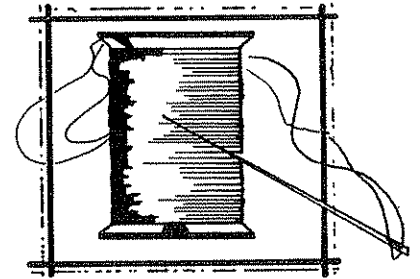


LESSON 6

TOPIC

The Sewing Box



TIME

30 minutes

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Sewing Box with Contents

OBJECTIVES

- 1) Students will identify instruments commonly used in sewing.
- 2) Students will be able to recognize uses of common sewing aids.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the Industrial Revolution, the work basket, work box, or work bag for needlework was used mainly by those in the upper class. The affluent woman of the eighteenth century often used a sewing box that was actually a piece of furniture. In the nineteenth century, and among those who were not well-to-do, sewing boxes were more modest in scale and usually were made by a friend or a relative. Portable boxes were developed for practical means so that a woman could carry her needlework. Common in the eighteenth century was a work pocket that was worn like an apron. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries needlework was carried in work bags and work baskets.

The sewing clamp (often called a sewing bird) was a common tool in preindustrial times. The clamp was used to stretch the fabric (like a third "hand") for sewing long seams. The clamps were no longer needed after the invention of the sewing machine in the mid-nineteenth century. The darning egg is another device used to stretch the fabric, in this case to fix or mend a garment. The darning egg was used by all but the most affluent classes.

Prior to the nineteenth century, pins were very expensive. Seth Hunt invented the modern solid headed pin in 1817. The price of pins dropped dramatically in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. At this point in time pincushions became common. Because pincushions are not very secure as a storage device, the earlier, more expensive pins were kept in a secured box. For the home seamstress, the development of the solid head pin allowed for pins to

substitute, in some cases, for basting (temporarily securing fabric together by sewing large stitches).

Sewing needles, like straight pins, were very expensive to purchase until mechanized processes reduced costs. Often a family would own only one needle, therefore causing a panic if it was lost. Because needles were so precious they were often kept in needle cases.

Sewing scissors are usually thought to be "sacred" by the avid home seamstress; so much so, that most children and husbands are cautioned never to use the sewing scissors, especially to cut paper. Current sewing scissors are much easier to use than those in use before the Industrial Revolution. An interesting point is that in commercial sewing, scissors are not used. Mechanized scissors have been introduced to the home market on numerous occasions but have never caught on.

Thimbles, intended to protect the fingers from the prick of the needle, probably originated in some form in prehistoric days. Thimbles have been made of various materials including steel, brass, silver, gold, pewter, bone, ivory, plastic, celluloid, leather, and even fish bones. In Victorian times, young men often presented their fiancées with a gold thimble at the time of the engagement. For the ceremony, the band of the thimble was cut off and served as a wedding band for the bride. Today thimbles have changed little in design and are relatively inexpensive.

Tools like measuring tapes and yard sticks date from the nineteenth century when there was an effort to standardize measurement among the working and middle class. There is a contrast between the measuring tools used by the professional dressmaker and the home seamstress. Simpler approaches are used by the home seamstress.

Cotton sewing thread (twisted) was invented just after 1810. Prior to this date thread was made of hand-spun linen or silk. Early cotton thread would not pass through the eye of a sewing machine needle. Once the sewing machine was in demand, the industry had reason to improve the cotton thread. With the popularization of the sewing machine, the modern six-cord mercerized (twisted) sewing thread became standard.

Source: Maines, Rachel, "The Tools of the Workbasket," in *Bits and Pieces: Textile Tradition* Lewisburg, Pa.: Oral Traditions Project of the Union County Historical Society, 1991.

VOCABULARY

Darn	To mend or repair a hole in a piece of cloth with interwoven or interlocked stitches.
Darning Egg	An egg-shaped wooden tool used for mending socks.
Needle	A small, slender tool with a hole for thread at one end and a sharp point at the other. Used for sewing. Quiltmakers use small needles, usually

	size 8 to 12 (the larger the number the finer the needle).
Needle Case	A wooden, metal, ivory, or bone container used to hold needles.
Pin	A small thin piece of wire with one flat end or larger end and one sharp, pointed end. A pin is used for holding pieces of fabric together prior to sewing.
Pincushion	A small pillow made to hold pins and needles.
Scissors	An instrument used for cutting.
Sewing Box	A box or case used to hold sewing supplies, such as scissors, thread, needles, and pins.
Spool	A small wooden or plastic cylinder used to hold thread.
Tape Measure	An instrument used for measurement and marked off in units.
Template	A piece of stiff cardboard or plastic used as a pattern guide for cutting fabric.
Thimble	A guard worn on the finger to protect the finger from the prick of a needle or pin.
Thread	A strong spun fiber used for sewing.

ACTIVITIES

1) Show the students the *sewing box* and let them explore the contents (**Warning: Some of the instruments are sharp, therefore this activity needs adult supervision**). Ask the students if someone in their family has a sewing box. Discuss what a sewing box is used for. Explain that the sewing box displayed here might have been used by someone in the upper or middle classes. If you were poor what might you use for a sewing box? (Possible answers include recycled tins, boxes, bags, etc.)

2) Included in the sewing box are a series of cards. Each card contains the name of an object and its definition. Have the students match the cards with the objects in the sewing box. On the back of each card is an illustration of the object and information about the history of it. Read the information on the card aloud.

a) Other objects and materials are always found in sewing boxes. Such objects include buttons, hooks and eyes, and fabric scraps. Ask the students if they know why other

types of objects might be found in a sewing box. These miscellaneous items are often used to repair garments.

3) To help the students understand how these objects are used, present the following problems to them.

a) If you needed to darn a sock, what instruments from the sewing box would you need? Darning egg, needle, thread (or yarn), and scissors.

b) Imagine that three of the five buttons on your shirt have come off. What would you need to repair the shirt? Buttons, tape measure (to place the buttons evenly), needle, thread, and scissors.

c) If you wanted to make a quilt block using hand sewing techniques, what objects would you need from the sewing box? Template, scissors, needle, pins, and thread.

ASSESSMENT

Levels of Achievement

For Objective 1

- a) Students correctly identify one or two of the instruments used in sewing.
- b) Students correctly identify most or all of the instruments used in sewing.

For Objective 2

- a) Students recognize one or two of the uses of sewing aides.
- b) Students recognize most or all of the uses of sewing aides.