Hilltop Cloud

Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Members,

On July 9th 1819 marks the birth of the man who is credited with inventing the sewing machine. Elias Howe was from Massachusetts, and he created his machine in 1845. However, as with so many inventions, it's not a straightforward story.
Mechanisation of sewing dates back to 1755, Charles Fredrick Weisenthal, a German-born engineer working in England was awarded the first British patent for a needle intended to be used in a sewing machine, But the trail of development then stops, it doesn't appear that he went on to develop the actual machine. In 1790 a man called Thomas Saint did patent a machine that was designed to sewing together leather. It used an awl to punch a hole, which was followed up by a needle carrying the thread. Saint was a cabinet maker, and although no working examples of his machine survive, replicas have been made from his plans, though they did need substantial modification. Critics have suggested that he never actually made a working machine.
Further men developed ideas, patented them, and produced working examples, but the first practical machine that was widely used was designed by Frenchman Barthélemy Thimonnier. Hi machine was patented in 1830, and used in a factory that created uniforms for the French Army.

All of these machines used what's known as the chain stitch, which looked to replicated the way a hand sewing needle functions. American Walter Hunt developed the first lockstitch machine in 1832. This is the first machine that uses a bobbin thread under the fabric to lock the top thread in to place. Issues with the feed mechanism meant the machine was never commercially viable, and it wasn't patented until 1854.

In 1844 all the disparate elements of the various machines were combined by British inventor John Fisher. It was designed to produce lace, but had all the elements of a working sewing machine. Due to this it was misfiled at the patent office, and John Fisher wasn't credited with his invention.

Instead we move forward to our credited inventor Elias Howe, and a name synonymous with sewing machines, Isaac Merritt Singer. Howe was the first to create his machine, and to patent it, but despite repeated demonstrations showing the efficiency of his machine he couldn't find a commercial backer. He came to England, to try to find a manufacturing partner, and while he was away the American sewing machine market exploded, lead by Singer. Howe filed for patent infringement, and won, Singer had to pay him $1.15 for every machine already sold, and then entered in to a partnership to license his idea.

Over the next century millions of Singer sewing machines were produced. A factory was established in Clydebank, Scotland. From its opening in 1884 until 1943 36,000,000 sewing machines were made, and there were many other factories all around the world. If you have an old Singer machine it's possible to find the location of manufacture, and the year it was made just from the serial number.

The Clydebank factory finally closed in 1980. In its short history it was one of the marvels of the manufacturing world, the factory boasting the largest clock tower in the world. On 21st March 1911 12 female cabinet polishers went on strike objecting to a change in working conditions that required them to do more work for less pay. Within a week all 10,000 of the 11,500 other workers had also come out on strike, backing up their fellow workers. Singer responded by closing the factory, and threatening to move all work to other European factories. The strike lasted for 3 weeks, but in the end workers returned to work. All of the Strike leaders and members of the Industrial Workers of Great Britain were sacked.

When I saw this date I knew it was one I had to celebrate in fibre form. One of the people who helped me when I first set up Hilltop Cloud was Natalie Fergie. At the time she was a yarn dyer, but had been writing for as long as I had known her. Her first book was published in 2017, and is called The Sewing Machine, the story starts at the time of the Singer strike in 1911. It's a lovely read, available as a Kindle edition, and an audiobook, and there's also a German translation.

Your fibre this month is inspired by the beautiful old black machines, in particular a Singer Model 66 with a decal the collectors call Lotus.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading-

Wikipedia Page on Sewing Machines featuring several animations showing the way the machine forms the stitches-
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sewing_machine#cite_note-sewing-2

How did Thomas Saint's Machine work?
http://teahippo.uk/oldsewingmachines/saint.html

History of the development of the sewing machine
http://ismacs.net/sewing_machine_history.html

Timeline of sewing machine development
http://teahippo.uk/oldsewingmachines/chron2.html

Dating old Singer machines-
https://sewalot.com/dating_singer_sewing_machine_by_serial_number.htm

History of the Clydebank Factory
https://www.glasgowlive.co.uk/news/history/singer-sewing-factory-clydebank-glasgow-16249748
https://sewalot.com/end_of_empire_by_alex_askaroff_sewalot.htm

The Singer Strike
http://strugglepedia.co.uk/index.php?title=The_Singer_Strike

The Sewing Machine by Natalie Fergie-
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34728868-the-sewing-machine

Singer 66 with Lotus decal
http://teahippo.uk/thewarrencollection/photos/album_105122472914945/index.html#Singer_Model_66_Lotus

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label
50% Shetland, 25% Eri Silk, 25% Corriedale