, the largest maker of sewing machines at the time, was selling around 500,000 machines each year (Bacon 93). It is likely that McMillan either did own or could have owned a sewing machine in 1891, given the decreased

cost and widespread use of sewing machines in America at that time. Owning a sewing machine would have helped McMillan and her family members sew faster and more efficiently complete the work of sewing that was expected of women at that time.

During the 1800s and early 1900s, sewing and dressmaking were skills that women were expected to have in order to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. During McMillan's time, a woman's ability to sew was associated with her ability to manage her home properly as a wife and mother (Gordon, "*Make it Yourself*" par. 43-50). Mothers often saw making clothing for their children as a way of showing their care for them (Gordon, "*Make it Yourself*" par. 50). Most people in American society at this time believed that sewing was a skill that women should possess, and girls were typically taught how to sew at home by their mothers (Gordon, "*Make it Yourself*" par. 4). In an article about sewing as women's work, Gordon writes "Sewing is laden with understandings of femininity, family, and social class. It evokes ideas about thrift, housekeeping, wifely duty, [and] motherly love" ("*Boundless Possibilities*" 68). During McMillan's time, sewing was thought of as a feminine skill that women naturally possessed, although some acknowledgment that sewing was also a learned skill existed (Gamber 463). By sewing at home, women could save money, care for their families, and perform a type of work that was expected of them as women. In McMillan's 1891 journal, sewing is done by women such as Martha herself, her daughter Fannie, and other women like Miss Rodermer. McMillan apparently views sewing as part of her duties as a wife and mother. Sewing, however, was not always regarded as a dreary task but rather was an enjoyable form of individual expression for some women.

While sewing and making dresses was certainly hard work, sewing could also be an enjoyable and creative activity for women. Some women disliked or had neutral opinions about

sewing, but others enjoyed sewing and saw it as a way to express themselves and their sense of style (Gordon, “Boundless Possibilities” 78). By making clothes for herself and her family, a woman was truly in control of what she wore and how she presented herself to the world (Gordon, “Boundless Possibilities” 78). Women who sewed for themselves or worked closely with a professional dressmaker could express themselves as individuals through their choice of fabric and design (Gordon, “Boundless Possibilities” 79). According to Gordon, many women found more decorative forms of sewing like embroidery, crocheting, quilting, and lace making particularly enjoyable (“Boundless Possibilities” 80). Sewers could use their sewing skills to decorate the items in their households or their own clothing (Gordon, “Boundless Possibilities” 80). Though not mentioned directly in the diary, some of Fannie’s sewing in the months leading up to her wedding in May 1891 might have been decorative sewing for her clothes or the household goods that she would bring to her new home after her marriage.

As time went on, home sewing and dressmaking decreased in popularity in America. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a shift away from both making clothes at home and hiring professional dressmakers to make individualized garments occurred as pre-made clothing became much more prominent (Connolly 40). By 1920, ready-made women’s clothing could be found more easily and was the most commonly worn type of clothing at that time (Connolly 40). Women were able to purchase clothing in stores or by mail order (Connolly 40). At this point in time, owning a sewing machine was no longer a sign of prestige and wealth, but rather implied the opposite (Connolly 41). The decrease in women sewing at home was partially because more women were employed outside of the home in the early 1900s and therefore had less time for sewing (Gordon, “*Make it Yourself*” par. 38). Likewise, the dress styles that were popular during the 1920s were easier and cheaper to manufacture than previous designs (Gordon, “*Make it*

Yourself” par. 37). American women were moving towards the practice of buying most items ready-made, rather than making them themselves as previous generations had (Gordon, “*Make it Yourself*” par. 39). Sewing at home did not disappear entirely, however. In rural areas and among poorer women especially, sewing at home was still a common practice (Gordon, “*Make it Yourself*” par. 40). But by the early 1900s, American women were gradually beginning to buy most of their clothes rather than making them.

Martha McMillan was a dedicated wife, mother, manager of her household, and community member. She recorded the sewing activities that she and other women performed as sewing at home, with or without the help of professionals, was a common practice for most women of her day. A better understanding of the skill, time, and care involved in sewing clothing encourages an appreciation and respect for the work, talent, and dedication that McMillan and her contemporaries put into their sewing projects. McMillan’s journal entries about sewing reveal the practical ways that she and other women in her family and community served their families and others on a daily basis.

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