COLLECTING TOY SEWING MACHINES

Written and Photographed by June Grayson

Lois Dixon began to sew when she was nine years old -"as soon as my legs were long enough for my feet to reach the sewing machine treadle," she says.

She learned to make her own clothes, worked on 4H sewing projects in high school, majored in home economics at the University of Kentucky at Lexington, and taught home economics in three states. Now - since her recent early retirement -she is still sewing and loving every minute of it.

No wonder Dixon, as well as many other home economics

teachers and seamstresses, likes to collect toy sewing machines - especially since they are made of the same materials and operate in the same fashion as adult sewing machines. Doll collectors and working-toy collectors also find toy sewing machines irresistible.

Dixon bought most of her machines in the 1970s at garages sales and flea markets. Now she and her husband, Mack Dixon, formerly with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, are antique dealers in St. Charles, Illinois. "Be prepared to pay more than the antique price guides suggest," Dixon warns. "The newer models may cost $20-$30, while the rarer ones bring as much as $110-$120."

Until recently, sewing ability was a necessary skill for all women. Ready-made clothing was expensive and not always accessible to the small towns and rural communities of early America.

Dixon, the youngest of six children of a Kentucky farm family, remembers, "Our biggest treat as children was to go into town with father when he went to buy cattle feed. A farmer's wife always salvaged those empty, coarse cotton sacks to make dish towels or petticoats, so eventually the feed companies

printed beautiful colored patterns on the sacks. We always tried to get three or four sacks alike so we would have enough for a new dress."

The sewing machine was the first widely distributed mechanical home appliance and played an important part in the industrial revolution. The challenge had been to invent an interlocking stitch that would not pull out. Elias Howe, of Spencer, Massachusetts, patented the first sewing machine in 1846. Other inventors also claimed credit for the discovery and patent wars ensued. Howe and his patent merged with Isaac Singer to found the Singer Sewing Machine Company. The Singer Company was to dominate the sewing machine market for the next one hundred years. In 1860, more that 110,000 sewing machines were produced in the United States alone.

Since then, sewing machine designs have been adapted for hundreds of specialized industrial uses, but the basic operation remains the same. The foot-powered treadle and pulley freed the operator's hands, allowing the sewer to work longer and more efficiently. Sewing machines have had electric motors for the last fifty years, but treadle machines are still common in those parts of the world where electricity is not readily available.

Toy sewing machines were made to be used. Traveling

salesmen for the sewing machine companies used the toys as sales models. Little girls dreamed of receiving them as Christmas or birthday presents. Advertising promotions reflected the belief that even play was a serious educational pursuit: "Practical and Instructive," or "As the Twig is Bent the Tree's Inclined."

Very few toy treadle sewing machines were produced, so if you can find one in good condition, you should buy it immediately. Such a toy, called the Little Daisy, was patented in 1883.

Even more unique was the "figural" sewing machine. The right arm of the figure held a rod which secured the fabric clamp. The left hand gripped the needle. Turning a porcelain handle on the figure's back caused the left hand to move up and down as it guided the thread through the fabric. Max Standt of Germany received a patent in 1891 for a figural machine with nine variations. Only two variations are known to have been made - one a Victorian lady and the other a clown. Since these machines are so rare, they do not need to be in perfect condition to be collectible, as well as astronomically priced.

Regardless of these early patent dates, toy sewing machines did not appear in quantity until the turn of the century.

Sturdily made of cast iron in Germany and the United States, they could be used for family sewing in emergencies. They were slow because the operator had to rotate the handle to move the needle through the fabric.

The quality of these toys declined during the depression of 1932 and the second World War due to shortages of heavy gauge metals and skilled workmen.

Perhaps the best quality toy sewing machines were not made by a toy manufacturer at all but were made by the Singer Company, the same company that dominated the full size sewing machine market. The first Singer models of painted and stenciled cast iron appeared around 1910. Fortunately, collectors can find dozens of variations. The machines are more valuable if they come with their original accessories and packing boxes.

Dixon does not know of any company making toy sewing machines today. Homes do not need a sewing machine. Young ladies are no longer expected to be expert seamstresses. "Girls must take one year of home economics in junior high," Dixon explains, "but in high school it is only an elective subject. Girls on the college track don't have time for sewing projects. Women who work outside the home often don't have the time or energy to sew when they are home. Fabrics cost as much

as ready made clothing."

Dixon still sews. She is making Confederate army uniforms, authentic down to the last bone button. Both her husband and her son participate in the Civil War Re-Enactment Pageants so popular now throughout the United States on the 125th Anniversary of the Civil War.

Home sewing will continue for creative, if not economic reasons, Dixon thinks. "Women will always want to make beautiful things for their homes."

#####