

MY SEWING JOURNEY
by Helaine Ball Eckstein, Nov.2018

It was 1948, I was 10 years old and we had just moved from the city to a farm in the country. I loved the country but definitely not the barn or the cows. My father was adamant about all of us kids joining 4H so I decided a garden would possibly work for me. I never saw one tomato that year! All I have is a scar from climbing over a barbed wire fence to get to the garden. It was during that time when I heard about the 4H sewing meetings. Maybe that would be better for me? I knew nothing about the craft and had never seen a sewing machine but knew it had to be cleaner work than gardening. I never did like to get my hands dirty.

My first project was a gathered skirt. I had 'sew' much fun. Mom had a sewing machine stashed away in the attic and it came down in a hurry. My grandmother came from FL most summers to stay with us and she said, "I can show you how to cut out a pattern for a gored skirt which I think you will like better." I took to sewing like a fish takes to water and I was on my way. Little did I know at the time it would be my life's passion and work.

I don't remember staying in 4H other than that year. I continued to sew and learn in the process. My mother did not know how to sew. I had no help but pursued studying the guide sheet reading directions over and over. If I couldn't understand the written directions I studied the pictures. Sometimes I got it right and sometimes I got it wrong. I did a lot of ripping out in those days. It was a great way for me to learn.

It is now 1956 and I am in high school, 9th grade, at my first day of classes. It was Home Economics and there was a room full of sewing machines. Oh my gosh I can't believe it. I could make a living teaching others to do what I love to do. The girl sitting beside me that day became my best friend all through high school and we roomed together in college also. I recently spoke with her. We both turned 80 last May!

I started teaching Home Economics in 1960 in East Brady, PA. Retired from formal classroom teaching in 1989 in West Palm Beach, FL. After retiring I started free lance teaching my cloth dolls and fur teddy bears throughout Manatee and Sarasota Counties. Eventually I got tired packing up supplies and carrying them around the county so I taught a few classes in my home.

I knew then that I was going to have to find some volunteer work to fill up my spare time. It was about the time that Kathleen Heinicke started a hands on Neighborhood Group. She stood in front of our Creative Sassy Sewer's Group, told us about the sewing camp they were going to start and did anyone want to help? Oh wow, my hand literally flew up in the air. I loved the camp and the kids were 'sew' wonderful and eager to learn. Kathleen asked me if I would take charge of it the next year and I continued to do that for 9 years. Camp Week was the highlight of my year. My Home Economics teaching experience was a huge help in getting new sewing equipment and supplies for the camp. Luckily I had many ASG members to volunteer to help teaching the camp. The camp was only a week long but I spent a good 6 months of the year preparing for it, making sample items, time schedules, scheduling a field trip and anything else that goes along with operating a successful camp. Dr. Diane Smith with Manatee County 4H was a jewel to work with and camp had waiting lists every year.

I became a member of ASG in 1993. At that time we were a part of the Tampa Chapter. It was on the trips to those meetings that we discussed starting our own chapter. I remember our first organizational meeting held at the Landings Viking Sewing Center. Each of us

volunteered to fill a position on the board and we were on our way to the Sarasota/GulfCoast Chapter of the American Sewing Guild. It has been a wonderful organization over the years. I've seen many changes, some good and some not so good.

When I began sewing the machines were simple and only sewed in the forward direction. Shortly thereafter a reverse stitch and the zigzag stitch came out and I thought that was fabulous. Needless to say when the embroidery machines came on the market, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven! What more could they possibly do to the machines? I couldn't afford one for a long time but eventually I had to have one. And then I bought the software to do my own digitizing. OMG what fun and such a challenge. It surely does tax my brain.

All kinds of sewing pretty much consumed my life and I have loved every minute of it. I have taken every opportunity possible to teach others how to sew. Over the years many have asked me, "Will you make me one of those?", and in most cases my answer was "No, but I will be happy to teach you how to make it". I love seeing light bulbs going off and eyes lighting up when a project is finished. I have taught people from ages 7 through 82 and the excitement is the same.

I continue to take embroidery and computer classes to improve my skills. I love a new challenge. My sewing journey has been 70 years long at this point in my life and I'm not ready to quit yet. My heart's desire would be that I have inspired others to sew and/or improved the quality of their sewing skills.