

LESSON 7

TOPIC

The Importance of Learning to Sew

TIME

45 minutes

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Photograph #4
Photograph #5
Diary



OBJECTIVES

1. Students will be able to compare and contrast the need for sewing skills in the nineteenth century and today.
2. Students will be able to discuss the effects of the sewing machine in Kansas.
3. Students will be able to assess the reliability of a diary as a historical source.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The sewing machine was first invented in 1832. Isaac Singer refined the sewing machine and patented his version in 1851. He widely promoted the sale of sewing machines and introduced the concept of the installment payment plan allowing greater distribution of the sewing machine. In 1860, factories were selling 111,000 machines a year. The Singer home model cost \$75 in 1860, but by 1871 a comparable model sold for \$25. By 1850, the sewing machine was in home use, but it was not until after the Civil War when the price dropped that it was in wide use. At this time it became available to women from a variety of social classes.

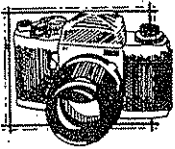
It is difficult for us today to understand the joy that came with the purchase of a sewing machine. To give the students an idea of the importance of the sewing machine, a passage from *Sod and Stubble* or *The White Lamb* might be read. Both novels are about the experiences of settlers in western Kansas, and both have passages that reveal the importance of the sewing machine.

Ise, John. *Sod and Stubble*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967, p. 81-82.
Lindsay, Mela Meisner. *Shukar Balan . . . The White Lamb*. Lincoln: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1983, p. 226-29.

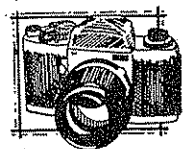
VOCABULARY

Diary	A daily or periodic record of personal activities and thoughts.
Piecing	To sew together pieces of fabric to form a quilt top.
Quilting Bee	The gathering of a group of quilters to work on a quilt.
Quilting Frame	The frame a quilt is put in to stretch the three layers flat while it is quilted.
Sewing Machine	A machine designed to stitch fabric together.

ACTIVITIES



1) Share *photograph #4* with the students. Explain that at one time children learned to sew at around six years of age. Using *photograph #4* explain that young girls often became exposed to sewing through their attendance at quilting bees. It was often the young girls' job to thread the needles for the women. Children often played around and under the quilting frame as their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts quilted. Many girls by the time they were in fifth grade had made several quilts. Young boys might learn to sew also. Often when boys were confined to their beds due to illness they were given sewing projects (usually quiltmaking) to occupy their time. Discuss why children do not learn to sew in first grade anymore? (Invention of sewing machine means kids don't need to practice hand sewing. More factory-made clothing means women do not need to devote their lives to sewing. Girls, therefore, can spend more time on academics.)



2) Share with the students *photograph #5*. This photograph (ca. 1900) is of a sewing class at Kansas State University. Notice the women are both hand sewing and using a sewing machine. Explain that the sewing machine was invented in 1832 and was widely available after the Civil War.

3) Discuss how students learn to sew today. Do they learn to sew on a machine or do they learn to hand sew? Are sewing machines affordable today? (Machines start at about \$100 today.) Why would people want to hand sew today? (Hand sewing is no longer a necessity since factory-made clothes are so readily available. Most people sew for creativity, fun, and relaxation.)

a) At this point the students could make a chart showing the reasons for sewing in the 1800s and today. For example, under the 1800s the students might list the need to make clothes and bedding, while under the column for today they might list creativity or fun.

4) Show the students the *diary*. Have the students read the *diary* aloud or read it to them. Introduce the document by explaining that Mary Schenck was eighteen years old in 1876 when she wrote the *diary*. She lived in Springdale, which is near Leavenworth. Her stepmother had recently died and she kept house for her father, brothers, and sisters. She stopped keeping this *diary* soon after her father remarried.



a) Have the students notice the spelling and the punctuation in the *diary*. The way in which it is written may seem strange to some students. Help them to see past the spelling and the grammar. Also point out that many words may not be familiar. You might have the students look up the words in the dictionary or discuss the possible meaning of some phrases.

Special Vocabulary

Basque	A tight-fitting bodice for women.
Brant	A wild goose.
Bedstead	The framework of a bed.
Blacked the stove	Restoring the color of the stove through a "painting" and cleaning process.
Carpet Rags	Strips of used fabric for making rag rugs.
Chemmazette	Really "chemisette" meaning a women's garment that fills the open front of a dress, often of lace.
Churn	Agitating cream to make butter.
Comfort	Can be another name for quilt.
Commenced	To begin.
Forenoon	Early part of the day, ending with noon (morning).
Knitting	The art of using needles and yarn or thread to create connected loops that form an article of clothing.
Lounge	A long couch.
Picked the Geese	Pulling the down and feathers off the geese.
Mending	The act of repairing cloth.

Set a hen	Encourage the hen to sit on and hatch the eggs.
Tatting	The process of making lace using a hand shuttle.
Waist	A child's undergarment to which other garments may be buttoned.

The family

Mary

Firman (who moved out to live away, probably as an apprentice)

Esley (a sister who had married and moved away)

Naomi (nicknamed Omy, she spent much of the time at Esley's house)

Isaac

John

Edith

Zena

Zeruiah

Levi

b) Discuss Mary's list of housework (needlework, ironing, cooking, washing, cleaning, and gardening). Note that they divided up the work, and during weeks that Mary cooked she had little other work to do. Also note how much sewing she did everyday, and remind the students that she was responsible for a good deal of the family's clothing and bedding. Point out how often she mentioned making quilts (she mentioned making eleven different quilts on thirty different days). Quiltmaking must have been something she enjoyed. Mary lived into her nineties and estimated that she made over three hundred quilts in her life.

c) Point out that Mary mentioned several quilt patterns by name including Winding Blade, Nine Patch, and Crowfoot.

5) Ask the students what they think of the *diary* in terms of telling us something about the past. Does reading it help us to understand the importance of sewing and quiltmaking in everyday life? Continue the discussion by encouraging the students to think of the value of diaries as historical sources. Now ask them the disadvantage of using diaries as historical sources. Is Mary's experience as an eighteen year old in 1876 typical? Does Mary represent all women of that time?

ASSESSMENT

Levels of Achievement

For Objective 1

- a) Students recognize that more people learned to sew in the nineteenth century than today.
- b) Students explain reasons for this.
- c) Students realize that some people learn to sew today too.

For Objective 2

- a) Students identify one or two effects of the sewing machine (e.g., less people sew, clothes are more readily available).
- b) Students are able to go into greater depth about the effect of the sewing machine and offer a variety of examples (e.g., women can spend more time on academic study, hand sewing becomes more of a hobby).

For Objective 3

- a) Students recognize either advantages or disadvantages in using a diary as a historical source.
- b) Students recognize both advantages and disadvantages (e.g., advantages: first hand account, detailed information; disadvantages: only from one point of view, distorted).
- c) Students conclude that the best use of a diary is in conjunction with other historical sources.



EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1) Language Experience

Have the students keep diaries for at least a week. Point out that Mary Schenck wrote down the work she did every day and little of her fun or personal feelings. She must have had a lot of fun but did not write it down. Why? (Possibly because she wrote this knowing that her father or another adult might read it.) In your diary what things could you include? Would you want anyone to read it? What would Mary think if she knew we were reading her diary today?