

A Jewish Grandmother Gave Us Christmas

by Don Nylin

In early October in Augusta, Illinois, in the late 1930s, the leaves were beginning to fall. The nights were cooler and there would soon be a hint of autumn in the air. Mother sat in her wicker rocker, homemade covers on the arms, in the dining room bay window. Dad's gooseneck lamp was shining brightly toward her lap where she held a linen cloth. Her right hand darted quickly but deftly into the linen and out, into the linen and out. Save for that small motion, Mother was almost a seated mannequin.



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Hour by hour, Mother sat there. Never rocking, only sewing. Barely moving except perhaps for an occasional glance upward to give her eyes some rest from the intense concentration, or maybe some tightening and loosening of the shoulders to release tension. There was no other movement but the stitches, the stitches, the stitches. If the fine linen so expertly held was a lady's sheer handkerchief, the initials were small. But always neat and precise; each stitch so closely placed against the prior one that they must be inspected carefully to see that they were not a small mound of silvery white. After about 15 minutes, Mother would carefully fold the hanky and place it aside so that the three initials showed to good advantage. Then, Mother would reach for another. And the process was repeated. Sometimes the pieces to be embroidered were larger men's handkerchiefs. The initials were larger, but the stitches as precise. Because the initials were larger, they took a wee bit longer. For these initials, a pearl-gray thread was perhaps used. On rare occasions, the thread was a blue.

Over and over, throughout the better part of the day, Mother embroidered linens. Often into the evening, as well, especially if she had spent part of the day at the Ladies Aid Society meeting, or maybe a church bazaar. Or maybe she had gone with Dad, a Methodist minister, to visit some hospitalized parishioner in Macomb or Quincy.

Less often, Mother would be seated with a large, heavy linen tablecloth on her lap. Still the stitch, stitch, stitch. Sometimes she worked on embellishing a single letter on the tablecloth. At other times, she worked on a much larger and more intricate monogram that consisted of a three-letter diamond. A large letter in the center indicated the family name. There were smaller letters on either side: to the

left, the initial of the given name and, to the right, that of the middle name. The monogram was often finished off with small triangles placed to the left and the right of the initials. The center letter would be raised over a sixteenth of an inch above the linen fabric of the tablecloth. These center initials took much longer to embroider, but still Mother managed to make the individual stitches imperceptible. And once the tablecloth was finished and laid aside, Mother proceeded to embroider eight napkins with smaller, monograms.

And so it went through October and November and into December. Boxes arrived from the Lace Shop in Evanston. Boxes with handkerchiefs, tablecloths, napkins, bureau runners, with initials stamped in pale blue, all carefully wrapped in white tissue. As boxes containing new work arrived, others, carefully packed, were heading northeastward to Evanston with completed work. Mother's pay was calculated by the number of initials she had embroidered. The more boxes with initials to embroider, the more pay.

I don't know when Mother began this annual employment. It could have been years earlier, perhaps closer to the beginning of the Depression years. We had moved to Augusta in September of 1938, right after I had started fourth grade. Although the country was beginning to work its way out of the Great Depression, I doubt that salaries of Methodist ministers were increasing very rapidly, so Mother needed to do this work to supplement Dad's income. Just like Dad worked a large garden and Mother canned jar after jar for the winter—to live beyond the subsistence level or thereabouts.

I wouldn't be surprised if Mother had been doing this most of my life, since at least the early 1930s when we were at the height of the Depression. Parishioners couldn't give to the church money they could not earn. And if the church didn't receive the money, well, we had to do without.

Mother did not learn to embroider from Gramma. Buttons, patches and darning most likely, but not embroidery. That came a bit later.

About May of '09 (pronounced *ought nine*) Mother completed grade school in Republic, Michigan. But instead of going on to the high school, that tall, two story building by the pond along the railroad tracks, she headed south to Illinois, to Chicago to become nurse girl (now called *au pair*) for a well-to-do Jewish family. After a time the family moved to New York. They must have been well-to-do because, after a few years with the family, she traveled with them across the United States to the Pacific in an entourage of at least three large touring cars, one towing a trailer with tents and the paraphernalia needed to maintain the family.

When the family was in New York, the grandmother lived with them. Evenings, after the children were in bed, Mother spent time with the grandmother. From her, Mother learned to embroider.

It was the money Mother earned embroidering for the Lace Shop that made the difference between “getting by” at Christmas time and having enough to buy presents for Paul, Dad and me.

That’s how A Jewish Grandmother Gave Us Christmas.



Don Nylin is a retired educator from northern Illinois. He has recently rediscovered the joy of writing. In addition to writing, he participates in several Elderhostels each year. He continues to enjoy working with wood.

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