

Stitches in Time

by Philip Gulley

Electricity was discovered by the ancient Greeks, though it didn't find its way to my in-laws' farm until the summer of 1948. That's when the truck from the Orange County Rural Electric Cooperative made its way down Grimes Lake Road, planting poles and stringing wire. My mother-in-law, Ruby, sat on her front porch snapping beans while the
5 linemen set the poles. That night she asked her husband, Howard, what he thought of her getting an electric sewing machine. Her treadle sewing machine was broken, the victim of two high-spirited boys who had pumped the treadle to an early death.

They drove to Bedford the next day to the Singer Sewing Center and bought a brand-new electric Singer with a buttonholer, a cabinet and a chair. It cost \$240, money they'd
10 earned from selling a truckload of hogs to the meatpacking plant in New Solsberry.

Ruby set into sewing for her boys. They added three children to their flock. More sewing. After supper, when the table was cleared and dishes washed, Ruby would bend over the machine, churning out clothes for her children and her neighbors. Thousands of dresses and shirts and pants. Clothes for dolls. Clothes for the minister's wife in town.
15 Prom dresses. Wedding dresses. The Singer raised its needle millions of times. Her family would fall asleep under Ruby-made quilts, lulled to sleep by the Singer hum.

The kids grew up and moved away. Grandchildren came, eight in all. The Singer stitched maternity clothes, baby dresses, baptismal gowns and quilts for the cribs. In 1987, Ruby called us on the phone, discouraged. After thirty-nine years, her Singer was limping.
20 She took it to Mr. Gardner in the next town. He fixed sewing machines but couldn't revive hers. He sent it away to Chicago. A month later, it came back, a paper tag hanging from its cord. *Obsolete. Parts not available*, the tag read.

I went to a sewing machine store the next day to buy a new one. Her old one was metal. The new machines are plastic and have computers and cost the same as Ruby's first
25 car. They give classes on how to use them. In the display window was a 1948 metal Singer blackhead.

"Does that one work?" I asked the man.

"I don't know," he said. "Let's plug it in." He plugged it in. It hummed to life.

"It's not for sale," he told me. "It's a display. There aren't a lot of these old Singer
30 blackheads around anymore."

I told him about Ruby—how she lives by herself and sews to keep busy, how she charges only six dollars to make a dress because the people she sews for don't have a lot of money, how a lot of times she doesn't charge a dime, how sewing is her ministry.

He sold the machine to me for twenty-five dollars.

35 The next weekend we hauled it down to Ruby's. She was sitting on the front porch watching for our car to round the corner on the gravel lane. She came outside and stood by the car as we opened the trunk. As she peered down at the '48 blackhead, a smile creased her face.

"It's just like my old one," she whispered.

40 We wrestled it inside and installed it in her old cabinet. Perfect fit. Plugged it in. When Ruby heard the hum, she clapped her hands.

It's still going strong. Ruby still charges six dollars a dress—unless it's a bride's dress. Then she sews it by hand. That'll cost you fifteen dollars, but only if you can afford it.

45 Ruby recently traveled north to visit her granddaughter Rachael. Rachael showed Ruby her Barbie doll, then asked if Ruby could maybe please sew some clothes for Barbie. The first night Ruby was home, she bent over her '48 blackhead, stitching matching dresses for Rachael and her Barbie. Way past midnight she sewed. The next morning she drove to town and mailed a package northward. Three days later her phone rang. Rachael called to say "Thank you" and "I love you" and "When can I see you again?"

50 On two other occasions, my wife and I found 1948 Singer blackheads in antique stores. We bought them and gave them to Ruby. She's got a lot of sewing ahead, and we don't want her to run out of sewing machines before she runs out of things to sew.

55 I don't always applaud every new thing that comes down the road, though I'm grateful that in 1948 electricity made its way down Grimes Lake Road. I'm grateful, too, for a woman who sews way into the night, who dispenses love one stitch at a time.