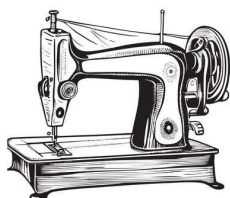


Thank Goodness for the Good Old Singer Sewing Machine

By Mary Brill

(Note: Reproduced here from Volume 5 of 'Expatriate Experience of Life and work in Nyasaland' by Colin Baker, with the kind permission of Mpemba Books, owners of the copyright.)

On my arrival in Nyasaland in 1950 I soon realised that my limited sewing skills were going to be a great help to me during our 15 years in the heart of Africa. My very first job was to



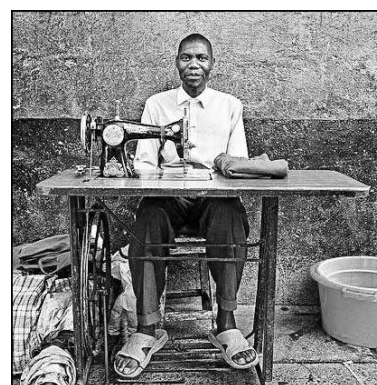
make all the curtains for our new home. I was able to buy material at our local Indian store, this was at Balaka, our nearest shopping town. It was a small place with a few shops and most important it had a railway station. We could have provisions sent up from Blantyre which was very useful. I was lucky to have a sewing



machine. It had belonged to my Grandmother. I also had two old flat irons which I had brought with me, these I found most useful. When we were at Balaka on the farm we had no electricity. So a hand sewing machine and flat irons were a great help.

Most of our furniture was made by an African carpenter who worked on the farm. But we also made use of petrol boxes. We made cupboards for our clothes and dressing table, these I covered with material to match the curtains, also bedspreads to match. Thank goodness for the old singer sewing machine.

I then started making clothes for the children and myself. Reg my husband had all his khaki shorts and shirts made by the African tailor who would sit with a treadle sewing machine on the kondi outside the Indian store. You could hire a tailor for a few days to do the sewing for you. They would copy any clothing for you, this was most useful if you had no patterns. I was lucky to have some and when we went on leave I would always buy more, or send to Rhodesia for them.



Wool for knitting was not always easy to obtain. I did not do much knitting at that time. I know a lot of women did and taught the African women their skills. I think some knitting and sewing was taught to young girls at school. The nuns were good at teaching sewing and other skills to do with handcrafts.

Most African tailors were men. I never saw any women sitting at a sewing machine. The women in the villages were always working in their gardens growing food for the family. I did see them making baskets from maize leaves, they also use banana leaves. They also did a lot of bead work and a little hand sewing and knitting. Some schools taught sewing and other crafts. I can remember some missions teaching crafts to their pupils. Baskets and beadwork were sold in the markets. During our years in Africa I made most of the children's clothes, and bridesmaids for her daughter Maggie, evening and day dresses for myself.

I remember when the Queen Mother visited Mzuzu in the 60s. We had to make our own dresses and hats to wear for the visit and of course the Garden Party. White gloves had to

be worn. I sent to UK for these. I think mother sent them for me. I remember seeing some wonderful outfits. Mine I made myself, the dress was a pretty floral material. I covered a straw hat to match the dress, with the long white gloves and smart shoes. I felt smart enough to meet a Queen. It was a wonderful day meeting and chatting to the Queen Mother. She looked wonderful dressed all in white, stepping out bright red plane onto the tarmac. I do remember a red carpet. A lovely sight. She was given a wonderful welcome.

Now 50 years on, I would've loved to have gone back to Malawi just to see how things have improved and I am sure that so much has improved over the years and that the children are learning more sewing skills

I am 90 now and find great pleasure in doing my craft work which includes sewing. I also enjoy teaching others.

