

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Prick Their Consciences:
The Politicization of Sewing in America from the
Revolutionary War to the Second World War

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“May the points of our needles prick the slaveholder’s consciences.”¹

In 1836 Angelina Grimke wrote those words in response to slavery in the southern U.S. She was a part of the abolitionist movement and wanted women to protest slavery in their needlework. By women displaying their distaste with slavery they would provide social pressure to change slaveholder’s minds. This would not be the first nor the last time that needlework and sewing would be used by women to voice their political opinions. American women and the government have both made sewing into a political activity in order to support their agendas. Women have used their needlework to speak out about their political beliefs and the American government has politicized sewing through policies that encouraged certain groups of women to sew in specific ways.

Very few authors have focused specifically upon politicized sewing. General women’s histories briefly cover some aspects, but not all. Nancy Woloch’s *Women and the American Experience*² provides a general overview of women and politics in American from founding to present, and describes the lives of textile workers who went on strike and refused to sew as a political motivator. Sara Evan’s *Tidal Wave*³ discusses how women’s personal lives are inextricably entwined with their political lives in the latter half of the twentieth century, and expands the idea to cover several decades before that as well. *Unequal Sisters*⁴ is a collection of articles edited by Ellen DuBois and Vicki

¹ Angelina Grimke, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” In *The Asheville Reader: The Modern World*, edited by Edward J. Katz and Tracey Rizzo, (Massachusetts: Copley Custom Publishing Group, 2003).

² Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006).

³ Sara Evan, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End*, (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

⁴ Ellen DuBois and Vicki Ruiz, editors, *Unequal Sisters*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Ruiz regarding women's history in America, and provided pertinent information on how women affected both society and politics. Sewing was not highlighted, but general information on political and social status was valuable in determining what the lives of women were like during the years this paper covers.

Generic histories of sewing and needlework are also available, giving brief comments and examples of politicized sewing. The Smithsonian Institution, through the Cooper Hewitt Museum, released *Needlework*,⁵ a general introduction to the history of needlework throughout the globe. It covers a wide period of time and range of countries, and focuses on needlework in general and how techniques and materials spread. *Painted with Thread*,⁶ released by the Peabody Essex Museum, discusses an embroidery exhibit they have of American embroidery from the last half century, and provides brief biographies of the sewers. Young Yang Chung wrote *Silken Threads*,⁷ exploring the history of embroidery in the Far East. She devotes some time to the hierarchy of symbols and colors used to mark political status in court life. Averil Colby's *Samplers*⁸ goes into detail over what themes were popular in English and American sampler sewing from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, and provides many examples of verses sewn onto samplers, including political sentiments.

Mary Symonds and L. Preece wrote *Needlework in Religion*,⁹ exploring the symbols and techniques that were used in vestments and linens of English churches during the past three hundred years. Symonds suggests that women sewed these things as

⁵ Adolph S. Cavallo, *Needlework*, (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1979).

⁶ Paula Bradstreet Richter, *Painted With Thread*, (Salem, Mass.: Peabody Essex Museum, 2000).

⁷ Young Yang Chung, *Silken Threads*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005).

⁸ Averil Colby, *Samplers: Yesterday and Today*, (London: B.T. Batsford, 1965).

⁹ Mary Symonds and L. Preece, *Needlework in Religion*, (London, New York, etc.: Sir I. Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1915).

a way of expressing themselves when they were not allowed to speak out in public. *The Modernist Textile*,¹⁰ by Virginia Troy, discusses the impact that modernism had on textiles, including how they could become a source of national pride and how they reflected the politics of the era they were made in. *Bauhaus Textiles*¹¹ by Sigrid Weltge brings to light the artistic contributions of women to the Bauhaus art movement. Weltge follows the evolutions of the movement and why social politics of the time caused women's offerings to be forgotten over time.

Other books on sewing focus less on the product and more on the materials used. Mary Beaudry wrote a book on the material culture of sewing entitled *Findings*.¹² Writing from an archeological perspective, Beaudry shows how government policy and trading routes influenced the materials that people sewed with.

Books directly relating to politicized sewing focus only on one type of politicized sewing. Gladys Fry's *Stitched From the Soul*¹³ discussed the role of sewing in slave women's lives. It asserts that while slaves were under the legal control of their owners, they could gain leverage and social power through sewing. Brenda Schmahmann wrote an article on the political repercussions of embroidery in South Africa. *On Pins and Needles*¹⁴ follows the gender politics of embroidery in a small village, and how their product reflects the country's political and economic climate. *American Needlework*,¹⁵ written by Georgiana Harbeson, is an extensive overview of decorative sewing

¹⁰ Virginia Troy, *The Modernist Textile*, (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2006).

¹¹ Sigrid Weltge, *Bauhaus Textiles*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

¹² Mary Beaudry, *Findings*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹³ Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched From the Soul*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Brenda Schmahmann, *On Pins and Needles*, found in *Between Union and Liberation*, edited by Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

¹⁵ Georgiana Harbeson, *American Needlework*, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1938).

techniques and motifs in America. A small section of the book is dedicated to decorative images that were sold by or made for political campaigns from Abolition until the 1950's.

Julie Powell addresses political sewing directly, focusing on campaign materials during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. "Quilted Ballots" is found in *On the Cutting Edge: Textile Collectors, Collections, and Traditions*,¹⁶ edited by Jeannette Lasansky. Powell discusses the large amount of political textiles that were sold during the nineteenth century and the political candidates who courted women's support. Herbert Collins of the Smithsonian Institution was also interested in these textiles and compiled all of the political textiles that the museum held in *Threads of History: Americana Recorded on Cloth 1775 to the Present*.¹⁷ Collins provides basic information on each of the 1,502 pieces shown.

Roszika Parker wrote *The Subversive Stitch*¹⁸ to explore the role that embroidery had in women's personal expression. In her book Parker discusses the transformation of sewing from a gender neutral occupation to a symbol of all that was feminine to the Victorians. The author focuses primarily on the social aspects of this shift, but in her last chapter "A Naturally Revolutionary Art?" Parker addresses the political potential of embroidery, citing examples in America and abroad. She makes an effort to "concentrate on specific instances in which embroidery became part of a move to transform the relationship of art to society, and the place of women within society."¹⁹

¹⁶ Julie Powell, "Quilted Ballots: Political and Campaign Textiles," in *On the Cutting Edge: Textile Collectors, Collections, and Traditions*, ed. Joseph G. Foster, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 27.

¹⁷ Herbert Ridgeway Collins' *Threads of History: Americana Recorded on Cloth 1775 to the Present*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979).

¹⁸ Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁹ Parker, 189.

Little historical investigation has gone into exploring the ways in which sewing was made political in America. In the following paper both women's history and sewing history are combined to present a more holistic analysis of politicized sewing from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Both the act of sewing and the finished product were sometimes politicized by the American government or women.

Perhaps the first thing to be addressed in the realm of politicized sewing is the definition of public versus private. The concept of a division between private life and public is sometimes defined as separate spheres of living, inside the home and outside. This concept is faulty because a woman's private life, her household and family, are deeply affected by the political climate that she is living in. The women's liberation movement confronted this fallacy and declared that there was no difference between private and public issues. Sarah M. Evans may have put it most clearly when she wrote about feminism:

Perhaps its most distinctive characteristic has been the challenge to the contrary between the "personal;" and the "political" captured in an early slogan, "The Personal Is Political." Under this banner, the movement politicized issues that has long been deemed outside the purview of "politics," including sexuality, domestic violence, and the exercise of authority within the family.²⁰

When talking about political sewing the personal can be seen as political in several situations. Women speaking about political matters through their sewing were also a sign that sewing could be a political activity. Either women were using their personal sewing, both the material and the deed, to demonstrate their political opinions, beliefs, and concerns; or the government was pressuring women to sew as a way to direct

²⁰ Evans, 3.

their political opinions and social influence. The fact that the government was trying to reach women through sewing materials and subjects made women's personal actions and opinions a political matter.

During the early American period there were many women who sewed images of the new American flag, George Washington, or an eagle. All of these were symbols of an America free from British rule, and displayed the patriotism of the women making them. A mourning image in the Peabody Essex Museum, done by an unknown artist, shows his obelisk grave marker, with an Angel sitting upon it reading a copy of the Constitution of the United States.²¹ Other images show him alive, representing the vitality of the American republic, dressed in military garments and surrounded by the implements of war, victorious.²²

Statesmen besides George Washington had their portraits sewn by patriotic women. The Concord Historical Society at one point possessed a large needlework portrait of Benjamin Franklin, showing him surrounded by books, maps, and atlases,²³ and Harbeson has an example of a portrait of Henry Clay in needlepoint and cross stitch that is rich in symbolism. He stands by a roman pillar, a sign of the republic, with an open expanse of land leading to the sea as a backdrop with a plow and ox ready to till the land. This image was meant to evoke the spirit of westward expansion all the way to the sea, encouraging settlers to put uncultivated land to the plow.²⁴

The most obvious instances of politicized sewing came in the form of campaign advertising textiles. Campaign textiles might be such things as the 1884 printed bandana

²¹ Image found in Richter, 45.

²² Image found in Richter, 99.

²³ Image found in Harbeson, 108.

²⁴ Image found in Harbeson, 108.

with the legend “Democratic / Candidates / President / Grover Cleveland / Vice President / Thomas A. Hendricks,”²⁵ or the 1912 banner promoting Roosevelt’s campaign for the National Progressive party.²⁶ Both the banner and the kerchief could be carried or displayed throughout election time to advertise who the owner was rooting for. Each of these examples was printed for a specific use, but basics like bunting and yard goods were also produced. Julie Powell maintains that “Today a lion’s share of the money raised in campaigns is spent on television time, debates, and spot commercials where previously campaign funds were used to purchase and distribute buttons and lapel devices, ceramics, glassware, and textiles.”²⁷

These textiles were produced with sewers in mind, those women who were taking plain cloth and transforming it into a finished product. European textiles manufacturers printed large amounts of campaign themed fabrics for sale within the United States, meaning that there must have been a strong market for them. An example of this would include an 1880 cotton cloth printed with images of presidential candidate James Garfield and his running mate Chester Arthur.²⁸ On the roll of cloth the oval portraits were surrounded by laurel wreaths and supported by American flags, Garfield invoking nationalistic pride through these symbols of republican government. William Henry Harrison also used this practice to display an image of himself that he thought would win him votes. Cotton chintz fabrics were printed with images of Harrison as a equestrian or

²⁵ Image found in Collins, 244.

²⁶ Image found in Collins, 374.

²⁷ Powell, 27.

²⁸ Image found in Collins, 218.

his campaign symbols of a log cabin and cider barrel, representing that his house was open with cider ready for those who came and joined him.²⁹

A common use that women found for these campaign yardages were quilts. Henry Clay's wife, Lucretia, made a silk quilt with his portrait in the center and presented it to the wife of Kentucky Governor John Crittenden to show how close their husbands were both politically and personally.³⁰ Another such quilt can be found in Collins' collection, a 1888 quilt with the legend "Protection / For President Benjamin Harrison / For Vice President / Levi P. Morton" on a bandana in the center showing their portraits and red, white, and blue stripes stitched in concentric squares around it to form the body of the quilt top.³¹

The textiles themselves were not the only way for political candidates to reach the sewing population. Women could also buy sewing materials that advertised the candidate that they favored. From Lincoln's 1860 campaign manufacturers made thread boxes with the picture of particular candidates on them, as well as needle packets, scissors, and other sewing paraphernalia.³² Both the seller and the buyer of these items displayed political activism through sewing. When Grover Cleveland ran for president he used sewing advertising to suggest that he was a good family man. Cleveland had the good fortune to marry a pretty young wife, Frances, and a series of advertising trade cards show him admiring his wife as she sews on a machine and buys bolt cloth. There is even a card advertising Merrick Thread Co. where the portraits of Grover and Frances

²⁹ Powell, 28.

³⁰ This quilt is at the Kentucky Museum, Bowling Green, Kentucky; Accession #84.34. information found in Powell, 28.

³¹ Image found in Collins, 263.

³² Powell, 29.

area joined in a heart made of thread.³³ Other presidents used thread packaging, thimbles, sewing scissors, and needle packets with the slogan “Stick to the Republican Party” to promote their campaigns.³⁴

Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams both released thread boxes with their political slogans printed on the inside, despite the fact that women would not receive the vote for nearly a century afterwards.³⁵ What makes these items even more interesting is that they were being sold many decades before women got the vote, even before the suffrage movement became popular. Despite women’s lack of overt political power they were being courted by presidential candidates who wanted their support. Having women in favor of him suggested that a candidate would act in ways to protect home life, such as ensuring order and improving the economy.

A woman working with political textiles was publicly defining herself as a supporter of the person whose textile she was working with, and her family and visitors were likely to see her working on it or the display of the finished product. She and her husband/father/head of household might influence one another’s political leanings, and candidates who had the support of women might gain an edge. Women for many of the early years of American history were associated with the home and family. If women were displaying support for a candidate then he might be thought of as more socially stable, more likely to pass laws and make decisions to protect the home and the status quo. Certainly most the presidents have been securely married men.

³³ Image found in Powell, 31.

³⁴ Image found in Joseph G. Foster, ed. *On the Cutting Edge: Textile Collectors, Collections, and Traditions*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), cover image.

³⁵ Powell, 27.

Sewing could also be politicized without referencing a specific political stance. General national spirit was encouraged during the Civil War and materials were put out that suggested that women sew



Image 1

as an act of patriotism. For example a series of pictorial envelopes were released in the Union during the Civil War showing women sewing beneath the American flag with such captions as “Our hearts are with them” (Image 1)³⁶ and “Our hearts are with our brothers in the field.”³⁷ Other envelopes in the same series show women performing other tasks to help the soldiers, such as baking bread for them, with the implied assertion that though women could not fight, they could find other ways of helping that fell within traditional female roles.³⁸

The white women of the South were not the only ones in their area to have political implications to their sewing. During the era of slavery, quilting could be a way for slave women to work together on artistic pieces and way for them to rise in status if they were on a plantation. It was an opportunity to gain some income, for slave seamstresses “were also better fed, clothed, and housed, and had more freedom of movement,”³⁹ than other slaves. Despite being politically suppressed, literally owned by another person, slave women could gain more power over their lives by being valued as a seamstress.

³⁶ *Civil War Treasures*, New York Historical Society collection. Call number PR-022-3-88-9, American Memory Project. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/nhihtml/cwnyhshome.html>

³⁷ *Civil War Treasures*, call number PR-022-3-88-7.

³⁸ *Civil War Treasures*, call number PR-022-3-88-6.

³⁹ Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16.

Some women put forth a good deal of effort to become seamstresses because of this. Nancy Dodson, a sixteen year old slave, was meant to learn tailoring from Mrs. Jones, a white woman. She was instead left to do general work and child care, but when Mrs. Jones left Nancy to sew a basted coat “she sat up that night and ripped the coat all apart, cut an exact pattern and then put it together again. She did the same with pants and vests and then she undertook her trade.”⁴⁰ Despite the fact that Mrs. Jones wanted to force Nancy to stay in her menial position watching children, Nancy used her sewing as a tool to remove herself from that state of affairs. Some women were assigned permanently to do the sewing of the plantation, as Nancy was eventually able to achieve. Making multiple pieces of clothing for every slave on the plantation per year for their clothing allowances took a lot of time, and many times women would work year round to make it all.⁴¹

Even after the end of slavery sewing continued to be a status symbol for black women. Sewing decoratively was a sign of affluence, because only the wealthy could afford to spend both time and materials on decorations. St. Francis’ Academy for Colored Girls was a more upscale school for boarders, one where tuition was demanded and more upper class things were studied. As a part of this girls learned standard education and “sewing in all its branches, embroidery in cotton, silk, chenille or gold, tapestry, tufted work, bead work, lace embroidery” and other decorative arts.⁴²

The girls sent to St. Francis’ were attempting to assimilate into the white middle class, the class with political power. The girls’ sewing did not necessarily that come

⁴⁰ Susan Walker, papers, found in Fry, 16.

⁴¹ Fry, 17.

⁴² *Catalogue of Pupils of Saint Frances’ Academy*. (Baltimore : Printed by John Murphy & Co. ..., 1868), American Memory Project. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lcrbmrp.t2321>

from natural inclination, but was instead an effort to prove social status. Only girls with wealthy families could send them to St. Francis' Academy, and learning such work as embroidery cost as much as one sixth the fee for both boarding and tuition for a quarter.⁴³ This price suggests that sewing was valued by the school and boarders.

At some points in American history the government and other large organizations such as churches have tried to Americanize Indians, African Americans, and other minorities through seminaries and mission schools which taught girls homemaking skills such as tailoring, embroidery, and mending. During the years of Manifest Destiny, when many people believed that it was divine will that American be settled from coast to coast, white Americans were not tolerant of other cultures, and considered the Native Americans already occupying that land to be uncivilized and brutal.

The government wanted the land that the Indians had been living on for generations, believing the land was wasted because it was not cultivated.⁴⁴ To change this, the American government instituted the reservation system. When this did not cause the Indians to abandon their culture, the government created boarding schools, where Indian children were forced to attend. The goal of the one school, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, was explicitly stated to have "always planted treason to the tribe and loyalty to the nation at large."⁴⁵ Separated from their families for most of the year and forbidden from living their own culture, not even allowed to speak their own language, children were taught so called civilized trades, which for girls included sewing.⁴⁶

⁴³ *St. Frances' Academy*, 1.

⁴⁴ Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, (NY, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 282.

⁴⁵ *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction (1892)*, 46-59. Reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 260-271.

⁴⁶ Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, (NY, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 282.

The first Indian boarding schools were fashioned after the black schools that had come into being after the Civil War. One of the first and largest was the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, founded in 1868.⁴⁷ The school was at first for men, but they expanded to teach women. The school tried to partially support itself by having “sewing, weaving, basket and pottery making departments ... [giving] students a chance to earn a part o the cost of their board and clothing, and at the same time learn something of the standards demanded by the world’s markets.”⁴⁸

The American government tried to culturally assimilate the Native Americans. Boarding schools were largely run by private groups, normally churches, but with the government’s backing.⁴⁹ Part of the regimen for girls was to learn various homemaking techniques, including sewing. Girls were taught such professions as tailoring, laundry, or sewing, both with and without a sewing machine.⁵⁰ An engraving made in Oregon, 1887, shows all of these (Image 2).⁵¹

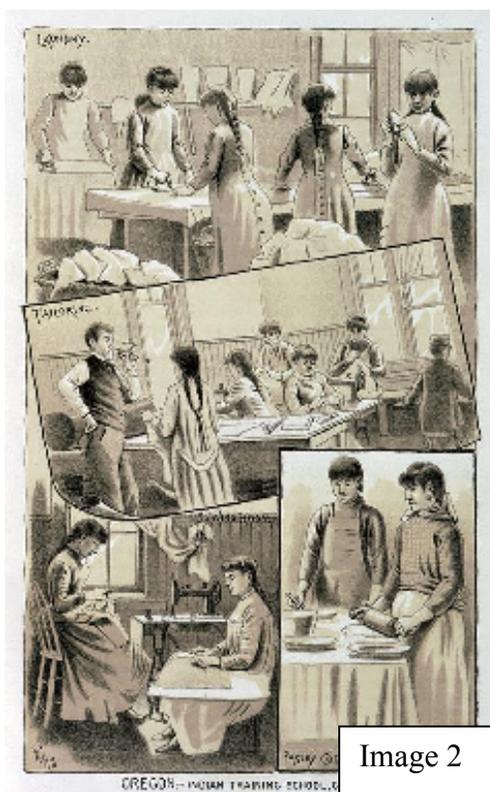


Image 2

⁴⁷ *Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute*. [Hampton, Va.] : Hampton Institute Press, 1902. American Memory Project. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lcrbmrp.t1611>

⁴⁸ *Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute Pamphlet*, American Memory Project.

⁴⁹ M. Annette Jaimes, ed., *The State of Native America - Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, (South End Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1992), 380.

⁵⁰ *Umatilla girls in sewing class*. Photographs. American Indians of the Pacific Northwest Collection, University of Washington Library. American Memory Project. <http://content.lib.washington.edu/cgi-bin/htmlview.exe?CISOROOT=/loc&CISOPTR=859> (A series of photographs from an Indian boarding school.)

⁵¹ *Indian Training School Girl's Activities*, American Indians of the Pacific Northwest Collection, Image from West Shore Magazine, v. 13, no. 1, p. 13.

Sewing was such a part of what mission schools used to civilize young women that media sprang up that talked about it. There was even a book by Mrs. J. R. Romer entitled *Cooking and Sewing Songs and Recitations for Industrial and Mission Schools*, so that girls could further internalize the values of their teachers.⁵² The presence of such songs and publications show that indoctrination of girls through homemaking was a common and well-understood method. According to proponents of Americanization “What the Negro [and Indian] need[ed] at once [were] elementary and industrial education and moral development.”⁵³ The schools were not teaching academics so much as they were teaching a lifestyle that the workers believed was superior to the Native American’s traditional one.

Another marginalized group who were subject to Americanization were Hispanic women. The presence of Mexican nationals within United States territory worried many people who did not believe that Mexicans led appropriate lifestyles and according to Pearl Ellis “we who employ them are challenged to raise their standards of living, improve sanitation, and control disease.”⁵⁴ In 1929 she released *Americanization Through Homemaking*, a book that suggested that Hispanic women could Americanize their families more swiftly than any other method. Ellis asserted that “Since the girls are potential mothers and homemakers, they will control, in a large measure, the destinies of their future families.”⁵⁵ She believed that when “the Bill of Rights as outlined by Herbert

⁵² Mrs. J. R. Romer, editor. *Cooking and Sewing Songs and Recitations for Industrial and Mission Schools*. The American missionary. / Volume 43, Issue 4, Apr 1889. American Memory Project. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncps:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(ABK5794-0043-70\)\)::](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncps:@field(DOCID+@lit(ABK5794-0043-70))::)

⁵³ Hampton, 1. Attributed to General Armstrong.

⁵⁴ Pearl Idelia Ellis, *Americanization Through Homemaking*, (Los Angeles, CA.: Wetzel Publishing Co., Inc., 1929), preface.

⁵⁵ Ellis,, preface.

Hoover in regard to the American child ... is assimilated by the community and nation, a great stride will have been made in its progress.”⁵⁶

By instructing young women in how to live their lives, run households, and sew, instructors were indoctrinating the girls in the white American lifestyle, wanting them “to adopt our customs, our ideals, and our country.”⁵⁷ This training was important to Ellis and the other workers in the Americanization department in Covina City Schools because “the surest solution to the Americanization problem lies in the proper training of the parents of a future citizenry.”⁵⁸

The entire first chapter is devoted to teaching Mexican girls sewing, saying “it is very rare to find a Mexican girl who does not enjoy sewing.”⁵⁹ It was important to Ellis that girls be able to sew early on, for “sanitary, hygienic, and dietic measures are not easily learned by the Mexican.”⁶⁰ She stressed that since few Mexican girls received a high school education that they must be taught as “early as possible,”⁶¹ because she would be responsible for providing her future family with clothing and cloth goods. *Americanization Through Homemaking* instructed teachers to have girls sew their own clothing and to show them how to run and upkeep a sewing machine, which made sewing tasks easier than by hand.⁶²

The sewing machine, and the industrial age that it represented, brought many changes in the lives of women. Multiple waves of European immigration into the United

⁵⁶ Ellis, 64,

⁵⁷ Ellis, preface.

⁵⁸ Ellis, 65.

⁵⁹ Ellis, 15.

⁶⁰ Ellis, 64.

⁶¹ Ellis, 13.

⁶² Ellis, 14.

States gave North Eastern cities large numbers of cheap workers.⁶³ This pool of labor enabled swift industrialization brought about huge numbers of professional sewers who would labor in workshops for small wages to help their families, many of them women who did not have the legal power to challenge their exploitive employers.

Women were not considered equal workers, with legislation even stating that “she is not an equal competitor with her brother,”⁶⁴ but this did not acknowledge the need that many women were facing: desperately trying to keep their families fed, and that sometimes a woman would be on her own, or widowed with children, and had no other paycheck to help support her.

Thousands of women joined the workforce, and were forced to take even lower wages than men because they were rarely hired for anything but an entry level position.⁶⁵ Many of the working women went into the garment industry, making ready-made clothing in small workshops that paid by the piece.⁶⁶ The working girl became a regular part of city life, with contemporary culture even writing songs about her, such as “Sally of the Sewing Machine,”⁶⁷ which made light of the intense labor that garment workers had to do in order to support themselves. This piecework was detrimental to wages, because the speed at which a girl worked determined her pay for the day. If her machine broke or there were long lines to pick up work then she lost the money she would have made during that time.⁶⁸

⁶³ Woloch, 230.

⁶⁴ *Muller vs. Oregon*, 208 U.S. 412, 28 Sup. Ct. 324 (1908). In Susan Ware’s *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, (New York, NY: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997), 77.

⁶⁵ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 203.

⁶⁶ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 202.

⁶⁷ *Sally of the Sewing Machine*. (New York, New York: H. De Marsan, no date given).

⁶⁸ Agnes Nestor, “The Story of a Glove Maker” (1898) found in Ware, 69.

The workshops that garment makers worked in had hazardous working conditions and women faced harassment from men working there. Difficulties built up until women began to take part in organized labor forces. One of the most famous demonstrations was the Shirtwaist Strike of 1909. Eighteen thousand women walked out of their workshops in late November, their refusal to sew crippling the industry for several months.⁶⁹

Women eventually went back to work, without many of the concessions they had been hoping to gain, but the precedent was set and women could believe that they could use the power of their numbers in the garment industry to force big business to give them better working conditions and higher pay.

Women in the garment industry did not have direct political power. Women could not vote for leaders who would look out for their interests, and were not even allowed to join many unions.⁷⁰ Women made efforts to create their own unions and trade organizations, but these received less funding from benefactors because they were women and it was often assumed that a woman would have a man to depend on, either a father or a husband. Equal pay for equal work was not a universally accepted concept at the time, and was even discouraged by some unions because it would take jobs away from men. Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, one of the largest unions, even stated that “It is the so called competition of the unorganized, defenseless woman worker, the girl and the wife, that often tends to reduce the wages of the father and husband.”⁷¹

Labor movements in the garment industry were not the only way that sewing could be utilized by mass movements. The labor movement fueled and gave grounds for

⁶⁹ Woloch, 201, 213.

⁷⁰ Woloch, 240.

⁷¹ Samuel Gompers, found in Woloch, 241-242.

the women's suffrage movement, whose female members needed the political power to force change in labor laws. Leonora O'Reilly explains that "you men make the laws that will let you go free and send us into the gutter."⁷² Various types of sewing were used during the suffrage movement to express political sentiments. Women made or bought banners, sashes, handkerchiefs and hats with suffrage symbols and colors for the March 3, 1913 parade in Washington, D.C.⁷³ There they marched in formation and put on pageantry to celebrate their first national parade. (Image 3)⁷⁴



Image 3

In 1910 at Seneca Castle, New York, women met at a sewing circle to discuss political equality.⁷⁵ The organizers were using the acceptable pastime of sewing to facilitate the spread of radical political beliefs. This same club of women was charged a year later with desecrating the national flag "by allowing an ardent suffragist to change the picture of 'Betsy Ross,' which was on exhibition in the Suffrage Booth, that is, painting the stars yellow." The change to suffrage colors would be interpreted as the union states supporting suffrage.⁷⁶ The women's sewing club of Seneca Castle used the patriotic image of a woman sewing to assert that they had the right to vote, to be politically active.

⁷² Leonora O'Reilly, "A Labor Organizer Speaks Out for Suffrage," found in Ware, 126.

⁷³ "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign," page 5, found in *Women of Protest Collection*, Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/suffrage/nwp/tactics.html>

⁷⁴ *Women of Protest Collection*, image in timeline.

⁷⁵ Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897-1911; scrapbook 8, page 105. September 16, 1910. American Memory Project, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbcmil.scrp6011605>

⁷⁶ Miller NAWSA scrapbooks, book 9, page 42. April 3, 1911.

Women also created their own, personal designs that reflected their opinions about the political climate they were living in. There is a body of samplers available that commemorate the events of the First World War. Verses such as “This is my commandment / That ye love one another / As I have loved you,”⁷⁷ and the text of “In Flander’s Fields” were embroidered onto samplers with images of national flags and war machines.⁷⁸ Through these samplers women expressed in words and images their appreciation of peace and remembered the trials that they had lived through.

Mary Saltonstall Parker created two samplers that showed images from the war, something that must have been important to her with two sons enlisted. The first sampler was finished just after the end of war and shows images of soldiers marching in lines, the names of her sons, and the admonition to “Keep the homefires burning till the boys come home.”⁷⁹ At the bottom of the sampler a sailing ship is done in the style of the Bayeaux tapestry, an “allusion to an ancient embroidered historical narrative,” according to Richter⁸⁰ Parker’s other sampler was created in her last year of life and displayed images of death and peace, still saves a corner to hold a flag symbol and the legend “armistice,” the real and tangible peace that she had lived to see.⁸¹ She used her sewing to memorialize how her life was affected by the war.

After the suffrage movement, around the 1930’s, women began to use samplers to talk about political issues, using both images and text to get their point across. The Woman’s Organization of National Prohibition Reform in New York adopted a sampler which said “Bring back the old, Ring in the new, Turn out false laws, Ring in the new,”

⁷⁷ Text found in Harbeson, 175.

⁷⁸ Text found in Harbeson, 176.

⁷⁹ Image found in Richter, 129.

⁸⁰ Image found in Richter, 128.

⁸¹ Image found in Richter, 131.

printing hundreds of these designs and selling them to promote the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment.⁸² Other commercial samplers promoted such things as the Rhode Island tercentenary, the recognition of the U.S.S.R. by America, and the “Adopt a Family” drive during the Depression.⁸³ Some samplers, like Mrs. de Lancey Kountze’s NRA sampler, were adapted from posters by the women themselves.⁸⁴ Others were sampler patterns designed to be mass produced and sold to help raise funds for their movements.⁸⁵ In this was women paid to advertise for a political movement, making her choice of sewing pattern a political act.



Image 4

Women also continued to find sewing an acceptable profession. During the Great Depression the American government put out posters that encouraged women to go into sewing industries. The Work Projects Administration encouraged women to find “occupations related to sewing, such as power machine operator, alterations worker, dress designer, hand finisher, basting trimmer, packer, or swatcher.” (Image 4)⁸⁶ These posters addressed the need for all available people to work

without threatening the gender divide. Women would still be doing feminine work, just in a more public capacity. World War II saw a continuation of this policy within the WPA, and a poster was released showing images of war through the outline of a sewing

⁸² Image found in Harbeson, 174-175.

⁸³ Images found in Harbeson, 174-175.

⁸⁴ Image found in Harbeson, 174-175.

⁸⁵ Harbeson, 175.

⁸⁶ *By the People, for the People: Posters from the WPA 1936-1943*. Library of Congress collection. American Memory Project. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html>

machine.⁸⁷ The government wanted women to work because with so many men out of jobs, or later away in the war, industries needed more laborers. The government was boosting the economy by encouraging women to join sewing professions.

Sewing has been made into a political activity at various times in the history of the United States. The American government has encouraged women to sew in order to support its own agenda, and women have used their sewing to bring the government's attention to their own concerns. These intersections between politics and sewing have led to a political history of sewing in America from late nineteenth century up into the twentieth.

⁸⁷ *By the People, for the People: Posters from the WPA 1936-1943.*

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collection. American Memory Project. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awpnp6/wpa.html>

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Indian Training School Girl's Activities. Image from West Shore Magazine, v. 13, no. 1, p. 13, at Chemawa near Salem, Oregon, engraving made 1887. American Indians

of the Pacific Northwest collection, University of Washington Library collection.
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