

Take your needle, my child, and work at your pattern; it will come out a rose by and by. Life is like that - one stitch at a time taken patiently and the pattern will come out all right like the embroidery. - so said Oliver Wendel Holmes.

My mother taught me the gentle art of embroidery when I was quite young, and many other skills both practical and spiritual. Work of the hands is like that. And so we long to make things, if only we knew how.

Welcome to Vintage Americana - exploring and restoring rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and in this episode we're going to talk about how those skills have been passed down - hand to hand to hand. And what happens to us when they aren't.

I still remember sewing my first dress as a 4-H project. I might have been 8 or 9 years old. It was a very simple, striped seersucker sundress, with an equally simple eyelet vest to go over the top. It was nearly done, but for the hem. And so, at that week's meeting, I sat in a chair at Mrs. Bloss's table. Her old singer and Mom's Pfaff hummed along as other girls worked on their own projects. Mrs. Bloss's old treadle machine in the bedroom creaked in time with its own ribbon - there were never quite enough machines to go around for all the girls at the weekly meeting but we made do.

Hemming, Mom insisted, was best performed by hand. So she'd shown me how to carefully press and pin up the hem of the dress, checking the depth of the hem with a seam gauge every few inches. Then, we sat at the table and she showed me the nearly invisible stitch best used for the purpose. The stripes helped me learn spaced, counting three stripes between each stitch. Round the bottom of the skirt I went, slowly but surely. Learning all the bits of muscle memory necessary to become proficient.

Mom, clearly, had a lesson plan in mind. For, without my really noticing, she directed me the next year to a pattern that had a plain white bodice - with pintucks - and a print skirt. Once again, striped. This one was a pretty floral striped ticking, and I loved that little dress for as long as it fit. I was quite put out that the metal tab from the sweepstakes ribbon it one left a small rust stain on the white fabric. Mom to the rescue again - got it out. She understood, without every mentioning it to me, that having a visual guide for stitch length helped train young hands and eyes to consistency. Throughout my 4H sewing career, she made sure to gradually increase the complexity and add new skills. From simple elastic, to buttons and buttonholes, to zippers. From gathers to pleats. Sleeveless to sleeves. Confidence and skill built gradually over time. As a little girl

learned the all the little tricks common to the workbasket of the 1950's dressmaker, even when they weren't specified in the instructions of the purchased pattern.

I hadn't given much thought to the difference in my instruction in the art of sewing, until a few years ago. One of the incidents that brought it to my attention was a trip to the local fabric store for some supplies to make a dress for one of my daughters. We're blessed to have a little chain of shops in the area that are NOT a national chain, and are regularly staffed with women who are themselves adept at sewing. They carry a much wider selection of nicer, natural fiber fabrics. But even here, I was having trouble finding what I needed, and had to ask for assistance. The right bolt was located, and as she unrolled a bit off to cut my requested yardage, I laughed and said, "You'd think I was the last person left on Earth who uses silk organza for sleeve heads in puffed sleeves." Her lips flattened for just a moment before she replied, "You are!."

I did learn a number of things from Dad, as well. There were lessons in his shop as we made some pinewood derby cars together for the AWANA tournament. But, by and large, I preferred the gentler arts of sewing, embroidery, baking, canning and gardening. And so I followed Mom around, soaking things up like a little sponge.

Sadly, as a member of Gen X, I was something of an exception, rather than the rule. Our predecessors of the Baby Boomer generation had largely rejected many of these skills as unsuitable for budding feminists or their place in the modern world. Something that didn't start to become apparent to me until junior high school. It was, I think, 8th grade when I wound up in a home economics course, there being little else left that fit into my schedule, since I was in neither band nor chorale.

The first attempt at this placed me in a sewing class. Week one, we spent sewing straight lines down notebook paper. After about 30 minutes of this, we took a break, and the teacher showed us some of the letter pillow patterns we could choose as our semester project. When she sent us back to our notebook paper for more practice, I quietly raised my hand, and explained where my sewing skills were.

I was rather promptly moved into the cooking class, instead. This went only slightly better, although I did at least learn how to put out a grease fire when one of my classmates set a wok on fire.

Not that school-based classes are not useful. They certainly can be. My father began a

lifelong love a woodworking in shop class. One of his projects is a beech wood dresser that my sister has laid claim to (drat her). Over the years, I have been the recipient of more than one lovely piece of furniture or other wooden item for my use or enjoyment. This includes bookcases, a jewelry box, a swift for winding skeins of yarn, and any number of other projects. Although the treasure is a dollhouse he made for me when I was young. It's a thing of beauty, with double hung windows that open and close, variable width wood flooring, and real window sills and door molding throughout. I treasure it still, and on my project list is getting it wired for tiny lights, then finishing its decoration and furnishing.

Even in my own generation, when we still had these classes, they were useful and inspiring. A dear friend and classmate used his wood shop time to make a queen sized bed. He's gone on to be both an adept carpenter as well as a successful custom home builder.

The old apprentice system had a lot to be said for it. Young hands learn best. Even now, my strongest skills tend to be those learned while still quite young, even when I may go years without learning them. And, while one certainly CAN learn to be a fine carpenter after retirement, I don't know if that person would ever have quite the feel for the tasks as someone who started at 13 or 14. Muscle memory and certain motor skills, as well as knowledge of what different processes FEEL like in the hands, are something that can only be acquired by repetition. And, for whatever reason, we acquire those skills more quickly and more thoroughly when we are very young.

Even the understanding of how things work, and how to adjust to circumstances is best learned when young. This is something I've finally learned in 20 years of marriage. My husband lost his father when he was very young, and so missed out on a lot of the casual absorption of basic skills around the house. Dad is happy to advise, but it leads to some - interesting stories.

Our current house, a little 1947 Cape Cod, has a door on the stairwell to the upstairs. It's a heavy, solid wood door, and over the years had started to pull on the top hinge, to the point where the bottom started to scrape on the top step when it was opened and closed. My husband tried the obvious thing - a longer screw to hold the hinge in place. That worked for a few weeks. The hole for the screw had just gotten so worn that there was nothing for the threads to sink into. So, a call was placed to Dad. To him, this was an extremely simple fix. He advised that my husband find a small piece of wood, like a

match stick, cover it with wood glue, place it in the whole, let the glue start to set up, and THEN replace the hinge and screw. The small bit of wood would fill in the worn out hole and provide purchase for the screw.

Easy, right?

Well. And then. My husband upended the junk drawer, in search of wooden matches. Nothing. He went to three different stores - none. I made the suggestion that since the purpose of the exercise was to fill the hole with wood, he could go grab one of the cedar shims in the garage, break off a small piece and use that.

"Your Dad said 'matchstick!'" he insisted, and continued the search. He did find some wooden matchsticks at an old-fashioned hardware store that also has an excellent selection of camping gear. And the repair was completed. Thus far, 2 years and holding perfectly.

Dad was highly entertained. Yes, he said, the cedar splinter would have worked just as well. But maybe don't tell him for a while.

What happens when an entire generation is raised without this transmission of skill from hand to hand to hand?

Hipsters. Adulting classes. Website upon blog upon youtube channel demonstrating some skillset that was commonplace among the Silent generation and every one before it - put forth as an achievement worth celebrating by a generation rediscovering them.

I admit that this sometimes sticks in my craw a bit. A generation whose parents chose Vlassic pickles and Smuckers Jam over home made preserves now trumpet the superiority of "Food in Jars!" as a discovery on a par with turning Lead into Gold.

It isn't the rediscovery of the skills that I object to. That, in itself, is a good thing. It's the attitude that each such rediscovery should be greeted with a ticker tape parade. AND that the rediscoverers are now the fount of all knowledge on the topic. Which is where I beg to differ.

Let's talk for a moment about autodidacts and the hidden traps they face. An autodidact is someone who chooses to learn without benefit of mentor or institution.

Whether that is from books, videos, or experimentation. Sometimes this works out OK. And other times, what you miss out on is something that 1600 years or more of repetition has gotten down to a better process.

I can share a couple of examples of autodidact moments.

Once upon a time, I belonged to a large group of historical re-enactors. Because this sort of thing requires period dress, sewing rapidly becomes nearly required. However, historical costuming is an entirely different skill set than modern pattern sewing. (Even though the Big Three Pattern companies offer some patterns - most of them are laughably inaccurate from a historical perspective and often avoided by members of re-enactment groups) There are a LOT of sewing autodidacts in these groups. And sometimes, the result is outfits that are nearly pinned and hot glued together. Others, though become very skilled.

One of the events, aimed at promoting and increasing the skills involved in creating an authentic outfit was called "The Quest for the Golden Seamstress." Participants had something like 24 hours to create an entire costume from the skin out - patterns to be drafted on site. At around 2 AM, a friend handed me the bodice pieces to the gown to sew together. She had drafted it from her measurements, and it was something she'd done many times. I took the pieces, and assembled the bodice using the standard 5/8" seam allowance, then handed it back. She tried it on and it was MUCH too small.

"What did you do?" she asked, "this ought to fit perfectly!" She took it off, turned it back out and examined the seams. "How much seam allowance is this?"

I blinked. "5/8"

"I drafted it with 1/4" seam allowances!"

So, I picked out the seams and reassembled at 1/4". It then fit perfectly. The point of disconnect? Because she was an autodidact, and only ever sewed hand drafted patterns for historical gowns, she was unaware that the industry standard is 5/8". And so that is what most people who were TAUGHT to sew will default to, unless it is stipulated otherwise. And, of course the reason for this is to allow room for alterations later, should they be needed. Or even alterations during assembly, since commercial patterns are hardly custom drafted.

This doesn't mean that she was WRONG. Just that she lacked a piece of information that would be assumed by anyone who had been taught to sew. And her practice might make her life more challenging down the road, should she ever want to let out a seam.

A more famous, and very successful autodidact is Christine McConnell. Maybe you've seen her youtube channel, instagram account, or the Netflix show. She makes jaw-droppingly incredible cakes, confections, crafts, and dresses. But there are moments...

My husband and I were watching an episode of her show, in which she was making herself a new dress. In order to create the darts, she held up the fabric, cut out a rough wedge with the scissors, and then pinned it to sew.

According to my husband, I stared at the screen and my eye began to twitch. Possibly I stopped breathing for a moment, he's not sure. And then I set out on a tirade about darts.

Short version - that is NOT how you make a dart for a dress. Or anything else. Did it work? Well, yes. On camera. And maybe that works for her. But the potential for disaster falls into the "red alert" portion of the scale. Again, an autodidact could very well look at a garment, examine the dart, and assume this was the technique. In fact, a dart should be marked, sewn carefully without any back stitching, the ends tied off, and the placement checked. ONLY once they are determined to be correct is the excess fabric trimmed away. It allows the option of picking the dart out and resewing it if it sits in the wrong place or takes up too much fabric, etc. If you cut the dart first, and it's not right... you're screwed.

And nobody is immune from this. My mother was not much of a knitter. On top of that, she was left handed. So this was not a skill I learned from her. My grandmother WAS - but she and I didn't get along terribly well. She had taught me to crochet, her preferred hobby, but never bothered with knitting.

So, soon after getting married, I found myself in a new town, all alone - my husband was still an active duty Marine. I decided now was a good time to learn. I bought needles, yarn, and a book. I seemed to get along well enough, for a couple of months. But I was also lonely, so I signed up for a beginning knitting class at a local yarn store. The first day, as dear, patient Ruth walked around the room she looked at what I had on my

needles. "Oh," she said, "were you intending to knit that whole thing in twisted stockinette?"

"Um, no?"

"Ah, well, you're putting the tip of your needle through the back loop of each stitch, which twists it. Let me show you how to do it the other way."

And after a few minutes of THAT, she politely suggested that I try bamboo needles.

She was right about that, too. It's probably both abusive and counter-productive to try to teach someone to knit on aluminum needles with cheap acrylic yarn. The slip factor and splitting yarn add up to make it MUCH more difficult. Likely causing more than a few people to give up in disgust. But these are the materials available in most national craft stores, and the likeliest things to be picked up by someone who has decided to teach themselves.

We lose so much when we break the chain. All those little tips and tricks learned by doing AND learned because they were passed down.

Another example is family recipes. Many a treasured dish can't be reconstructed successfully by just having a list of ingredients. It's as much about the "how" as the "what." The butterscotch pie recipe my mother often made for church potlucks is one of these. Throw things together and you will get an unpleasant mix of brown sugar syrup, bits of scrambled egg, and uncooked lumps of flour. Do it right, and you have a fabulous dessert nothing like anything else you can find on Pinterest.

Just as treasured is my great-grandmother's sugar cookie recipe. Soft, sweet, and redolent with almond flavor, they're nothing like the crisp, often tasteless flour-laden frosted cookies that usually go by that name anywhere else. For years the recipe wasn't even written down, it existed solely in her head. My mother spent an afternoon with her grandmother, while she was on a break from nurse's training and followed her around the kitchen with a notepad. This exercise was complicated by the fact that no actual measuring cups were soiled in the process. At one point, Mom asked just how much flour. The response? "Till it looks right."

So, Mom took her notes, and the experience of watching her grandmother make them

repeatedly, and baked, and measured until it "looked right." Now it's not Christmas without them.

None of this is to say that there is anything at all wrong with watching youtube videos on how to knit or buying books on quilting, nor enrolling in an online cooking class. But we're social creatures. Interaction is important. Sometimes we misunderstand something that the instructor considered so obvious as not to need explaining. A prominent chef once told a story about teaching his son and his friends to cook. He asked them to zest some lemons, then turned away to prep the next element of the dish for them. When he turned back, they had diligently removed all the outer yellow part of the lemond rinds - and thrown it away, proudly offering him a bowl of naked, white lemons.

Things like podcasts, and Skillshare, Craftsy and Great Courses are certainly an aspect of technology that has much to be said for it. The correspondence courses of the modern age, they let us pursue interests from the comfort of our own homes, on our own schedules.

But give some thought to taking a class. A real, in-person class. You'll learn things no video can teach you AND you'll have a chance to meet people who share your interests. Sometimes it's just passing a pleasant hour with other folks - that knitting class I mentioned? I don't even really remember the other ladies in it. On the other hand, when my schedule permitted, I belonged to a quilting guild. Although I don't have the time to attend meetings anymore, a few of those ladies remain friends. And I learned more than one new technique, because meetings included an educational portion put on by a member.

If you have young teenagers, this may be even more important. I think the push for all kids to go to college is incredibly misguided for a number of reasons. Not everybody should, and not everybody wants to. And the long term effect has been to dilute the usefulness of some degree programs.

Along with shop classes, we've also been gradually losing another purveyor of these skill sets - youth-oriented programs like 4H and FFA. 4H in particular has been a little inclined to dilute their offerings in a couple of ways. The first is an attempt to appeal more widely to kids who are not part of a rural community and are not interested in agriculture by pushing STEM and leadership programs. And the second is the tendency



of the 4H livestock programs to be excessively influenced both by the livestock show industry and by the temptation to chase the larger pay-offs from auction over real learning for the kids. But they are still there and they can be a great thing if you can find (or start!) the right local club. FFA clubs tend to be limited to those schools who still maintain an AG program in the formal curriculum. So it can be difficult if your school system doesn't offer these things.

Think about, if you've got a child who has an interest in something more hands-on, establishing a relationship with someone who does that thing for living. There is no reason we can't revive some elements of the old apprentice system. In exchange for being allowed to hang around and soak up some of that experience, any kid can do simple tasks around the workshop. The fine carpenter who worked on my parents' house had a young man with him who might have been 17. And had been helping long enough to be allowed to make some of the miter cuts and fit the molding around the doors. A younger kid might help clean up the job site, fetch and carry things, and hold items and tools while getting a feel for the profession.

Also pay attention to older relatives. Spend time with Aunt Betsy in the kitchen. Get her to teach you to make the traditional Christmas brunch Stollen, so that someone can carry on the tradition. I used to watch Uncle Jake harness the horses in rapt fascination. I could probably do it myself, now, in a pinch. That seems like a pointless skill, but one never knows. And if we let these things fall out of practice, we may lose them completely.

If you want a bit of passive entertainment that makes the point, the BBC hit on a winning formula a number of years ago. For each season, they would plunk a team of historians and archaeologists into a historical setting and set them the goal of spending the next year doing all the tasks the people from that era would have needed to master to make a living. Unsurprisingly, even though they knew in intellectual terms what things needed doing, putting it into practice was another thing altogether. Era by era, the shows are "Tales of the Green Valley" - in an 18th century setting, "Victorian Farm," "Edwardian Farm," "War Farm," and "Tudor Monastery Farm," all of which are more obvious in terms of setting. Look around various platforms and you can probably find all of them.

What is present in all these shows, although not always emphasized, is that much of what goes on is aided by someone who has made either a career or a long term hobby out of maintaining and using the skill that our Erstwhile Heroes need. Whether it's a

thatcher, a ploughman, a shepherd, a tailor, a basket maker, or another long-passed skill, there seems to still be a few people practicing it.

Seek these people out. If you have any interest in learning something that time has passed by, do it. Who knows, you might end up as a guest star on TV someday! And if not, you'll find something you enjoy and you'll preserve a skill that someone may need down the road.

You can find rural skills schools all over the country. These are organizations or small businesses dedicated to keeping the fire burning. Places like the John C. Campbell Folk School, the Driftless Folk School, and Tillers international are places you can go to spend anywhere from a few days to a few weeks learning blacksmithing, basketweaving, plowing with draft horses, tractor repair, and any number of other useful skills for the modern homesteader or rural denizen.

You can also look for local enthusiasts. Want to learn about vintage tractor engines so you can keep Grandpa's old John Deere B running? Find a local club and learn the ins and outs from the people who keep them and bring them from event to event all summer long. Join a homebrewing club. Or a quilt guild. Most of these organizations LOVE new people and will fall over themselves in their delight at having someone new to share their passions with.

We have a deep-seated need to do things with our hands. This is why even people with highly-paid office jobs often are dedicated to hobbies that involve making things. We derive a sense of satisfaction from making and fixing things that cannot be gained in any other way.

Set aside some time this month to learn to do something new. Look around for a group or class near you that could help you expand your skills. Or, teach someone you know how to do something new. Me? I have some mending to do, and I just got a new book on darning. But maybe I'll take a few things along when I see my Mom this weekend. I bet she can show me her technique. It's time to hand on a skill.

Are you coming?

We have a deep-seated need to do things with our hands. This is why even people with highly paid office jobs often pursue a hobby with their hands. There is a satisfaction that can't be gained any other way.

