

# Making History One Stitch At A Time

July 18, 2015



Photo caption: This sewing machine, made by Singer, dates to the 1870s, and was owned by Lydia Labar of Ithaca. It's now part of The History Center's collection.

## A Machine That Has Changed History Stitch by Stitch

With the exception of the clock, the sewing machine was the first piece of mechanical technology to become a household fixture. From the early to mid-twentieth century, it was unusual to find a household without a sewing machine. The time saved, and the economy of sewing clothing and home furnishings, freed many women from the drudgery of hand stitching.

To this day, the sewing machine has a paradoxical history. Its influence in the home, in women's lives, and on workers around the world presents several contradictions.

Even before its widespread use, the potential consequences of the sewing machine were both feared and revered. Tailors in France rebelled against an early version of the machine in 1831, invading a factory and smashing the devilish invention. Marx warned against its use to oppress workers. Gandhi saw it as a way to lift his people from poverty.

As an invention, the sewing machine is ingenious. Perfected over 160 years ago, the technology is simple, scalable, and versatile. Sewing machines have been used for projects as varied as sewing together the heat shields for space shuttles, or to construct artificial heart valves. No matter the size or shape, the action of the machine is the same: A top thread is carried by a needle to pick up a bottom thread and create a locked stitch in whatever material is to be sewn together.

Commercially, the sewing machine brought new efficiencies to tailor's shops, dressmakers, shoemakers, hat makers, saddlers, and more. It provided opportunities for unmarried and widowed women to earn an independent living.

When garment factories began to appear in the United States in the 1870s and '80s, the darker side of the sewing machine emerged. From its beginning, the clothing industry was built on the mechanical reliability of the sewing machine and the availability of cheap female labor.

Mass-produced clothing was typically made in unhealthy conditions where long hours and low pay were commonplace. Strikes and industry reforms started in the early 1900s, although not in time to prevent the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in 1911 when nearly 150 women were trapped and perished in locked workrooms.

Over the following decades, workplace safety rules and minimum wage laws improved sweatshop conditions in this country until the expense of these improvements drove the jobs overseas to areas where regulations were lax.

Marx and Gandhi were both right, of course. The market demand for vast quantities of garments has created a widespread system of worker oppression. Women are often exploited in unspeakable ways, and yet the pay they receive helps support their families and children. The collapse of an eight-story garment factory in Bangladesh that killed over 1,000 people, mostly women, in 2013 has spurred stronger efforts to reform this problematic industry.

Behind the turmoil sits the machine that was for decades a family fixture, used with love countless times to make children's clothing, wedding dresses, and prom gowns. The sewing machine brought about a proliferation of practical and artistic quilt making, and is the foundation of fashion design.

It is impossible not to admire a fine old sewing machine, with its sleek lines and gold filigree decals. Nearly flawless mechanically, a 100-year-old home sewing machine will still sew beautifully. Contemporary sewing machine manufacturers have ironically turned this once lifetime possession into a throwaway item – but whether it is a functional relic or a plastic imitation, the sewing machine still engages us as an indispensable invention.

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Wendy Skinner is the founder and director of SewGreen.

### **Sewing Machine Talk**

Learn more about the sewing machine's paradoxical history and its influence in the home, in women's lives, and on workers around the world. Wendy Skinner will be giving a talk on the history of this fascinating invention at The History Center, 401 East State Street, Ithaca, Saturday July 18<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 PM.

### **About SewGreen**

SewGreen is a not-for-profit reuse/resale program for textiles, fiber, sewing supplies – and now art supplies. They are located at 112 N Cayuga Street in downtown Ithaca NY. They offer classes in sewing and knitting, and provide jobs and apprenticeships for teens and young adults. Store hours are 10 am to 6 pm weekdays, 10 am to 5 pm Saturday, Noon to 5 pm Sunday. [www.sewgreen.org](http://www.sewgreen.org)