

## Sitting at my Grandmother's Sewing Machine

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My grandmother, Emma Groeger, had a treadle sewing machine that sat in the corner of her kitchen facing a west window. You can see it in the picture below of my mother, sister, our dog Casey, and I hanging out in the kitchen in the



1960s. The kitchen was the heart of my grandmother's house. Not only did we all spend a lot of time in her kitchen when we visited but when we were gone she spent her days in that sunny west-facing corner sewing for her neighbors.

I had a deep nostalgia for that sewing machine. My sister and I were allowed to sit in the chair and work the pedals. We watched the sharp little needle flashing up and down.

We got to go through the drawers

looking at the spools of colored thread, the tiny scissors, thimbles, cards of rick-rack and ribbon, and other sewing paraphernalia. Best of all, the middle drawer on the left was full of buttons. Big buttons, baby buttons, cloth covered buttons, pearl buttons... every shape, color and size. My sister and I would pour them all out on the kitchen table and take turns picking until we had divided the whole pile. Grandma then gave us each a needle threaded with a long thread and a button at the end and we made ourselves button necklaces.

When my grandmother died very suddenly her sewing machine came to live at my parent's house. It got tucked away down in the basement in a corner. We could see it, but no one could work the pedals any more or look in the middle drawer because the sewing machine was blocked by the sofa.

One afternoon, 20 years after my grandmother died, my mother and I were



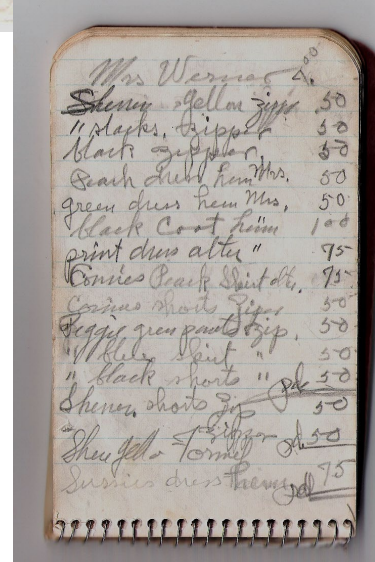
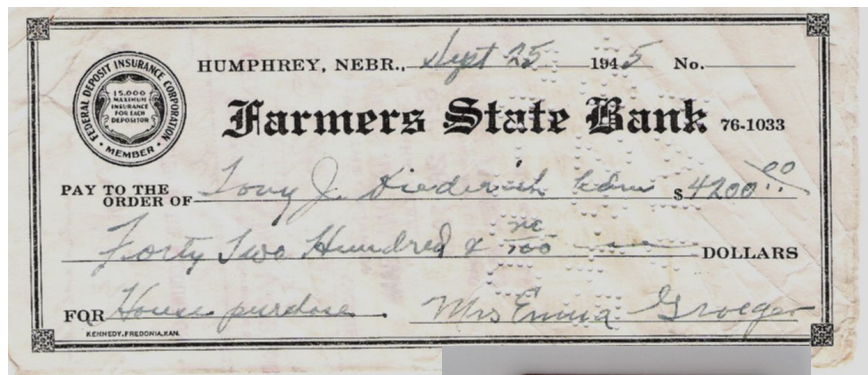
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reminiscing about Grandma and I suddenly said “Do you suppose the buttons are still there in the machine drawer?” My mother said she didn’t see why they wouldn’t be; nothing had been touched or moved since Grandma last used the machine. In a flash, we were down in the basement pulling the old sewing machine out where we could look at it.

It was amazing to sit where my Grandmother had sat so many hours of her life and to know that her machine was just exactly as she had left it the day that she died. Yes, the buttons were all there! And, as we opened the drawers, there was also a faint scent of my grandmother and clear evidence of her life right down to the pencil stubs that were sharpened by razor blade, and the little spiral notebooks she used to keep track of her jobs.

Most importantly, we found something that day that completely changed my view of my Grandmother. We found, tucked into the most current of her little spiral notebooks, the final, canceled check she used to pay for her house from all her little 10 cent, 50 cent, and one dollar sewing jobs. The check was dated 1945 and my Grandmother died in the late 1960s. Clearly she had transferred that cancelled check from job book to job book over the years to remind herself of what she had accomplished with her work.



I never thought of my grandmother as a business woman. My family thought of Grandma as a “housewife who took in a little sewing on the side.” However finding this canceled check prompted my mother to tell me the real story. My grandfather was sick, hospitalized, and unable to work for many years during the Great Depression. At times the family was so poor they lived on tomatoes and bread. My grandmother gardened and made all the family clothes but still my mother had to quit taking her beloved piano lessons because the family couldn’t afford

the 50 cents per week they cost. Eventually my grandmother was hired to run a youth center in her town for the WPA and later, when the center closed, she boarded students from farm families during the school week, often getting paid

in chickens, eggs and vegetables which kept her family fed. She began "taking in sewing" (which should really read "began her own custom sewing business") during a time when other job opportunities were not open to women and at a time when small town families could not



afford "store-boughten" clothes. (Read that "she found a great niche for her services!") All during the Depression she not only kept clothes on her family's backs and food on the table but she managed to set a little money aside each week until she had enough to purchase a lovely two story house, the very house she had dreamed of owning for years. It cost her \$6,000 in the 1940s but she paid for it with the pennies, nickels and dimes she earned with her sewing.

Had I not sat at my Grandmother's sewing machine I might never have known she was an entrepreneur and business woman or that she was so proud of herself that she kept a reminder of her success in the sewing machine she used until the day she died.